

Plagiarism software pins down new source for Shakespeare's plays

By Alison Flood, The Guardian on 02.20.18

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A First Folio edition of William Shakespeare's plays is pictured at Sotheby's auction house in London, England, March 30, 2006. About 750 copies of the First Folio were printed in 1623, seven years after the playwright's death. Photo by: John D McHugh/AFP/Getty Images

Plagiarism software more commonly used to check student essays for overly assiduous borrowings has uncovered a long-forgotten, handwritten document, from 1576, as the possible source for more than 20 monologues and passages from Shakespeare's plays.

Independent scholar Dennis McCarthy and LaFayette College professor June Schlueter used WCopyfind software to compare passages from Shakespeare's plays with George North's 1576 unpublished manuscript, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion," about the dangers of rebelling against a king. They were able to trace more than 20 passages back to the essay, including Gloucester's opening soliloquy in "Richard III," Macbeth's comparison of dog breeds to different classes of men, the Fool's Merlin prophecy in "King Lear," and the events surrounding Jack Cade's fatal fight with Alexander Iden in "Henry VI."

“Until now, no Shakespeare scholar has studied the manuscript, and it has probably remained little read. Yet, as our analysis has revealed, 'Discourse' is not merely the only uniquely existent, evidently uncopied document to have had a substantial impact on the canon; it is one of the most influential Shakespearean source texts in any form,” they write in a new book, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels by George North," published February 16 by Boydell & Brewer in collaboration with the British Library. “In terms of the number of plays, scenes and passages affected, the scope of the manuscript’s influence likely exceeds all other known Shakespearean sources, excepting only the 'Chronicles of Hall and Holinshed' and Thomas North’s 'Plutarch’s Lives.’”

In the Duke of Gloucester’s opening monologue, and a passage from "Discourse," for example, the scholars and their software found that each contained “a tight juxtaposition of the same eight terms: glass, proportion, fair, feature, deformed, world, shadow, Nature.” The words occur within 77 words in "Discourse" and within 92 in "Richard III" – running them through a searchable database of more than 60,000 early English books, no other work contained the same eight words in passages of up to 200 words.

Furthermore, when just four words were considered – proportion, glass, feature and fair, which occur within a 31-word cluster in Shakespeare and a 16-word cluster in North – no other work in the database used the words in such close formation. “While it may seem to some at first glance that anyone writing about a glass is liable to use proportion, fair and feature in the same passage, this is no longer a matter of conjecture ... no one else did,” they write, adding that “before digitization, scholars simply could not conduct searches in a comprehensive and objective fashion.”

McCarthy and Schlueter say that “the likelihood of Shakespeare juxtaposing these four shared terms by chance is less than one in a billion,” and that “even if by sheer chance Shakespeare hit these first four words, he still then has to match the next four words: Nature, shadow, deformed, world. This would be like hitting a national lottery twice in a row.”

They also show how details of the final hours of the rebel Jack Cade in Shakespeare’s "Henry VI, Part II," including Cade eating grass because he is starving, and his corpse later being eaten by crows, mirror North’s poem about Cade’s death. The details appear in no other accounts of the rebel’s death.

McCarthy was moved to track down the manuscript of "Discourse" after spotting a mention of it in a 1927 catalog of rare books where it was described as “an original and unknown work.” He and Schlueter searched for a year for the document, before it was eventually discovered in the British Library.

“It’s showing why you should never rebel against a king. It was an important ass-kissing thing to do ... he’s trying to show ‘hey I’m behind the Elizabethan aristocracy,’ ” said McCarthy of the North text. “Shakespeare used it for his own plays, particularly plays dealing with rebellion. It solves a lot of riddles scholars have debated.”

The reaction to the discovery has been mixed. “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,” said professor David Bevington of the University of Chicago.

But the Shakespeare scholar Sir Brian Vickers, who himself used plagiarism software to discover that “Edward III” was possibly a collaboration between Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd, was less convinced.

“I’ve only read parts of McCarthy’s book, but I think he has made a good case for Shakespeare having read this work. He tends to overstate his case, and finds significance in tiny details that can be explained by other factors,” said Vickers. “He has previously shown that Shakespeare knew other works by Sir Thomas North than his famous translation of “Plutarch’s Lives.” But, instead of taking this as further evidence of Shakespeare’s remarkable memory, in 2011 he published a book, “North of Shakespeare,” which claimed that North was the true author of Shakespeare’s plays. Scholars are now rather skeptical of his work.”

