

North by Shakespeare: A Rogue Scholar's Quest for the Truth Behind the Bard's Work

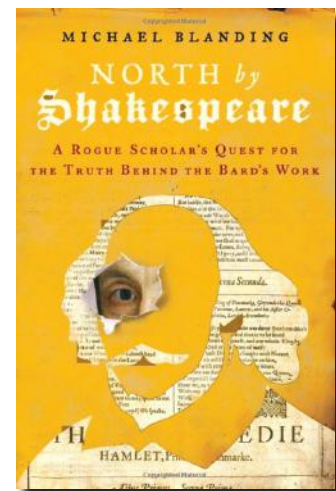
Reviewed by Michael Hyde

North by Shakespeare: A Rogue Scholar's Quest for the Truth Behind the Bard's Work. By Michael Blanding. Hachette Books, March 30, 2021, 498 pages (hardcover \$24.49, Kindle \$14.99).

Every researcher hopes to discover lost unpublished manuscripts about William Shakespeare, of whom we have precisely zero literary evidence in his own hand—only six signatures on legal documents.

Michael Blanding and Dennis McCarthy have the admirable fortune of one such find apiece—papers not lost but hidden in the British Library. Blanding located the original manuscript of Sir Thomas North's 1555 travel journal in the summer of 2019, where he found a loose page at the end, with the title written in North's hand (350; unless otherwise noted, all cites to page numbers are to Blanding's book). McCarthy shocked the Shakespeare establishment in 2018 when he located the manuscript of George North's *Discourse on Rebellion and Rebels* in the Duke of Portland's collection, also housed but oddly catalogued in the British Library.

Blanding is a veteran journalist; McCarthy is a college dropout and self-educated researcher. Both have previously written books on other subjects: McCarthy explored the field of biogeography in *Here Be Dragons: How the Study of Animal and Plant Distributions Revolutionized Our Views of Life on Earth* (2009), while Blanding's *The Map Thief* (2014) explored the nefarious



practice of stealing old maps from libraries. Blanding first wrote about McCarthy's discovery of the George North manuscript in *The New York Times* in February 2018.

In 2011 McCarthy published his own book on Thomas North, *North of Shakespeare: The True Story of the Secret Genius Who Wrote the World's Greatest Body of Literature*. That book is no longer available. In 2018 McCarthy teamed up with June Schlueter, a professor of English at Lafayette College, to produce a contemporary edition of George North's *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels*. Earlier this year McCarthy and Schlueter collaborated on a second book, *Thomas North's 1555 Travel Journal: From Italy to Shakespeare*.

A Google search led McCarthy to a 1927 auction catalogue that listed the George North manuscript. His skillful use of WCopyfind, a plagiarism detection program, and other tools facilitated examining images of the actual documents. This resulted in McCarthy's discovering numerous verbal parallels between the George North manuscript and the works of Shakespeare, and between Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (1580) and the Shakespeare canon. Thomas North (born 1535) and George North (fl 1561–1581) are assumed to be kinsmen, though the exact relationship between the two men has not been established.

The book's main title, *North by Shakespeare*, should perhaps be reversed, as its argument is that the works of Shakespeare were written *by* North, the lost author. McCarthy has long maintained that William of Stratford did not truly write the canon, rather he purchased and adapted for the stage a cache of manuscripts of plays by Thomas North. McCarthy believes that North wrote these original versions in the 1560s and 1570s. Ten years ago, in his earlier book, *North of Shakespeare*, McCarthy stated flatly: "Shakespeare was not the original author of the masterpieces. He merely adapted them for the stage." The echoes ring as I read aloud the full titles of the two books —*North, Shakespeare, True/Truth, Secret Genius* and *Rogue Scholar*. North is the unsuspected secret genius, Shakespeare the playbroker and adapter, and McCarthy the rogue scholar who finally uncovers the Truth.

