

## REBELLION THEMES IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

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**Abstract.** William Shakespeare, the renowned playwright of the Elizabethan era, is celebrated for his insightful exploration of human nature, society, and the complexities of power. One recurring theme that echoes throughout several of his tragedies is rebellion. Shakespeare masterfully weaves tales of political unrest, familial discord, and personal defiance, providing a profound examination of the consequences of rebellion. This article delves into the rebellion themes in some of Shakespeare's most iconic tragedies. A Brief Discourse of Rebellions & Rebels exists in a manuscript written by George North in 1576, consisting of 114 pages (British Library MS 70520). It was tracked down recently by two researchers, Denis McCarthy and June Schlueter. Their study of A Brief Discourse was published in 2018, in which they explained how, after copying and digitising the contents, they were able to compare words and phrases in the manuscript with other works on the EEBO database.

**Keywords:** Rebellion, tragedy, play, method, research.

### INTRODUCTION

George North (fl. 1561-1581) was a minor figure in the Court of Queen Elizabeth. He served for a while as Ambassador to Sweden and was the author of three politically orientated translations: *The Description of Swedland, Gotland and Finland* (1561), the *Philosopher of the Court* (1575), and *The Stage of Popish Toys* (1581.) The latter two were dedicated to Christopher Hatton; so George North would not seem to be in Oxford's camp.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

George appears to have been related to Roger, Lord North (1530-1600), perhaps a brother like the celebrated Thomas North, or perhaps a cousin. Lord North lived at Kirtling Hall, Cambridgeshire, about four miles south of Newmarket and eighteen miles east of the town of Cambridge. Roger North was known to Walsingham and served on a number of embassies during the reign of Elizabeth, including one to France in 1574. Roger later entertained the Queen on her Progress in 1578 and for his final years served as the Treasurer of the Queen's household. His younger brother, Thomas North (1535-1604), was the noted translator of Plutarch. Thomas had studied at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, and at Lincoln's Inn. He had accompanied his brother to Paris in 1574. Thomas published his

translation of Amyot's French version of Plutarch in 1579; *The Lives of the noble Grecians and Romanes Compared*, which of course was an important source for *Julius Caesar*, *Antony & Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*. Roger North's household accounts indicate that both George North and Thomas North were living at his home, Kirtling Hall, during the four months in 1576 leading to the presentation of the *Discourse* to Roger.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

McCarthy had seen the manuscript mentioned in a 1927 Auction Catalogue of fine and rare books. The catalogue described it as "an original and unknown work" and went on: "It is extremely interesting to compare George North's poems on Owen Glendower and Jack Cade with Shakespeare's treatment of the same subject in *Richard II* and *2 Henry VI*." After a difficult search, McCarthy and Schlueter were alerted to its holding at the British Library (BL) by Tony Edwards, Professor of Medieval Manuscripts at the University of Kent. The BL had acquired it in 1933. After digitising the contents, McCarthy and Schlueter used a software programme intended to detect scholastic plagiarism, Wcopyfind. Thus they were able to establish more than twenty correlations with passages from the works of Shakespeare in the manuscript including: Gloucester's opening soliloquy about his deformed appearance and villainous determination (*Richard III*, I. i. 14–30), Canterbury's discussion of aristocratic order in the societies of bees (*Henry V*, I. ii. 183–212), Macbeth's comparison of various breeds of dogs to different classes of men (*Macbeth*, III.i. 93–102), the citizens' uprising in *Coriolanus* (Act II), and essentially all the events surrounding Jack Cade's fatal fight with Alexander Iden in his garden (*2 Henry VI*, IV. x). Similarly, George North's discussion and quoting of a Merlin prophecy also clears up long-standing confusions over the origin and purpose of the Fool's Merlin prophecy in *King Lear* (III. ii. 79–95).

Indeed McCarthy and Schluetter claim that the manuscript's influence probably exceeds all known sources except for the *Chronicles* of Hall and Holinshed and Thomas North's Plutarch's *Lives*. They also established by reference to the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database that there are no other known sources for these speeches and incidents. These examples are not totally obvious. No undergraduate would be in trouble for plagiarism on the basis of them. I am not qualified to evaluate the strength of these claims. No doubt plenty of others (qualified or not) will attempt this task.

For anyone interested in the works of Shakespeare, and especially for those that doubt the authorship, three questions emerge:

(a) Why did the manuscript remain unpublished when other works by George North found their way into print?

