

SAT Conference 22 November 2015
SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORIES
Whose agenda do they serve?

11.00 Introduction *Professor William Leahy*

Most of us know Shakespeare's History plays as two great tetralogies covering 100 years from the downfall of Richard II through the civil wars and the clash with France, culminating in the defeat of Richard III and the establishment of the Tudor Dynasty. No other dramatist has ever formed such a grand conception of history as this, especially when we add other history plays *King John* and *Henry VIII* (and probably *Edward III*), we are stunned by the extraordinary scale of Shakespeare's achievement. His characterisations of figures like Richard II, Richard III and Henry V have become deeply embedded in our national consciousness; but all are open to doubt on historical grounds.

11.10 *Professor Andrew Hadfield*
Shakespeare's Political World

12.00 *Donna Murphy*
Shakespeare and the Earl of Northumberland in Five Histories

12.45 *Gerit Quealy*
A Play-full delve into the Henries: Why Authorship Matters to Actors

13.30 Lunch

14:30 Sources and Scenes from the Histories* Director: *Greg Thompson*

15.30 *John Casson*
King John: Research, Revision, Politics and Prequel

16.00 Tea & Cake

16.30 *Ramon Jiménez*
George Peel didn't write The Troublesome Reign of John

17.00 *King John Qs*

17.15 Panel Forum / Q&A Chaired by William Leahy

18.00 Wine Reception for the Launch of *30-Second Shakespeare*

19.00 The End

* Speeches and scenes to be read by Richard Clifford, Derek Jacobi, Annabel Leventon and Mark Rylance.

Shakespeare's Histories

Introduction by Kevin Gilvary

Most of us know Shakespeare's History plays as two great tetralogies covering 100 years from the downfall of Richard II through the civil wars and the clash with France, culminating in the defeat of Richard III and the establishment of the Tudor Dynasty. No other dramatist has ever formed such a grand conception of history as this. When we add other history plays *King John* and *Henry VIII* (and probably *Edward III*), we are stunned by the extraordinary scale of Shakespeare's achievement.

The plays *Richard II* and *Richard III* deal with régime change. Both events were known to have happened and both are presented as necessary only under the most extreme of circumstances. These plays have had such a pervasive influence on the imagination of the English people that few seriously question whether Richard II was so inept or whether Richard III was in fact evil. Similarly, the glorification of Prince Hal leads most of us to accept that Henry V was the embodiment of national heroism. These characterisations derive from Shakespeare and are deeply embedded in our national consciousness; but all are open to doubt on historical grounds.

A consideration of Shakespeare's histories could be extended in two ways: to include earlier anonymous plays performed by the Queen's Men in the 1580s such as *Troublesome Reign of King John* which some scholars have ventured to identify as Shakespeare's juvenilia; but also to canonical works among the Roman plays and the tragedies, which include astute reflections on government and politics.

Audiences and Venues

It is commonly assumed that Shakespeare wrote the history plays for performance by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at the Globe. However, the Globe was not constructed until 1599 and the only known performances of Shakespeare's history plays there were *Richard II* in 1601 (on the eve of the Essex Rebellion) and *Henry VIII* in 1613, when the roof caught fire and the theatre burned down. Most public performances would have taken place at The Theatre in Shoreditch. However, the main purpose of the Lord Chamberlain's Men was to provide entertainment for the Queen, the courtiers, and foreign dignitaries, perhaps at Whitehall Palace or at Greenwich Palace.

Another area of uncertainty surrounds the relationship between the repertoire of the Queen's Men and plays like *The True Tragedie of Richard the Third* and *The Famous Victories of Henry V*. The Queen's Men were formed in 1583 on the express orders of the Queen under the control of Francis Walsingham. Their main duty was to tour the provinces and promote national unity in the face of a foreign invasion. It is usually argued that Shakespeare revised these plays, but were they written by Shakespeare as a state-employed playwright?

Sources

The two major sources for Shakespeare were the Chronicle Histories by Edward Hall and by Raphael Holinshed. However, he also drew details from an astonishing range of sources, some of which were in French or Latin. Such was the conclusion of Geoffrey Bullough in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. These included highly obscure works: chronicles in English and French which existed only in manuscript. For example, the unpublished *Wakefield Chronicle* influenced *King John*.