Michael Hyde has taught in the English departments at several Boston area colleges and universities. He has a BA from Harvard granted magna cum laude and an MA and PhD from Tufts University. His doctoral thesis, "The Poet's Creative Word," was a study of the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Under the tutelage of Walter Houghton, he worked on the five-volume bibliographical project known as the Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals. His work focused on attribution of authorship in Victorian literary magazines, and involved identifying anonymous or pseudonymous authors using both external evidence and internal evidence based on known writings of each author.

McCarthy began his quest with the aim of identifying “Ur-Hamlet,” the pre-Shakespeare version of *Hamlet* that scholars assume must have existed, based on the “Seneca by candlelight” allusion in Thomas Nashe’s 1589 preface to Greene’s *Menaphon* (107). McCarthy finds an early English translator of Seneca, Jasper Heywood. Using Heywood’s preface to *Thyestes* (1560) as his crux, in which Heywood urges more Seneca translating from the young scholars at the Inns of Court, McCarthy selects Thomas North as the best candidate because North’s name is at the top of Heywood’s list: “There you shall find that self same North whose works his wit displays and Dial of Princes paint” (109). Following this slender thread, we learn that North was by 1562 “singled out by Heywood as the writer most likely to pen a Senecan tragedy.”

This is the internal and external evidence that McCarthy and Blanding have fermented into a theory proposing that Thomas North, the famous prose translator of Plutarch, was the true author of the lost *Hamlet* and the works of Shakespeare. Nashe mentions Hamlet and Seneca in 1589; translator Heywood mentions Thomas North at the Inns of Court in 1560; North therefore composed the earliest versions of the Shakespeare masterpieces while generating his prose translations in the 1560s and 1570s. McCarthy says of Thomas North, “He is Hamlet as much as J. D. Salinger is Holden Caulfield” (287).

All this speculation ignores the basic procedures outlined in Samuel Schoenbaum’s *Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* (1966). Nevertheless, the result is that parallel passages from George North’s *Discourse on Rebels* are being hailed, if not closely examined, as the earliest vestiges of Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry.

Returning to the search for “Ur-Hamlet,” it should be noted that translating Seneca was a literary hobby between 1560 and 1589 for Elizabethans. The Stationers’ Register for 1581 lists “Seneca’s ninth tragedy, the Octavia . . . translated by Thomas Nuce, whose name appears in the 1581 collection titled ‘Seneca His Ten Tragedies’” (154). Note the initials—TN. It is possible that no “Ur-Hamlet,” no “Ur-Shakespeare,” and no “Ur-Seneca” ever existed unless we are willing to treat the conjecture of lost plays by North as fact. Thomas North’s name is not in the table of contents of the 1581 collection of Seneca’s ten tragedies. We can only solve the puzzle by theorizing that his other lost poetic works (not prose translations) account for Shakespearean parallel passages in the manuscript of George North’s *Discourse on Rebels and Rebellion* written in 1576, but undiscovered until 2018, though “hidden” in the British Library.

All this is necessary to understand what was really happening in 2018 when McCarthy and Professor Schlueter made their find. But why in 1576 did

George North write the *Discourse*? Yes, he was seeking patronage and later obtained the ambassadorship to Sweden and had a diplomatic career under Elizabeth. But his actual sentences sound like this, “Rebels therefore the worst of all subjects are most ready to rebellion.” The *Discourse* is addressed to his patron, Second Baron Roger North, whose father had been imprisoned in 1524 for plotting rebellion against Henry VIII (51–53). Edward North was in the Tower a full year, and luckily released without further punishment. The anonymous tract *Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion* (1571) provides further context. Mark Anderson, in “*Shakespeare*” *By Another Name* (2005), describes its “state sanctioned propaganda” (Anderson 43), with English vicars being required to read every Sunday from the Anglican book of twelve homilies. The “Willful Rebellion” homily was also a direct response to the Northern Uprising of 1570–1571, and, as Anderson says, “its influence on Shakespeare has been widely chronicled.”