Walsingham was working closely with Cecil at the time of the Northern Rebellion in 1569 and given the close connections with the family it is possible that George hoped to gain favour by writing *A Brief Discourse*. Despite its anti-rebellion theme, the work was not published, perhaps because it did not go far enough in tainting the rebellious subjects.

(b) What happened to the manuscript between its publication and its mention in a catalogue in 1927?

At the time of its writing George North was living with his relative, Roger Lord North, at Kirtling Hall or Tower, Cambridgeshire, to whom he dedicated the work. Thomas North was also living there at the time. Presumably it stayed in the archives until the family decided to sell their heirlooms.

(c) How might the author of the works of Shakespeare encountered this private manuscript?

McCarthy and Schlueter suggest three possibilities: *A Brief Discourse* circulated in manuscript and that Shakespeare had access to it. However, if the manuscript had circulated, it would have been known to the contributors to the Holinshed project, but they do not list it, nor do they seem to draw on it.<sup>2</sup> Nor is it mentioned by other authorities such as Camden and Stow. Next they suggest that Shakespeare could have been with the Queen's Men in the 1580s, who visited Kirtling Hall. Shakespeare could have made use of the library at that point and even copied it. McCarthy and Schlueter are vague on the chronology: now we know from Lord North's accounts that the Queen's Men visited Kirtling Hall in June 1583, soon after their formation. Some biographers believe that young William of Stratford joined the Queen's Men and toured with them. But such a scenario is thought to have happened from 1587 after the death of William Knell.<sup>4</sup> McCarthy and Schlueter finally resort to "an indirect source".

1. *Macbeth: Ambition's Reckless Revolt* In "Macbeth," Shakespeare delves into the destructive nature of unchecked ambition. The eponymous character's rebellion against King Duncan not only sets the stage for a bloody power struggle but also exposes the corrosive effects of blind ambition. Macbeth's rebellion against the natural order results in a tragic downfall, underscoring the dangers of pursuing power without moral restraint.

2. *Hamlet: A Son's Revolt* "Hamlet" explores the theme of rebellion on both personal and political levels. The protagonist, Hamlet, grapples with his internal rebellion against the moral decay of his society, epitomized by his uncle Claudius's ascension to the throne. Hamlet's internal struggle leads to an external rebellion against the corrupt monarchy, resulting in a series of tragic events. The play reflects the consequences of resisting injustice and the toll such rebellion takes on the individual.

3. *Othello: Jealousy's Rebellion* In "Othello," Shakespeare explores the destructive power of jealousy as a form of rebellion. Iago's machinations spark a rebellion of emotions within Othello, ultimately leading to the tragic demise of the titular character and those around him. The play highlights how personal insecurities can incite rebellion within individuals, creating a tumultuous path that ends in tragedy.

4. *Julius Caesar: Political Rebellion* "Julius Caesar" revolves around political rebellion and the consequences of conspiring against a ruler. The assassination of

Caesar sets off a chain reaction of civil unrest and power struggles, illustrating the precarious nature of political rebellion. Shakespeare examines the complexities of loyalty, patriotism, and the consequences of betraying a leader, offering a timeless exploration of the dynamics of power and rebellion.

5. King Lear: Familial Rebellion"King Lear" delves into the theme of rebellion within the family, portraying the consequences of filial disobedience. Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his daughters leads to betrayal and rebellion, highlighting the fragile nature of familial relationships. The play explores the consequences of parental authority challenged and the tragedy that ensues when family bonds are broken.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's tragedies serve as timeless reflections on the multifaceted nature of rebellion. Whether it's the ambitious ascent of Macbeth, Hamlet's internal and external struggles, the destructive force of jealousy in Othello, the political turmoil in Julius Caesar, or the familial discord in King Lear, Shakespeare intricately weaves rebellion themes into the fabric of his tragedies. These works continue to resonate, inviting audiences to ponder the consequences of defiance, both on a personal and societal level.

Making the reasonable assumptions that the manuscript remained at Kirtling Hall,<sup>6</sup> and that there has not been any copy, it seems impossible that Shakspeare, who would have been twelve at the time of the manuscript's composition, would ever have had access to it.

It is my view that if those of you with the necessary literary competence are able to support the thesis of McCarthy and Schlueter, these are respectable arguments (a) against the authorship of Stratford's Shakspeare and (b) in favour of Oxford's authorship.

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