UCL English professor John Mullan was also cautious about the significance of the discovery. “This book might well have been read by Shakespeare,” said Mullan. “But there’s an eight-volume hardback work about sources of Shakespeare. And it’s a chastening experience – when you look at a particular play, ‘Henry IV, Part I’ for example, it has nine lengthy chunks from different works. They’re labeled as source, or possible source, or probable source, or historical analogue, or analogue. There are different degrees of ‘sourciness.’ ”

Quiz

- 1 Read the following selection from the article.

"...Yet, as our analysis has revealed, 'Discourse' is not merely the only uniquely existent, evidently uncopied document to have had a substantial impact on the canon; it is one of the most influential Shakespearean source texts in any form," they write in a new book, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels by George North," published February 16 by Boydell & Brewer in collaboration with the British Library.

Which selection from the article BEST supports this idea?

- (A) Independent scholar Dennis McCarthy and LaFayette College professor June Schlueter used WCopyfind software to compare passages from Shakespeare's plays with George North's 1576 unpublished manuscript, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion," about the dangers of rebelling against a king.
- (B) The words occur within 77 words in "Discourse" and within 92 in "Richard III" – running them through a searchable database of more than 60,000 early English books, no other work contained the same eight words in passages of up to 200 words.
- (C) McCarthy was moved to track down the manuscript of "Discourse" after spotting a mention of it in a 1927 catalog of rare books where it was described as "an original and unknown work."
- (D) But the Shakespeare scholar Sir Brian Vickers, who himself used plagiarism software to discover that "Edward III" was possibly a collaboration between Shakespeare and Thomas Kyd, was less convinced.

- 2 Read the selection from the article.

"I've only read parts of McCarthy's book, but I think he has made a good case for Shakespeare having read this work. He tends to overstate his case, and finds significance in tiny details that can be explained by other factors," said Vickers. "He has previously shown that Shakespeare knew other works by Sir Thomas North than his famous translation of "Plutarch's Lives." But, instead of taking this as further evidence of Shakespeare's remarkable memory, in 2011 he published a book, "North of Shakespeare," which claimed that North was the true author of Shakespeare's plays. Scholars are now rather skeptical of his work."

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from the selection?

- (A) Most scholars have come to the conclusion that McCarthy's research was faulty, as it was later proven that North had no real impact on Shakespeare's plays.
 - (B) While McCarthy's thesis that North's writings influenced Shakespeare's plays made sense, his wild claims that North was the real author of the plays made scholars doubt him.
 - (C) McCarthy was the first scholar to prove that Shakespeare was familiar with a number of North's works, including his famous translation, "Plutarch's Lives."
 - (D) Without McCarthy's analysis of North's work, scholars would have little understanding of what kinds of sources Shakespeare used to inform his plays.
- 3 What is the author's MAIN purpose for including John Mullan's point of view in the article?
- (A) to explain why McCarthy and Schlueter's discovery is so important to scholars' understanding of Shakespeare
 - (B) to provide an example of how McCarthy and Schlueter's discovery changed scholarly interpretation of Shakespeare's works
 - (C) to illustrate how later research has disproven much of what McCarthy and Schlueter asserted in their findings
 - (D) to highlight the problems that some members of the scholarly community have with McCarthy and Schlueter's research

- 4 Read the following selection from the article.

McCarthy and Schlueter say that “the likelihood of Shakespeare juxtaposing these four shared terms by chance is less than one in a billion,” and that “even if by sheer chance Shakespeare hit these first four words, he still then has to match the next four words: Nature, shadow, deformed, world. This would be like hitting a national lottery twice in a row.”

Why does the author include this quote in the article?

- (A) to convey the improbability that the similarities between Shakespeare's and North's works are a coincidence
- (B) to imply that the discovery of the similarities between North's and Shakespeare's works is like hitting the national lottery
- (C) to explain which eight words scholars used to determine that Shakespeare was influenced by North's book
- (D) to demonstrate how scholars are using plagiarism software to determine the sources for Shakespeare's plays