The very next year (1572) the Duke of Norfolk was executed for conspiring in the Catholic plot to bring Mary Queen of Scots to England. George North was reminding his patron that their family’s safety and prosperity depended on constantly affirming loyalty to the Crown. The Second Baron Roger North (a new creation by Mary in 1555, the last Catholic Queen of England) must have been keenly aware of his family’s suspect Catholic history. Cousin George wrote his manifesto in Kirtling Hall to finally absolve the North family of any stain lingering from the memory of Edward’s youthful rebellion against Henry VIII. Thenceforth the Norths were never rebels and remained the “best of all subjects,” ever loyal and obedient. Blanding’s find of Thomas North’s original 1555 journal further reminds us that the family was regarded by Mary as devout Catholics. Thomas was part of the group of English ambassadors sent to Rome to effect the return of England to the true Church.

Interestingly, there is an Oxfordian provenance to the discovery of the Thomas North manuscript. It is now the earliest known manuscript of the journal, donated as part of the Harleian Collection in 1759. Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford (second creation), purchased it in 1704 as one of 600 manuscripts from the D’Ewes estate. It passed to the 2nd Earl, his son Edward, and was sold to the Library by his widow, hence its listing in the Collection. In 1759 it was attributed as “written by one of the Bishop of Ely’s servants” i.e., Thomas North. There are further confirmatory attributions to North in 1872 and 1937.

Blanding’s strongest and most Oxfordian section is his chapter, “Wonders of the World Abroad,” on Italian travels. Yet it is also the most internally conflicted. First, he admits that “one of the reasons scholarly opinion has turned against the idea of an Italian jaunt for the Bard is that it has become a favorite argument of anti-Stratfordians, who use it to prove that the Earl of

Oxford was the true author of the plays.” Next, he notes the “geographical howlers” in *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, where “the biggest gaffe is the fact that Valentine and Proteus travel from Verona to Milan by boat, despite both cities being landlocked.” He adds that “critics have thrown cold water on the idea that there was network of canals connecting the major cities of Northern Italy.” But then he reverses track, noting that Richard Paul Roe, “lawyer and Oxfordian, set out to prove critics wrong by travelling to Italy in search of the locations in the plays in his *Shakespeare Guide to Italy*,” and found “old maps showing a canal connecting the Adige River in Verona and the Po River near Milan, making such a trip by boat possible in the time of Shakespeare. Roe even found vestiges of the old waterways.”

Luckily for Blanding and McCarthy, Roe “was careful throughout his book never to speculate on the identity of the author—referring to him simply as ‘the playwright.’” This justifies attesting their Stratfordian bona fides once again: “Of course, that playwright, McCarthy thinks, wasn’t Oxford or Shakespeare, but North” (161). Of course, Roe is heavily relied on by Blanding and McCarthy for the rest of their Italian trip. “We take Roe’s book with us now as we head across the hilly country of Northeastern Italy to one of the most popular destinations for English travelers in the sixteenth century, Padua.”

The issue of Thomas North’s trip (or trips) to Italy is ambiguous in Blanding’s telling. Yes, North was in the English entourage to Rome in 1555 as part of the Marian embassy. However, McCarthy speculates without evidence that North made a second trip around 1570 that may have been a catalyst for his playwriting. Oxfordians will compare this imaginary trip with Edward de Vere’s thoroughly documented lengthy stay in Italy in 1575–76.

Let us unravel the paragraphs above: Roe is correct about Shakespeare’s Italy, the critics are incorrect, the waterways near Verona are still visible, and regardless of “scholarly opinion,” Blanding and McCarthy use Roe as their guide because it contains no overtly stated anti-Stratfordian heresies. McCarthy and Blanding are nevertheless often dismissive of other studies of Shakespeare that fail to endorse McCarthy’s all-encompassing thesis that the Shakespeare canon is a 1590s revision of the lost plays of Thomas North. Discussing *Julius Caesar*, McCarthy gets aggressive: “passage after passage and image after image is taken for the play [from North]...[P]eople don’t realize how many quotes are taken directly from [North’s *Plutarch*]” (196).