Dating the History Plays

There is no direct evidence for the date of composition of any of Shakespeare's plays or the sequence of composition. There are no letters or journals, no interviews or contemporary memoirs, no notes or first drafts, and no books with revealing marginalia.

It is usual to suppose that the plays were composed from about 1591 onwards, but there is no conclusive evidence for this. The 'scholarly consensus' on the dating of Shakespeare's History plays is based on the magisterial work of Sir Edmund Chambers published in 1930: "There is much of conjecture, even as regards the order, and still more as regards the ascriptions to particular years." Later scholars, however, have not followed such a cautious approach and have tended to simply accept his dates as 'fact' rather than 'conjecture'.

The title page of a quarto gives some useful information including the date of publication, but this is not necessarily a reliable guide to the date of composition. The Stationers' Register notes the intention of a publisher to publish a work, establishing a kind of copyright. Yet for some plays at least, there was a considerable delay between composition and publication, *I Henry VI* is thought to have been composed c. 1591, but was not registered or published until 1623.

Did Shakespeare revise his own plays? If so, when? And which versions were performed? We do not know how much time elapsed between the completion of a play and its first performance. There are other unanswered questions: Did the author work alongside a co-author or did a second author revise and expand a shorter piece by Shakespeare at a later stage?

Ernst Honigmann in 1985 proposed an alternative earlier chronology for the dates of Shakespeare's plays, in particular for the Histories, a genre which he created. In short, we cannot be more precise as to when Shakespeare composed these plays than to suggest sometime after the publication of the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles* in 1587.

Topicalities: References in the Plays to External Events

As we do not know when the plays were composed, it is very difficult to establish any kind of topicality. Furthermore, some topicalities may have been added (or removed) when the play was in production, perhaps many years after composition. The one instance on which most scholars agree is the reference by the Chorus in *Henry V* to "the General of our gracious Empress / As in good time he may – from Ireland coming Bringing rebellion broached on his sword." This is taken as referring to the anticipated return of the Earl of Essex from Ireland in 1599.

***Richard II* and the Essex Rebellion**

At a time, late in Elizabeth's reign, when the question of succession was at its most sensitive, how was it that the author of the deposition scene in *Richard II* escaped all censure? Elizabeth had prohibited discussion of Richard II's abdication. "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" Queen Elizabeth remarked in 1601 to William Lambarde, Keeper of the Records of the Tower. "He that will forget God will also forget his benefactors; this tragedie was played 40^{tie} times in open streets and houses." Sir John Hayward, the author of the prose account of Richard's abdication: *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie IV*, was tried in the Star Chamber in 1600 and spent the rest of Elizabeth's reign in the Fleet prison. Yet Essex sent his steward, Sir Gilly Merrick, to offer the Lord Chamberlain's Men forty shillings to perform *Richard II*, two days before the planned uprising against Elizabeth in 1601. When the Privy Council investigated, the spokesman for the company, Augustine Phillips, claimed that they had been reluctant to put on a play "so old and so long out of use." The plot failed and the rebels were tried and found guilty: the Earl of Essex was beheaded, Merrick was hanged at Tyburn and the Earl of Southampton was condemned to death. He remained on Death Row in the Tower until his sentence was commuted by James I in 1603. Strangely, the author of the play, which had been published under the name 'William Shake-speare' in 1598 and 1599, was not summoned before the Privy Council at Westminster Hall.

Historiography

The portrayal of historical events on stage produced a mixed response from Elizabethans. Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesy* which was composed 1581-3 and circulated in manuscript among the aristocracy before it was published in 1595, complained about the inadequacy of a theatre stage to represent grand events: “two Armies flye in, represented with foure swords and bucklers, and then what harde heart will not receive it for a pitched field?”

However, in *Pierce Penniless* (1589; 1592), Thomas Nashe defended the idea of History plays: “Wherein our forefathers' valiant acts (that have lain long buried in rusty brass and worm-eaten books) are revived, and they themselves raised from the grave of oblivion, and brought to plead their aged honors in open presence.” Nashe continues: “How it would have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred years in his Tombe, he should triumph againe on the Stage, and have his bones embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least.” Nashe’s comments seem to attest to the popularity of *I Henry VI* on stage in the early 1590s and perhaps in the late 1580s.

