

Response to Don Rubin

COMMENTARY

William Rubinstein

There are two other matters to raise before responding to the specific points made by Professor Don Rubin (2024). The first concerns ‘Hand D’ (although I also respond to other points he raised about Hand D below.) I attach photographs made by John O’Donnell, an excellent Neville researcher, of words in the manuscript of Hand D, and the same exact words in letters written by Sir Henry Neville. (When I wrote my original article for this *Journal* (Rubinstein, 2024), I had not yet secured the permission of Mr. O’Donnell to reproduce them, as I have since then.) As will be seen, the two sets of words are identical, and were obviously written by the same man. To reiterate, these are photos of the same exact words, not merely evidence of apparently similar writing styles. The idiosyncratic features of this handwriting were also very likely to have been accentuated by the pens, ink, and paper used in Elizabethan times. The photos here also supplement the photos of Neville’s handwriting reproduced in my original article and, more fully, in the book I co-authored with the late Dr. John Casson (Casson & Rubinstein, 2014). The identical nature of the handwriting constitutes powerful, if not irrefutable, evidence that Neville wrote Shakespeare’s works.

SUBMITTED August 01, 2024
ACCEPTED September 10, 2024
PUBLISHED September 30, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.31275/20243531>

PLATINUM OPEN ACCESS

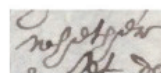
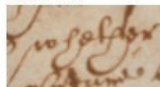


Creative Commons License 4.0.
CC-BY-NC. Attribution required.
No commercial use.

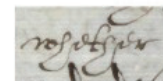
Sir Thomas More

Neville Documents

whether

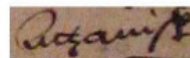
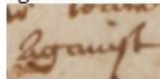


Letter to Robert Cecil,
26? February 1600/1601

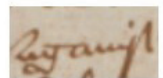


Letter to Robert Cecil,
9 July 1601

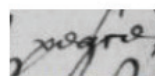
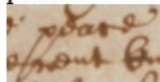
against



Worsley MS 47, folio 3 (c. 1584)



peace



Letter to Thomas Windebank,
10 January 1599/1600

Figure 1. The Handwriting of ‘Hand D’ (Left Column) in *Sir Thomas More* (Jowett, 2011) Compared to Sir Henry Neville’s Handwriting.

Secondly, Don Rubin is an advocate of the view that Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (1550–1604), wrote the works of William Shakespeare. When, many years ago, I first became interested in the Authorship question, I read everything available on de Vere as the real author and have read most works published subsequently, but I was not convinced, then or since. Although the Oxford theory has now been around for over a century, not a single example of what might reasonably be termed convincing evidence in support of the theory has ever been found. There is, in addition, the inconvenient fact that de Vere lived from 1550 until 1604, although all mainstream accounts of Shakespeare's career assert that he wrote his works between about 1590 (when de Vere was 40 years old) and 1613 (when de Vere had been dead for nine years), necessitating the creation by Oxfordians of a new chronology of the life and writing career of 'William Shakespeare,' for which no evidence whatever exists, to say nothing of the fact (as outlined in my original essay) that Shakespeare's plays contain references to events that occurred after de Vere's death.

The conclusion that the Oxfordian theory is false is also the conclusion of all academic scholars who have studied it, including those who have examined its claims in detail. A prime example of such a scholar is Emeritus Professor Alan H. Nelson, formerly of the University of California at Berkeley. Nelson (2003) was the author of the standard scholarly biography of de Vere, *Monstrous Adversary: The Life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*, a 527-page work which includes hundreds of footnote references, many from unpublished manuscript sources. Nelson was well aware of the Oxfordian theory and devoted several chapters in his book to examining de Vere's career as a poet and playwright. He was also the author of the biographical entry on Oxford in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (the ODNB, first published in printed form in 2004), the standard biographical compilation of the lives of notable British people from Roman times to a few years ago, containing over 60,000 entries, written by specialist experts, and continuously revised as required. Nelson (2004) concluded his online entry on de Vere by stating that:

claims by literary and historical amateurs, beginning with J. Thomas Looney in 1920 and embraced by Oxford's otherwise worthy biographer B.M. Ward, that Oxford wrote the poems and plays attributed by contemporaries to William Shakespeare are without merit.