This is wrong. I still possess the paperback edition of North’s *Plutarch* from my Humanities 6 course at Harvard University. We were shown the passages in *Antony and Cleopatra* that were sourced and lifted verbatim by Shakespeare from North. We compared, line by line, what was authorial invention with what was pure North. An Oxfordian example is an extract from North’s *Coriolanus* translation that is lifted entirely (J. Thomas Looney, “*Shakespeare*”

Identified, Centenary Edition [2018], 350). Coriolanus's address to Aufidius in Act IV, Scene V, is word for word from North, but then varies. It seems that the traditional classroom teaching of the Roman plays having their origins in North's *Plutarch* was on the mark, even at Harvard.

It remains for McCarthy to prove as clearly with his lengthy lists of parallel passages gleaned from software that the rest of the canon is pure North and that North was indeed the "Ur-Shakespeare" of the 1560s and 1570s. In the Folger Shakespeare Library's podcast interview with McCarthy, "Shakespeare Unlimited Episode 93," Barbara Bogaev tries to concentrate on the "one-in-a-billion" "word collocations" gleaned from his accumulation of parallel passages in George North and Shakespeare—all derived from running his plagiarism software: "But is there any danger in analyzing literature this way that you might fall into confirmation bias?" McCarthy offers an ambiguous defense: "Well, yes and no. In terms of source study, rather than authorship study, you have to cherry-pick in terms of resemblances between two passages." So this means "Yes" on source study and "No" on authorship?

Stating that one must cherry-pick reveals a classic problem in attribution studies. I will gladly defend McCarthy, as I find that his long lists of parallel passages from North and Shakespeare (see Blanding's Appendix B) do contain some accurate correspondences. Nevertheless, I urge McCarthy and readers to examine Schoenbaum's warning of the perils of parallel passages in authorship, if not in source studies (*Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship* [1966], esp. pp. 189–193). In Section III, "Avoiding Disaster," he quotes E. K. Chambers: "There is nothing more dangerous than the attempt to determine authorship by the citation of parallels" (Schoenbaum 189). The five-page section cited above is especially cautionary and conservative on using internal evidence and counting up verbal parallels for attribution. The sad outcome was for Schoenbaum's contemporaries, at their worst, to passionately "claim every play in sight for an author on whom they have obsessively fixed" (Schoenbaum 192).

He lists M. St. Clare Byne's five "Golden Rules" on using verbal parallels: 1) there are always multiple explanations; 2) insist on quality in parallels; 3) avoid "mere accumulation"; 4) logically proceed from known works to anonymous ones; 5) apply "negative checks" to ensure that the same parallels are not found in other authors. Schoenbaum adds another: "To these rules I would venture to add a sixth, parallels from plays of uncertain or contested authorship prove nothing" (*ibid*). His suggestion that many Elizabethan plays, including those attributed to Shakespeare, remain of "uncertain" or "contested" authorship should make each of us more humble as we pursue elusive rabbits and identifications into their rabbit holes.

I wonder if Schoenbaum would have accepted McCarthy's ideas, buttressed as they are by many supporting parallel passages. A follow-up question is

whether verbal parallels are subjective or objective in the minds of readers, like notes in music. Are they valid for source study, as McCarthy insists, but not for authorship, as Schoenbaum warns? Many Oxfordians are devoted to the practice of attribution via such parallels, yet I have my doubts. Hence my reaction to the cornucopia of parallels in Blanding's Appendix B is mixed. The renowned *Cleopatra* passage (373) from North's *Plutarch* is as vivid today as it was when I first read it in my Humanities class. But I believe that Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech, its existential questions, are from multiple sources, the chief being Thomas Bedingfield's 1573 English translation of *Cardanus Comfort*, which Edward de Vere patronized and welcomed in a beautifully written prefatory letter. The Cade passages from George North (374) I find generally convincing in their verbal suggestiveness for the Cade scene in *2 Henry VI*.