Examples of the ways in which Shakespeare appears to have spun history – variously enhancing, suppressing or switching the roles played by certain prominent individuals, families and factions - are provided in the advocacy papers for Marlowe, Bacon, Oxford, Stanley and Neville which follow this introduction.

Revision or Collaboration

A few editors have seen co-authorship in some of the History plays. Sir Brian Vickers has argued that John Fletcher composed more than half of *Henry VIII*, and that less than half of *I Henry IV* was composed by Shakespeare, while the majority of the play was probably written by Thomas Nashe. As with other plays that are thought to have been co-authored, these plays are among those which are thought to be inferior. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the authors actually worked together on a piece, in which case it would be very difficult to disentangle who wrote which passage, or whether one author expanded a shorter version at a later stage.

Attribution

So who was the author of this grand sweep of English history, encompassing a century of turbulence which closed with the accession of Henry Richmond and Elizabeth of York? The usual suspect is William Shakespere of Stratford-upon-Avon, a member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Yet how is it that there is no mention of him by Elizabeth’s principal minister, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, who had promoted the Holinshed Chronicle so as to give a view of history favourable to the Tudors? Why was he never mentioned by Edmund Tilney, who was Master of the Revels from 1579 – 1610 and who licensed the plays? Why was he unknown to Thomas Walsingham, who ran the secret service and established the Queen’s Men in the 1580s to promote the Elizabethan régime?

Those who are sceptical about the authorship of the plays find it more likely that the author was an anonymous Tudor propagandist whose identity was initially kept secret, but whose works were published under a pseudonym from 1598. He may have composed drama, not merely to provide entertainment whether at court, in the London theatre or on tour to the provinces, but mainly to instil a sense of national pride and unity in the face of foreign threats.

Shakespeare's Histories: Whose Agenda do they Serve?

Answer: William Stanley's! Who, among the various candidates for the authorship of the Shakespeare canon, is most likely to have been concerned so deeply with kingship and the history of earlier occupants of the throne? The obvious answer is the candidate *closest to the throne* in the 1580s and 90s: William Stanley, born 1561, a great-great-grandson of Henry VII and younger son of the fourth earl of Derby. William's elder brother Ferdinando, Lord Strange, was the legitimate heir to Queen Elizabeth through his mother Margaret, née Clifford, great-granddaughter of Henry VII, and William, whether playwright or not, would have been surrounded by intimations of royalty from his earliest days.

From the remarkable way in which Shakespeare enhances the roles of the Clifford and Stanley families in two of the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* we learn that he greatly favoured the Lancastrian cause in the Wars of the Roses. No less than eight of the history plays include members of the House of Lancaster who play significant parts, and the famously patriotic speech in *Richard II* starting "This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle" is spoken by John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (who in reality spent most of his life in France). According to Ian Wilson (*Shakespeare: the Evidence*, page 102), "in the case of the Cliffords, in *Henry VI, parts 2 and 3*, Shakespeare gives unusual prominence to the deaths of Lord Clifford and his son," developing their characters far beyond anything in Halle's Chronicle, the source he made use of.

Shakespeare also gives even greater emphasis to the parts played by various members of the Stanley family. Thus although the Stanleys played little part in the reign of Henry VI, Shakespeare brings in Sir John Stanley acting as jailor to the Duchess of Gloucester in *Henry VI, part 2*, while in *Henry VI, part 3* he has King Edward IV promising to reward Sir William Stanley; both these events are fictitious.

The most outrageous example of pro-Stanley bias, however, occurs in *Richard III*, where Shakespeare attributes to Thomas Stanley (later created first earl of Derby) a major contribution to the outcome of the battle of Bosworth Field (22 August 1485), when in fact he prevaricated, and it was his brother William (ignored by Shakespeare) who took the decisive action. I give here Ian Wilson's definitive analysis of these aspects of the play.

Early in the play Shakespeare represents Thomas as the only Yorkist nobleman not taken in by Richard III, and the only great noble pointedly not cursed by Henry VI's widow, Queen Margaret, among those on-stage in Act I scene 3. Then in a scene for which there is no known historical source he has Thomas conduct a brilliant battle of wits versus Richard, culminating in the increasingly insecure Richard deciding to hold Thomas's son George Stanley as a hostage, prompting Thomas's double-edged response: 'So deal with him as I prove true to you.'

