

Much ado about words as two Shakespeare sleuths spot old manuscript

February 13 2018, by Nancy Owano



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Will the real William Shakespeare please stand up? Massive numbers of academic papers have focused through the decades on questions of where and when the bard lifted from other works and how much was from his own head.

Software designed to sniff for plagiarism offers a fresh talking point.

Researchers Dennis McCarthy and June Schlueter believe that the Bard of Avon may have borrowed from a little-known 16th century manuscript, about rebellion and rebels by George North, said Margi Murphy in *The Telegraph*.

Slate and other sites reported that George North's 16-century manuscript, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels" was put under the sniffing spotlight. The authors uncovered his manuscript at the British Library. *Slate* called North "a minor Elizabethan diplomat.

Their research tool: [WCopyfind](#). It is described as an open source program that compares documents and reports similarities in words and phrases.

The authors did not suggest the Bard plagiarized, but that, as *New York Times* put it, "he read and was [inspired](#) by" the North manuscript.

According to their research, Shakespeare consulted the manuscript to write King Lear, Macbeth, Richard III, Henry V, and seven other [plays](#), said *Fast Company*.

Michael Blanding in *New York Times* said their findings will be published this month by D.S. Brewer, which specializes in the Medieval Literature of England and [France](#), and the British Library.

Cover notes included "New sources for Shakespeare do not turn up every day... This is a truly significant one that has not heretofore been studied or published. The list of passages now traced back to this source is impressive," according to David Bevington, Professor Emeritus, University of Chicago.

McCarthy is an independent Shakespeare scholar. Schlueter is Charles A. Dana Professor Emerita of English at Lafayette College, according to publisher notes. Shakespeare is one of her area specialties.

Essentially, it is not a situation where passages or lines were verbatim. What they did find that was that the software picked out "common words and phrases between North's manuscript and Shakespeare's plays," said *Fast Company*.

They found "the pattern of words" convincing, said Murphy, which appear to be lifted from North's tome. (Who was North? He served as an ambassador to Sweden in the late 1500s, said Murphy.)

"If this new source is authenticated, it could prove to be a landmark moment for English [literature](#)," Murphy added.

Commented *Alphr's* Thomas McMullan: "Shakespeare is well known for borrowing plots and turns of phrase from other writers, from Geoffrey Chaucer and Giovanni Boccaccio to his [contemporary](#) Christopher Marlowe."

What's new is the suggestion that the writer also had North's manuscript in his mind when developing some of the famous works. "The new book adds yet another wrinkle to the debate surrounding Shakespeare's literary [legacy](#)," said *Smithsonian.com*.

Nonetheless, for those who have read many of the works of Shakespeare, all the pattern similarities in the world would not erase a sentiment in one comment in *The Telegraph*: "It may be the source but it is not the river."

Citation: Much ado about words as two Shakespeare sleuths spot old manuscript (2018, February 13) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2018-02-ado-words-shakespeare-sleuths-manuscript.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.