

# Who Wrote Shakespeare?

## *The Historical Evidence and an Assessment of the Competing Explanations*

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**Abstract.** This paper compares the conventional attribution of Shakespeare's works to the man from Stratford-upon-Avon with three alternatives: Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford; Sir Henry Neville; and a pooled group of other possible principal authors. The attribution record favors Stratford, while the missing personal literary record, the works' use of untranslated continental sources, and their courtly and diplomatic knowledge motivate a skeptical assessment. Two new computational studies, conducted with ChatGPT and Claude, test whether Christopher Marlowe could have continued as the principal writer after his recorded death in 1593. Neither finds a persistent late-Marlowe signature, while the Shakespeare canon retains a recognizable and developing profile. Oxford's death in 1604 creates two distinct problems: later sources and production, and the continuation of stylistic development into plays that first appeared after his death. Neville combines source access, a large surviving correspondence, specific letter-to-play parallels, and a lifespan matching the canon, but no verse or drama survives under his name and no document unambiguously identifies him as the author. A declared 10% starting probability for Stratford and stated evidence weights yield approximately 64% Neville, 17% Oxford, 8% Stratford, and 11% for all other explanations combined. Sensitivity tables show how strongly these figures depend on the starting assessment and on the weight given to the Neville-specific evidence.

## 1. The Historical Question

Readers need three distinctions at the outset. *Shakespeare* is the literary name attached to the works. *The Stratford man* is the documented person who worked in the London theatre. *Principal author* means the person who supplied most of the canon's original composition, even if collaborators wrote some passages. The conventional view joins those three identities. Concealment theories separate them.

The debate is therefore not about whether the Stratford man existed, acted, or had a place in the theatre. Those facts belong to the historical record. Nor is it about whether a dramatist could collaborate or adapt earlier stories; both are compatible with conventional authorship. The disputed step is the identification of the theatrical man as the main composer. [25, 33]

Two named alternatives receive full treatment here. Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, was a courtier with literary interests, documented Italian travel, and surviving poems and correspondence. Sir Henry Neville was a Merton-trained scholar, continental traveller, ambassador to France, member of Parliament, and member of the Virginia Company's governing council, whose surviving correspondence runs to some 136,000 words. Ken Feinstein's 635-page study, read together with selected checks of its primary sources, makes Neville's case specific enough to be modeled separately. *Oxfordian* and *Stratfordian* describe positions in the debate, not standards of evidence. Other possibilities remain grouped where the record does not permit a confident choice among them. [3, 44, 84, 86]

Few literary names are more familiar than Shakespeare, yet familiarity with a name does not itself establish the identity of its bearer. The disputed proposition is specific: did the actor and shareholder associated with Stratford-upon-Avon supply the dominant compositional voice of the plays and poems attributed to William Shakespeare? Answering it requires connecting a body of literature, a theatrical professional, and a biographical person. Documents that establish one of these connections may contribute little to another.

The conventional account identifies these roles with one man. Shakespeare came from Stratford, worked in the London theatre, participated in a successful company, and wrote the works that circulated under his name. Ordinary collaboration and revision belong comfortably within this account. Principal authorship does not mean that every surviving line was written by the same person, that the author controlled every printed edition, or that all works bearing the name were authentic. The fullest modern statements of this position, and of the case against the alternatives, are Shapiro's *Contested Will* and the collection edited by Edmondson and Wells, *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*. [117, 118]

The alternative considered here is a concealed principal whose work reached the company through an intermediary or accepted public identity. Such an arrangement need not involve a large conspiracy. One writer, a company-associated intermediary, and a small number of managers could be sufficient. Printers, readers, and many performers might repeat the established attribution without knowing how a particular script originated. A concealed principal could also work with collaborators and leave

material that others revised.

These possibilities create a genuine evidentiary problem. A title page naming Shakespeare is expected under the conventional account, but it is also expected once a successful front arrangement has established that name. The title page therefore cannot be assigned the same evidentiary force against every alternative. Conversely, explaining how concealment could work does not show that it occurred. An alternative must account for the particular testimony, the production chronology, and the literary material, as well as the public name.

The inquiry accordingly treats all sides as historical hypotheses. It neither adopts conventional attribution merely because it is conventional nor treats each uncertainty in the Stratford biography as evidence that a particular rival wrote the plays. The central issue is comparative explanation: how probable is the surviving record under each coherent account?

## 2. Bayesian Reasoning and the Starting Probability

Bayesian reasoning is a way of making changes of judgment explicit. We begin with a starting assessment, ask whether a piece of evidence would be more expected if one explanation were true than if another were true, and adjust accordingly. The starting assessment is called the *prior*; the updated assessment is called the *posterior*. A *likelihood ratio* expresses the comparative force of the evidence. The terms describe stages of reasoning, not different kinds of historical fact.