But it is in the circumstance of the battle of Bosworth Field that Shakespeare makes his most blatant reworking of history. Whereas historically before the battle it was Henry Tudor who sought out Thomas Stanley's allegiance, in *Richard III* Shakespeare has Thomas much more riskily approach Henry. Whereas before the real battle Thomas Stanley hesitated from rendering Henry his full support, saying he 'would come to him in time convenient,' Shakespeare carefully omits this piece of ambivalence. Whereas during the actual battle it was Thomas's brother William Stanley who at the crucial eleventh hour directed his forces to fight for Henry, Shakespeare ignores this William and gives Thomas all the credit.

Not least, whereas according to the historical chronicles it was a Sir Richard Bray who found Richard's crown in a hawthorn bush, thereupon passing it to Thomas Stanley, Shakespeare attributes to Thomas not only the finding of the crown, but the plucking of it 'from the dead temples of this bloody wretch'. Finally, as literally the crowning moment of the whole tetralogy, Shakespeare, at last following history, has Thomas set Richard's crown upon Henry Tudor's head, making him King Henry VII, and thus founding the Tudor dynasty of which Elizabeth represented the third generation. In a moment of the most blatant emphasis of the Tudor debt to the Stanleys, Shakespeare then has the new Henry VII ask, as his first question as crowned king: 'But tell me, is young George Stanley living?'

The orthodox view of the prominence Shakespeare gives to the Clifford and Stanley families in these early plays is that he is flattering his patron, Ferdinando Stanley, Lord Strange, patron of the troupe of players of which the actor Shakspeare is assumed to have been a member, although *there is no evidence for this*. For Ferdinando (as already indicated) was the son of Margaret née Clifford and directly descended from the Thomas Stanley who did indeed crown Henry VII.

As an alternative to the orthodox view I would suggest that rather than the actor Shakspeare flattering his putative patron, we have *the author himself* flattering *his own ancestors*. What more likely, it could be argued, than that a young playwright would choose to write plays about a period of history in which his forbears played important roles, and then proceed to exaggerate those roles to the extreme, with the intention of reminding all who saw the plays that the Tudor dynasty owed its very existence to the Stanleys? Moreover, the *Henry VI* plays are thought to have been first acted by Strange's Men, William's brother's company. His brother's closeness to the throne would have made the adoption of a pen-name for his earliest publications highly desirable, to avoid bringing the family name into disrepute: writing poetry was bad enough, writing plays beyond the pale. And when William himself became Queen Elizabeth's heir after the death by poison of Ferdinando in April 1594, the pen-name became mandatory.

John M. Rollett

Note. The material in this article is largely drawn from Chapter 9 of my book, *William Stanley as Shakespeare: Evidence of Authorship by the Sixth Earl of Derby* (MacFarland, 2015).

In Memoriam

It is with great sadness that we announce the passing of our Associate, John Rollett, who died on 31st October 2015 at the age of 84. We extend our sympathies to John's family. John was a scholar and a gentleman. A research scientist by profession, he had been interested in the authorship question since the 1960s, initially as an Oxfordian, and subsequently as a powerful advocate of the case for William Stanley. Despite this switch of allegiance, he continued to engage in constructive and challenging dialogue with post-Stratfordians of various persuasions. He wrote several articles on Shakespeare for *Notes and Queries*, and his major study: *William Stanley as Shakespeare* was published earlier this year. In losing John, we have lost both a valued colleague who inspired respect and affection, and also our main champion of the 6th Earl of Derby. As a tribute to John, we have included this extended version of his submission to the conference brochure.