My strongest negative reaction is to the imputed verbal collocations or echoes in the paired passages on Richard Crouchback's deformities (375). Nothing in the George North passage suggests to me that Shakespeare's Richard III learned here to "descant on mine own deformity" as he chooses to "prove a villain." Other readers may see more parallels here, and elsewhere, than I do.

The questions of attributing either sources or authorship on the basis of verbal parallels are inescapable. Discussing Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter's 2018 edition of George North's *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion & Rebels*, Bill Boyle bows to the issue with a telltale "perhaps": "This deeper layer of matches makes this discovery different, and perhaps as compelling as the headlines have said" ("New Source for Shakespeare Leads to the Same Old Problems," *SO Newsletter*, Spring 2018, 18). Everyone needs to search Early English Books Online (EEBO) as they accumulate parallels, to avoid the blunder of claiming uniqueness or rarity for any particular passage.

A second review of the McCarthy-Schlueter book in the Spring 2019 *SO Newsletter* by the late Ron Hess was not so charitable. Hess saw the entire field of stylometrics, computer-assisted techniques, and plagiarism software as a moat now protecting the besieged Castle of Stratfordianism. He concluded, "Put these...movements together and you have a perfect marriage of ignorance meeting bliss" (Hess 21). He trenchantly observed that no computer search could locate the "common source" that tied together George North and Shakespeare because it was very likely private—at Court or in personal intercourse between families. Finally, he wondered if the British Library might have financed the McCarthy/Schlueter project because it protects and defends the traditional authorship case (Hess 23).

Blanding's Appendix A presents McCarthy's revision of the timeline of composition for the Shakespeare plays, with Thomas North on the left margin versus the orthodox chronology on the right. This is probably his most devastating, if unintentional, takedown of Will Shakspeare as the "monoauthor"

of the canonical plays. McCarthy's timeline begins with *Henry VIII* or *All is True* in 1555, nine years before the birth of William in Stratford-upon-Avon, and ends with *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Tempest* in 1602–03.

I have doubts about assigning *Henry VIII* to Thomas North at all, especially in 1555. North spent much of that year traveling to and from Rome on the Marian embassy to return England to Catholicism. One would expect that anything written by a devout Catholic on a diplomatic mission at that time to have a pro-Catholic, anti-Henry slant. Blanding dismisses *Henry VIII* ("simply put, a terrible play," 94–95) and suggests that its first known performance in 1613 was a "later adaptation."

Let us also recall the strident anti-Catholicism of Shakespeare's canonical *King John* ("No Italian priest/ Shall ever tithe or toil in these dominions!").

Blanding acknowledges in his first chapter that orthodox chronology shoe horns composition and performance dates for the plays into Shakespeare's years as an actor from 1589–90 to 1604. Shoehorning is as popular as ever in Appendix A. McCarthy fits the dates of composition of Thomas North's lost plays to his lifespan and career—his first produced at age 20 (1555), and his last at age 68 (1603). Coincidentally, both Thomas North and Edward de Vere died in 1604. Does this leave an opening for Stratfordians to slam the door closed on McCarthy's claim for plays that they think postdate 1604?

Arden of Faversham is included in the timeline, dated to 1557. Although it was not published until 1592, it is assumed to be identical to *A Cruel Murder Done in Kent* (1577). Oxfordians have their own case for *Arden* as presumably written by Edward de Vere and performed at Whitehall in March 1579 as *The History of Murderous Michael*. I found the McCarthy case for *Arden* to be convincing and persuasive for Thomas North as the author because of the play's connections to the North family. Coincidentally, the substitution of a "fictional Lord Clifford" in the play (23) in place of 1st Baron Sir Edward North reminds me of the omission of the 9th Earl of Oxford, the alleged homosexual favorite of the monarch, from Shakespeare's *Richard II*. Noble families also have their secrets and their cover-ups.