In *Monstrous Adversary*, Nelson (2003, p. 386) also quoted Francis Meres's famous 1598 passage about the

best writers of his time of comedy:

so the best for Comedy amongst us be, Edward Earle of Oxforde, Doctor Gager of Oxforde... John Lilly, Lodge, Gascoyne, Greene, Shakespeare, Thomas Nash, Thomas Heywood, Anthony Mundaye [sic] our best plotter...

After citing this passage, Nelson (2003) concluded that "Meres (for one) knew that Oxford and Shakespeare were not the same man" (p. 387). This raises a central question about the Oxfordian theory: if de Vere wrote the works attributed to William Shakespeare, why did he write 'comedy' plays under his own name, while also being the author of 37 plays, 154 sonnets, and several long poems using the pen name 'William Shakespeare'? Possibly, he might have feared that writing controversial politically sensitive works about the overthrow of dynasties under his own name might have landed him in trouble, but, as 'William Shakespeare,' also wrote the Falstaff plays, light Comedies, and the non-political sonnets. Writing under two different names makes no sense and is good evidence that de Vere was *not* William Shakespeare. Nelson (2003) also assessed de Vere's poetry, much of which – unlike his plays – still survives, and concluded that "Oxford's poems are, above all, astonishingly uneven. The best, though few, are fine indeed, while the worst, including "The labouring man that tills the fertile soyle", are execrable" (p. 387).

To turn now to the specific points raised by Don Rubin (2024):

1. *Hand D*. Above, and in my first article (Rubinstein, 2024), I presented striking photographic evidence that the handwriting in Hand D is that of Neville. It is certainly true that William Shakespeare's (i.e., the historical man from Stratford-Upon-Avon) handwriting only consists of six signatures on legal documents, two of which might have been written by lawyers' clerks, but this is evidence that Shakespeare was not an author, not that Neville did not write Hand D. That Hand D was written by 'William Shakespeare,' whoever he was, is argued at length and most persuasively by John Jowett (2011, pp. 437–453), editor of the Arden edition of *Sir Thomas More*, who concluded his discussion by saying that "Currently, the case for Shakespeare [as the author of Hand D] looks more secure than ever" (p. 452). Apart from the, by now, almost unanimous opinion of scholars, two other key points should be made: if Sir Henry Neville was *not* 'William Shakespeare,' but was – as is clear from the handwriting – the author of Hand D, it is a complete mystery why he should have been asked to write this portion of the play *Sir Thomas More*, alongside four other well-known playwrights of the

day who are believed to have written the rest of the play, namely Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Haywood, when Neville wrote no other literary works of any kind under his own name. Secondly, if Hand D was written by de Vere, it is curious that, so far as I am aware, no Oxfordian has ever taken the simple step of producing a comparison of his known handwriting with that of Hand D. In fact, the samples of handwriting unquestionably by de Vere which I have seen are nothing whatever like the handwriting of Hand D.

2. *Dating the Plays.* Nevillians fully accept the standard dating of the plays and poems by ‘William Shakespeare,’ which are supported by much evidence apart from simply Shakespeare’s dates. To take one example. *Hamlet*, probably Shakespeare’s most famous play, was first published in two separate quarto editions (i.e., a ‘quarto’ is a play published separately and by itself, and not in a volume of plays), known as Q1 and Q2. Q1 was entered in the “Stationer’s Register” – where all plays and other published works had to be recorded – in 1602, and then actually printed in the summer or autumn of 1603 (works written but not yet printed were often listed in the Stationer’s Register sometime before their actual publication). Q2, a longer version of the play, similar in content to the *Hamlet* on stage today, was published in 1604. Later, *Hamlet* appeared in the *First Folio* edition of all of Shakespeare’s works, published in 1623. It seems obviously likely from this that *Hamlet*, a world-renowned work, was written in 1600–1602, just before the play was registered, rather than having been written many years earlier and, for no reason, kept gathering dust in some drawer or storage box.

Asserting that a work was written many years earlier than its conventional date because its accepted date does not accord with the Oxfordian chronology is a typical claim made by Oxfordians, who regularly invent facts to fit their theories, and understanding this is especially important when considering the dates of those plays by Shakespeare which are agreed by scholars to have been written after de Vere’s death in 1604, a long list that includes *King Lear* (1605–1606); *Timon of Athens* (1605–1606); *Macbeth* (1606); *Anthony and Cleopatra* (1606); *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1607–1608); *Coriolanus* (1608); *The Winter’s Tale* (1609–1611); *Cymbeline* (1610); *The Tempest* (1610–1611); *Cardenio* (1612–1616, a lost play whose title is known); *Henry VIII* (1612–1613); and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613–1614), to say nothing of the volume of Shakespeare’s Sonnets that appeared in 1609. If the author of Shakespeare’s works died in 1604, where were the manuscripts of these 12 plays hiding prior to their apparent dates of authorship? Why were they not published long before? Who authorized their publication, and why then?