Mind the Gap: Francis Bacon and the Shakespeare History Plays

“Sirrah, I am sworn brother to a leash of drawers, and can call them all by their christen names, as Tom, Dick, and Francis.” - Prince Henry (aka Harry); *Henry IV Part 1* Act 2 Sc. 4

Shakespeare’s History plays form an unbroken sequence, except for two gaps. The “first tetralogy” (comprising *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1* and *2*, and *Henry V*), and the “second tetralogy”, (*Henry VI Parts 1,2,3* and *Richard III*) create a continuous narrative tracing the history of the English crown through the reign of seven kings. However, the plays of *King John* and *The Life of King Henry VIII* are disconnected from this otherwise seamless progression. Consider the gaps. The first, spanning the reign of four sovereigns between *King John* and *Richard II*, happens to be covered by four non-Shakespearean plays¹. If we bundle these plays together with those of Shakespeare, we have a sequence of works all appearing in the 1590s extending without interruption from *King John* to *Richard III*. These point to a *co-ordinated program*.

One gap remains, between *Richard III* and *Henry VIII*. Very curiously, it is filled by Francis Bacon’s prose work, *The History of the Reign of Henry VII*. Examine closely the splice: *Richard III* concludes at the battle of Bosworth Field. Bacon’s *Henry VII* commences at this same juncture: with the singing of the *Te Deum* on the battlefield to commemorate the ascent to the crown of the Earl of Richmond as Henry VII. Bacon’s *Henry VII* therefore completes an unbroken cycle of histories, from *King John* to *Henry VIII*. It is, incidentally, replete with terms relating to the theatre, acting and the staging of plays. Clearly, Francis Bacon was, at the very least, a party to the program of co-ordination, if not the lead conductor himself.

Certain clues invite further consideration of Bacon’s relationship to the History plays. *Henry VIII* appears in print for the first time in the 1623 Folio, and contains a curious historical anomaly. Shakespeare names four figures as calling on Cardinal Wolsey to relieve him of the Great Seal. In fact, only two of these were present (the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk), while the remaining two appear to be a historical error (the Earl of Surrey, and the Lord Chamberlain). Yet, the deputation who arrived on Bacon’s doorstep in 1621 to retrieve the Great Seal from him numbered four men, including the Earl of Arundel, (who was also Earl of Surrey), and the Earl of Pembroke, (who was Lord Chamberlain). Thus, the Folio version of the play glances at the historical resonance between the loss of the Great Seal by Wolsey in 1529, and by Bacon in 1621.

Finally, in *Henry IV Part 1*, Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Prince Henry a variation on the commonplace phrase “Tom, Dick or Harry”, by substituting the final “Harry” with “Francis”. The playwright has left this link connecting the Prince to the name Francis. Why? A clue: Prince Henry was the Prince of Wales. Francis Bacon, the unacknowledged son of Queen Elizabeth, if he had been recognised, would have also been the Prince of Wales. Tug on these loose threads, and not only the the tapestry of Shakespeare’s History plays, but English history itself, might unravel.

by Simon Miles

Francis Bacon Society

¹ 1. *Hon. History of Friar Bacon & Friar Bungay*; (first printed 1594) attr. R. Greene; on Henry III (1216-1272)
2. *Edward the First*; (1593) attr. G. Peele; Edward I (1272-1307)
3. *Edward the Second*; (1594) attr. C. Marlowe; Edward II (1307-1327)
4. *The Raigne of King Edward the third*; (1596) Anonymous; Edward III (1327-1377)

Marlowe and Shakespeare's History Plays

"Without Marlowe, there never would have been the Shakespeare whom we know," said T.M. Parrot. Christopher Marlowe is the one Shakespeare authorship candidate with the proven ability to write great plays. His influence saturated the Bard's works. "Shakespeare never forgot him: in...*The Tempest*, he is still echoing Marlowe's phrases," wrote A.L. Rowse.

Concerning history plays, the Folio versions of Shakespeare's *II* and *III Henry VI* not only share myriad language connections with Marlowe's works (e.g., *2H6*: "And all the wealthy kingdoms of the west" vs. Marlowe's *II Tamburlaine*: "Than all the wealthy kingdoms I subdued"; a series of shared words and imagery surrounding Ulysses stealing King Rhesus' horses in *3H6*, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, and *Ovid's Elegies*), they also share plot and character similarities. For example, in *2H6* Queen Margaret sarcastically suggests that the very Catholic English King Henry become Pope, while in Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, King Henry sarcastically suggests that the very Catholic Duke of Guise become king.