The latest Oxford University edition of *Arden* (2017) rejects Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe as authors and attributes it to Shakespeare. This helps McCarthy's case if he is proven right about Thomas North. But again, there is no contemporary evidence that Thomas North was a playwright. Nor is there evidence that he had any connection with the new playhouses built in the 1570s. Edward de Vere, who lived nearby at Fisher's Folly in the 1580s, had just such connections (Anderson 156–157). The best Blanding can do is to suppose that a poverty-stricken Thomas North, after his patron, the Earl of Leicester, died in 1588, "drifted down to London, where he might have met Shakespeare" (299). Luckily again for McCarthy, we have to suppose an

additional lost North play or two being written and sold to Will Shakspere, thus avoiding invidious comparisons and possible contradictions of his theories. Blanding later quotes Professor Gary Taylor, who pinpoints the difficulty: “The danger is that the invisibility of the lost texts means that it is very easy to speculate about them” (355).

Blanding writes that Taylor had earlier rejected McCarthy’s original *Arden* paper (348). He notes that McCarthy in a “wild moment” had wanted to purchase the original of Thomas North’s 1555 travel journal from the Lambeth Palace Library (which had obtained it for the prohibitive sum of \$43,750), and he imagines owning what he believes will become one of the most valuable documents in the world—an original North/Shakespeare in North’s own hand. Though he later confesses that “I made ridiculous and wild claims” (353), it is impossible not to see monomania in these melodramatic moments. McCarthy also worries that he will be accused of advocating a “conspiracy theory” by orthodox scholars for his belief in North’s lost plays. He gives Blanding more of his theories: *Merry Wives* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* “have little or no North at all”; the more literary plays are North’s original plays; Heminges and Condell “may have thought they were truly publishing Shakespeare” in 1623. Suddenly he panics at the thought: “that speculation, however, comes dangerously close to the anti-Stratfordian claim that ‘Shakespeare didn’t write Shakespeare.’ ”

Blanding’s 16-page bibliography is largely a compendium of orthodox Shakespeare biographies, historical backgrounders, Italian travels, standard reference works, Elizabethan contemporary authors, and theater studies. Only four Oxfordian scholars are included—J.T. Looney, Richard Roe, Charlton Ogburn and Joseph Sobran, while Diana Price is included as an independent researcher. To demonstrate his fairness, Blanding does allow Mark Twain’s doubts about the authorship (135–136) from *Is Shakespeare Dead?* and summarizes de Vere’s candidacy (136–138).

His one-page summary of Delia Bacon’s espousal of Francis Bacon as the true author (134) ends before she could reveal her cipher for Bacon, “who was known to write in code.” Cryptography was launched in Shakespeare studies in 1888 via “Minnesota lawyer Ignatius Donnelly” (139) and so the bibliography dutifully includes William F. and Elizebeth S. Friedman’s 1957 work, *The Shakespeare Cipher Examined*. That book’s subtitle betrays its intention: *Analysis of Cryptographic Systems Used as Evidence that Some Author Other Than William Shakespeare Wrote the Plays Commonly Attributed to Him*.

The case for Thomas North sometimes overlaps with arguments for Edward de Vere, with the signal difference that de Vere was involved in theater his entire life as both dramatist and patron, but North was never mentioned by contemporaries as a playwright. Blanding displays considerable animus at times toward authorship doubters, labeling all of them, especially Oxfordians,

as conspiracy theorists while proclaiming his belief that William of Stratford “wrote every word attributed to him during his lifetime” (4). This ignores, among other issues, the strong evidence of both collaboration and later revisions in the Shakespeare texts, a topic that is mostly pursued by Stratfordians themselves.