Common sense alone tells us that these plays were written in the lifetime of their author; the list and the dates are clearly consistent with an active playwright, producing a new play every year or two for his acting company to put on.

3. *The Sonnets.* Our view is that the famous and mysterious dedication to *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* was written by Neville himself, and that the dedicatee, “Mr. W.H.,” was Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton, Neville’s close friend, with his initials reversed, almost certainly to recall their time together, from 1601 until 1603, as prisoners in the Tower of London following the Essex rebellion, where they probably joked about being reduced to “Mr.” when they were stripped of their titles; the reversal of their initials was almost certainly a private joke, just as was Neville’s use of “our ever-living poet.” The *Sonnets* were almost certainly published when they were because Neville was then in an upbeat mood. The work’s publication coincided with the marriage of his eldest son to an heiress the month before (the first nineteen Sonnets are addressed to a young man, advising him to marry and have children, and had almost certainly been written for and sent to his son). These Sonnets have nothing whatever relevant to anything known about the life of William Shakespeare.

The *Sonnets* were also published when they were to mark the official launch of the London Virginia Company on almost the same day as the work was published, upon whose success Neville was pinning his financial hopes. “T.T.,” the initials of the man who signed the dedication, was almost certainly Thomas Thorpe, the volume’s publisher. Neville almost certainly did not have Thorpe’s permission to use his full name in print, so he used just his initials; any other alleged explanation makes no sense. As the 154 Sonnets were certainly written at different times and addressed to different people, only their author would have had copies of all 154 Sonnets; the fact that the volume was titled *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, rather than *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* strongly suggests that their publication was the work of someone besides the Stratford man. As de Vere had been dead for five years when the work was published, Oxfordians have to explain just who had possession of *all* of the 154 Sonnets, who brought about their publication and why, and why at that particular time, to say nothing of having to explain the meaning of the mysterious dedication, just who “Mr. W.H.” might be, and many other questions about its mysteries. They haven’t done this – and neither, it should be noted, has anyone who believed that their author was indeed William Shakespeare, despite several hundred years of trying.

4. *The Strachey Letter.* The assertion by Don Rubin that the references in *The Tempest* do not relate to Bermuda,

but to a neighborhood in London, and that the play was not based on the Strachey Letter of 1610, which described the shipwreck of 1609, strikes me as sheer nonsense. Line after line in the play was clearly drawn from the Strachey letter. The most accessible recent work to provide evidence for this is McCrea (2005, pp. 203–205). An older but lengthier article providing extensive evidence for this is Cawley (1926); see also Kuhl (1962), and Gayley's book (originally 1917, recently reprinted, but without a republication date, pp. 40–80.) The shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* occurred in 1609; the Strachey Letter, describing these events, was written in 1610, and the play was first performed on 1 November 1611. The causal connection between these events, which occurred at least five years after de Vere died, could not be clearer. One must again ask that if the play was written years earlier, where it was hiding all those long years, and why was it not performed in de Vere's lifetime? As well, it would certainly be a most remarkable coincidence that a play about a similar shipwreck had been written by de Vere years earlier but was first performed in 1611 and has been thought by every commentator since to be drawn in part from the Strachey Letter. It might also be noted that the Strachey Letter could only be read by directors of the London Virginia Company, who had to swear an oath not to reveal its contents to anyone else. Although Sir Henry Neville was certainly a director of the Company, William Shakespeare had no connection with it of any kind, and was obviously not one of its directors. Therefore, he could not have read the Strachey Letter.

5. *Early Authorship Doubts*. I have no quarrel with this, and pointed out that friends of Neville regarded him in his lifetime as an excellent literary writer. I have a copy of Wildenthal's book, but many of these doubts seem 'vague,' and no one was specifically named as the real author until Sir Francis Bacon, much later.

6. *Why Not Oxford?* This has been explained above and throughout my response. Given the glaring weaknesses in the case for de Vere as the real author, it seems very surprising that anyone could still maintain that he wrote the works attributed to 'William Shakespeare.' It also seems abundantly clear that the case for Sir Henry Neville as the real author is 20 times stronger than the case for de Vere, and I can only hope that anyone with an interest in this great mystery will examine the evidence with objectivity and with open eyes.