Marlowe brought Edward III onstage in the final scenes of his *Edward II*, and the anonymous *Edward III*, which many attribute to Shakespeare, would have made a logical follow-on. In fact, playwright Robert Greene implied that Marlowe wrote it, telling "Roscius" (Edward Alleyn): "If the Cobbler hath taught thee to say, *Ave Caesar*, disdain not thy tutor, because thou pratest in a King's chamber: what sentence thou utterest on the stage, flows from the censure of our wits" (*Francesco's Fortunes*, published by March 1591). "Our wits" refers to playwrights; "the Cobbler" is Marlowe, and "Ave Caesar" is a line from *Edward III*, spoken during a scene between King Edward and his son, the Black Prince. I view it as likely that Marlowe wrote *Edward II* in 1590 and *Edward III* shortly thereafter, and that the same author revised *Edward III* between June 1593 and its registration in 1595, reflecting not only a maturing writing ability, but also changed realities in international politics.

During his daily attendance of services in Canterbury Cathedral while at the King's School, Marlowe had ample opportunity to view the tomb of Odet de Coligny, possibly inspiring him to feature the assassination of his brother Admiral Gaspard de Coligny in *The Massacre at Paris*. Might Marlowe also have found playwriting inspiration in the final resting places of the Black Prince and Henry IV, also located in the Cathedral? Since the Black Prince predeceased his father, Edward IV was succeeded by Richard II. Numerous scholars have written about the remarkable similarities between *Edward II* and *Richard II*.

Several Shakespeare plays contain language specific to Cambridge University, which Marlowe attended but Shakespeare did not. For example, in *2H6* and *2H4* we find the juxtaposition of "commence" and "act," calling to mind that a candidate commenced at Cambridge following a successful disputation called "The Act." Marlowe employed "commence" with this meaning in *Doctor Faustus*. Among history plays, the Bard used "keep" in the Cambridge sense of "to dwell" in *3H6* and *1H4*, as did Marlowe in *The Massacre at Paris*.

Shakespeare referred three times to Marlowe's supposed death in a fight over "the reckoning" or bill for a meal: most famously in *As You Like It*, and also *Cymbeline*. In *1H4* Falstaff says: "What is that 'honour'? Air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday" (V.i.136-8). Marlowe's "death" occurred on a Wednesday. Marlovians propose that the vast array of interconnections between Marlowe and Shakespeare occur because Marlowe faked his death to avoid execution for "heresy" and continued writing, using William Shakspeare from Stratford as a front man.

Donna N. Murphy

Oxford and the Histories *Oh cheerful colours, see where Oxford comes...* 3HVI.5.1.58

For Lord MacCaulay the De Veres were: *The longest and most illustrious line of nobles that England has seen.* Steeped in the traditions of chivalry, successive generations of “the old Earls of Oxford” had participated in the Crusades, been made Knights of the Garter and fought in the battles of Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt. The 14th Earl accompanied Henry VIII to the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1521. The 15th Earl carried the crown at the coronation of Anne Boleyn in 1533. The 16th Earl, Edward’s father, entertained Elizabeth with dramatic interludes at Castle Hedingham in 1561. He also commissioned the historian John Leland to produce an elaborate genealogy which traced the family line back through the Norman Conquest to Milo de Vere, brother-in-law to Charlemagne.

Such a background would fit with Walt Whitman’s profile of the author of Shakespeare’s histories: "Conceived out of the fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism—only one of the 'wolfish earls' so plenteous in the plays themselves, or some born descendant and knower, might seem to be the true author of those amazing works". In the Henry plays, John de Vere, the 13th Earl, who led the vanguard at Bosworth Field, is variously described as *sweet Oxford - valiant Oxford - brave Oxford, wondrous well beloved.* On the other hand, in *King John* no mention is made of the treachery of the 3rd Earl, and in *Richard II* the king’s most notorious favourite, Robert de Vere, the 9th Earl, is completely absent. The curious question posed in *Henry V* by the constable of France on the eve of the battle of Agincourt: "The armour that I see in your tent tonight, are those stars or suns upon it?" (3.7.77-78) may well have been prompted by a tragic incident at the battle of Barnet when, through the mist, Warwick’s men mistook the Vere badge of the Star for the Sun badge of the Yorkists and attacked their own side. In 1573, like Prince Hal and Falstaff in *1 Henry IV*, three of Oxford’s men staged a highway robbery near Gad’s Hill for a lark.