Who is the best Oxfordian scholar to compare against McCarthy? Ramon Jiménez book, *Shakespeare’s Apprenticeship: Identifying the Real Playwright’s Earliest Works* (McFarland & Co., 2018) explores the same field and identifies true “Ur-Shakespeare” texts. Both are independent investigators; both present cases for Elizabethan courtiers, and both recount how nonchalantly Elizabethan writers echoed each other as they flagrantly lifted from their sources. As Jiménez observes, “moreover, all the Tudor chroniclers copied extensively from previous writers; Holinshed himself cited more than 190 sources” (Jiménez 113).

Jiménez methodically develops his case for de Vere as the teenage author in 1562 who wrote his first versions of dramas such as *The True Tragedy of Richard the Third*, later acquired and performed by the Queen’s Men as an anonymous work in the late 1580s. Jiménez offers three possible theories about the relationship between *True Tragedy* and the canonical *Richard III*. 1) Both are by Edward de Vere; 2) the 1562 play is by de Vere and the canonical version is a masterly revision by a new author; 3) as Dover Wilson proposed, both plays stem from a lost play by an unknown author. Jiménez chooses the first theory, as there is strong evidence to support it. Theory two leads us into a labyrinth of many possible authors. Theory three is similar to McCarthy’s claim for Thomas North as the “lost” author of the canon.

As I read Blanding’s book, I kept wondering why no evidence was presented for McCarthy’s hypothesis. Despite this, McCarthy is unflinching, repeating three times “I have all the goods” (348)—but they are never displayed. This occurs shortly before their meeting with Gary Taylor and Terri Bourus in March 2018 at Florida State University (351). The two academics are polite, attentive, but vague and noncommittal. Taylor concludes the meeting, “clearly the journal [of Thomas North] is important and clearly Shakespeare is interested in North” (352). I was even more bewildered by McCarthy defending himself to Blanding afterward as “being disingenuous by hiding [from Taylor and Bourus] the full extent of [my] theories about Thomas North and the source plays.” McCarthy is adamant: “I have to downplay it... [I]f I say exactly what I think, I can’t get in the door” (353).

Blanding eventually acknowledges that, after five years of traveling with McCarthy to Kirtling, Faversham, Mantua, and Rome, he has reached a difficult conclusion: “Not once, in all that time, have I found anything to disprove the notion that Thomas North wrote source plays for all of the

plays in the Shakespeare canon. Nor, however, have I found anything that definitively proves it. Despite the First Folio, there are no surviving plays with Thomas North's name on them, or even hard evidence that North was a playwright. There are no references to his dramatic works in letters, theater registers, or revels records. There are no surviving documents that place him in Italy in 1570 or Kenilworth in 1576. In short, it's entirely possible McCarthy has devoted a decade and a half of his life to a fantasy—an imaginative and plausible one, to be sure, but a pipe dream, which may prove no less true than the notion that the Earl of Oxford or Sir Francis Bacon secretly penned all of the Shakespeare plays" (355).

This is a devastating confession. The need for hard evidence is undeniable. It appears the "lost play" gambit is over, unless a new document emerges—not just "coincidence," as Blanding tries to argue. It is "no less true" that Thomas North or Edward de Vere, or Francis Bacon, or Mary Sidney could have "secretly penned" the Shakespeare masterpieces, lost or found, in the 1623 First Folio.

Could Oxford have seen the George North manuscript? I believe it highly probable. First, we know that noble families during the Elizabethan Era shared private manuscripts as part of the literary culture, with just 150 to 200 books printed annually throughout Elizabeth's reign. With few books available, literate people were eager to read anything they could get their hands on. Second, North wrote his *Discourse* at Kirtling Hall, probably in 1576. In August 1578, Oxford joined the Queen's party at Audley End. Early in September the assemblage next went to Kirtling Hall, about five miles from Audley End and 20 miles from Oxford's residence at Hedingham Castle. (See Alan Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary* (2003) at 180–182.)

As for the connections between Oxford and Thomas North, we know that in 1569–70 Oxford purchased a copy of Amyot's French translation of Plutarch, the same work that North used for his English translation of Plutarch a decade later.