7. *The Handwriting at Audley End*. This is one of the strangest claims about the Authorship question of which I have ever heard. Professor Stritmatter is quoted as claiming that the handwriting of the marginalia in some of the books formerly held at Billingbear, Neville's country house in Berkshire, and, since the 19th century, at Audley

End in Essex, were not written by Neville but by the 17th Earl of Oxford. In the book I co-authored with the late Dr. John Casson, we printed photographs of literally dozens of examples of the handwriting in Neville's books at Audley End, together with examples of his handwriting in letters and other documents that he wrote and show that they are identical and clearly written by the same man. For his claim to be even remotely accurate, Dr. Stritmatter would have to show the provenance of these books and how they came to be at Audley End. This would be rather difficult, as Neville and de Vere had no personal or intellectual connections or associations of any kind.

Indeed, it is very likely that they never spoke to each other, unless they discussed the weather for 30 seconds while waiting to enter Parliament. De Vere was the foreman of the jury that condemned the Earl of Essex to death following the 'Essex rebellion,' while Neville was sent to the Tower, barely escaping his own execution, for his role in that event. When Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, died in 1604, his books and other effects would have been inherited either by his widow, Elizabeth *née* Trentham, who died around 1612, or by his son and heir, Henry de Vere, eighteenth Earl of Oxford (1593–1625). Billingbear House, where Neville's books were held, was situated about six miles from Windsor in Berkshire, and about 35 miles from London. Edward de Vere had a house in London, as well as his family's ancestral home, Hedingham Castle, in Essex, on the other side of London, nearly 100 miles from Billingbear. Transporting them could only have been by some kind of primitive carriage, over unpaved roads, in English weather. If Neville wanted to buy books, he would have purchased them from booksellers in London, or, more likely, from booksellers in Oxford, where he was a graduate of Merton College, and a close friend of its head, Sir Henry Savile. Even if Neville purchased books from the heirs of de Vere after his death in 1604 – for which zero evidence exists – this proves nothing whatever about de Vere being the author of *Hamlet* or any other play by 'Shakespeare,' and is also irrelevant to the Authorship question after that date, when, as noted, 12 of the plays by 'Shakespeare' were certainly written.

Point 12 of my original article (Rubinstein, 2024), about Shakespeare visiting Sir Henry Savile in Oxford, is of the utmost importance – it has been described to me as "mind-blowing" and similar terms – and, to reiterate, I would very much like to hear from anyone in a position to add anything to the validity or otherwise of this claim. *Because* it is so implausible and has been asserted nowhere else besides in one edition of a book published in the 1890s, it deserves careful consideration. If, indeed, Shakespeare and Savile actually met, their purpose being

to discuss 'Shakespeare's' next play with Neville, its importance cannot be exaggerated.

REFERENCES

- Casson, J., & Rubinstein, W. D. (2016). *Sir Henry Neville was Shakespeare: The evidence*. Amberley Publishing.
- Cawley, R. R. (1926). Shakespeare's [sic] use of the voyagers in *The Tempest*. *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 41(3), 688–726. <https://doi.org/10.2307/457623>
- Gayley, C. M. (1917). *Shakespeare and the founders of liberty in America*. Kessinger Publishing. (Original work published 1917).
- Jowett, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Sir Thomas More*. The Arden Shakespeare, Series 3. Methuen Drama.
- Kuhl, E. P. (1962). Shakespeare and the founders of America: *The Tempest*. *Philological Quarterly*, 41(1), 123–146.
- McCrae, S. (2005). *The case for Shakespeare: The end of the authorship question*. Praeger. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400623653>
- Nelson, A. H. (2003). *Monstrous adversary: The life of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford*. Liverpool University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5949/UPO9781846313592>
- Nelson, A. H. (2004). Vere, Edward de, seventeenth Earl of Oxford (1550–1604), courtier and poet. In *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (online). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28208>.
- Rubin, D. (2024). JSE special issue commentary on Rubinstein (2024). *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 38,3 549-551. <https://doi.org/10.31275/20243529>
- Rubinstein, W. D. (2024). Why William Shakespeare did not write the works attributed to him, and why Sir Henry Neville did. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 38(2), 258–272. <https://doi.org/10.31275/20243243>