Oxford’s passion for history is well documented. It was as much a matter of education as of birth. His mentor, the great scholar Sir Thomas Smith, wrote a treatise on government and politics *De Republica Angolorum* which would influence the Shakespeare history plays. His father commissioned the playwright John Bale to write 14 history plays to be performed by his own players. Both Bale’s *King Johann*, and his *Chronicle of Sir John Oldcastle* are recognised Shakespeare sources, and yet they existed only in manuscript. Oxford had close connections with Raphael Holinshed. The first edition of *The Chronicles* had been dedicated to Oxford’s father-in-law in 1577. Holinshed had issued a pamphlet in 1573 attacking a man called Brown as the perpetrator of a murder, thereby deflecting blame from one of Oxford’s men. It is likely that Oxford was composing the History plays from consulting the same sources at the same time in the 1580s and in the same place (Cecil House) as Holinshed’s team were preparing the second edition of the *Chronicles*.

In 1564 Oxford’s uncle, Arthur Golding, wrote of the young earl’s *pregnancy of wit and sharpness of understanding* in his earnest desire *to read, peruse and communicate with others as well the histories of ancient times, and things done long ago, as also of the present estate of things in our days.*

(Dedication to *Histories of Trogus Pompeius* ... a source for Shakespeare’s Roman plays.)

Kevin Gilvary

The Neville Bias in the History Plays

Suffolk: And he of these that can do most of all
Cannot do more in England than the **Nevils** ... *Henry VI* part 2 (1.3.73)

Half hidden in the Shakespeare history plays are members of the Neville family, disguised by their titles; their true identities, the family name, thus being obscured. So often is a Neville hidden behind a title that we do not realize who has walked on stage: the Earl of Westmoreland is Ralph Neville. Shakespeare demonstrates a Neville bias: either inserting or foregrounding a member of the Neville family to bring them glory, or removing Nevilles to avoid exposing them or damaging their reputation. He also includes minor characters that have links to the Nevilles.

It might be argued that because they were key players in the history of the Plantagenet kings, any playwright dramatizing these reigns would inevitably have to bring members of the Neville family onto the stage. However the Bard's pro-Neville bias led to him distorting history, not simply for dramatic effect, but to show the power and influence of the Nevilles and to do so in a way that was sufficiently concealed as to suggest, rather than openly brag: only a Neville who had set out to hide his own identity would have the motive to both reveal the Nevilles' prominence and conceal their true identity. Indeed the playwright began by naming the Nevilles: in the 1594 quarto of *Henry VI* part 2 (*The First Part of the Contention*), he named the "**Nevils**" eight times. As time went by he was more circumspect.

An example of this bias occurs in *Henry IV* part 2 when the Bard removes responsibility for a treacherous trick from a Neville and displaces it onto Prince John of Lancaster. At the battle of Gaultree it was Ralph Neville who deceived Archbishop Scrope and the other rebel leaders into surrendering and then arrested them, whereas Shakespeare gives this Machiavellian role to Prince John, who promises to redress the rebels' grievances and so persuades them to discharge their army, enabling Neville to arrest them. Stow and Holinshed both stated that it was Westmoreland (Ralph Neville) who conducted this negotiation. Their testimony is reinforced by the fact that Prince John was only 16 at the time and so would have been an unlikely negotiator. Furthermore in *Henry V*, Shakespeare has Westmoreland play a significant role at Agincourt. However both Hall and Holinshed state that Henry V had specifically assigned Westmoreland to guard the Scottish border during this period and this placed him in England, not at Agincourt. In the First Folio, the king directly addresses Ralph Neville and refers to him as "cousin" (Ralph Neville married the half sister of Henry V's father). When *Henry V* was written, with its scenes in France and in French, Henry Neville was ambassador to France.

These discoveries add to the evidence that supports Henry Neville (1562-1615) as the hidden writer of the works of Shakespeare. Indeed, with this new perspective distortions and details in the Shakespeare history plays that were previously opaque, anomalous or cryptic become clear.

For a comprehensive study of the Nevilles in the History plays see:
Bradbeer & Casson, 2015, Sir Henry Neville, Alias William Shakespeare, Authorship Evidence in the History Plays: McFarland

John Casson 2015

Further Reading

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