A simple example shows why the starting assessment matters. Suppose two explanations begin equally likely, at 50% each. Evidence judged twice as likely under one explanation changes the odds to two to one, or about 67% for that explanation. If it begins at 20%, its odds are initially one to four. The same two-to-one evidence changes those odds to one to two, or about 33%. An identical judgment about the evidence can therefore produce very different conclusions when the starting judgments differ.

The present paper uses this method to expose disagreement, not to turn historical interpretation into a laboratory measurement. No formula tells us that the absence of manuscripts deserves exactly a 10% starting probability or that colleagues' testimony deserves exactly a particular advantage. Those numbers are stated judgments. Readers can reject them while still examining the facts and arguments that motivate them.

The relevant candidate is already selected by his name and theatrical position. Comparing him with a random resident of Stratford would set the wrong reference class. Conversely, placing the full attribution tradition in a very high prior and then multiplying by the same documents would count the evidence twice. The analysis therefore separates a biographical starting assessment from the testimonial record and from particular features of the works.

The reference calculation assigns Stratford 10%. This figure is an all-things-considered judgment with two components that pull in opposite directions. The general improbability of a sustained front arrangement favors Stratford. His documentary profile works against him: an uncertain educational

history, a missing personal literary archive, estate omissions, and the lack of securely immediate printed mourning. The 10% expresses the judgment that the second consideration outweighs the first. Because the general cost of concealment is placed here, it is not charged again when the testimony is weighed in Section 5. Readers who regard that cost as larger should raise the figure; Section 14 shows the effect.

This is a subjective probability. No matched archival census establishes a 10%, 20%, or 50% base rate, and none of those values can presently be presented as a measured frequency of authors with this background. Assertions of rare genius do not supply the missing denominator either.

The starting assessment includes uncertainty about education and opportunity. It does not include the specific Italian, French, legal, diplomatic, and courtly correspondences evaluated below. Those content observations receive separate conditional weights. Different observations can still be dependent: an educated person with international connections may satisfy several of them through one underlying capability. The model therefore allows additional content evidence while declining to multiply every language, allusion, sport, and biographical resemblance as an independent discovery.

The reference allocation is 10% Stratford, 39% Oxford, 31% Neville, and 20% to all other principal-authorship possibilities together. The starting shares of the alternatives rest on their general standing as hypotheses: acknowledged literary capability or its absence, education and social position as general capability, and a plausible motive and mechanism for concealment. Specific matches between a candidate's documented access and particular features of the works, contemporary literary tributes, and correspondences between letters and plays are weighed afterward as evidence. Because general capability and specific access overlap, the later knowledge factors are deliberately kept modest.

- **Oxford (39%)** has the strongest documented literary reputation among the alternatives: published and manuscript poems, patronage of players, and Francis Meres's 1598 listing of him among the best for comedy. [3, 43]
- **Neville (31%)** presents a developed and documented candidacy: a learned and well-connected man, educated at Merton under Henry Savile, whose surviving prose is large enough to test and who had both motive and practical means to keep his name off sensitive work. Against this, no verse, play, or acknowledged literary work survives under his own name. That absence is the principal reason his starting probability is set below Oxford's. [84, 86]
- **Other possibilities (20%)** include Derby, Bacon, Florio, North, Mary Sidney, Marlowe, other named candidates, and arrangements involving an unidentified principal. None has a case developed to the level of Oxford's or Neville's, and Marlowe faces the documentary record of his death in 1593. This category is heterogeneous, not a single hypothetical person endowed with all the attributes of its members.

Oxford retains the larger starting share among the named alternatives because he has acknowledged literary work. Neville receives a substantial share as the most fully documented of the remaining candidates. The residual is set below either named alternative but remains large enough to cover

several weaker named candidates and an unidentified principal. The allocation is subjective and is tested against alternatives in Section 14.

The distinction between principal authorship and sole authorship matters throughout. Stratford may be the principal writer while collaborators contribute substantial passages. A concealed principal may supply texts later revised within the theatre. Evidence of collaboration alone therefore does not decide the identity question. The hypotheses concern the dominant origin of the canon, not ownership of every surviving line.

The principal result is conditional on this skeptical starting assessment for Stratford. It is accompanied by sensitivity tables rather than an invented confidence interval. Readers who place Stratford at 50% before the remaining evidence will obtain a substantially more Stratfordian result from exactly the same evidence weights. The paper's purpose is to identify the assumptions that matter and judge them historically, without allowing the formula to conceal their uncertainty.

### 3. The Missing Literary Life

A personal literary archive would contain materials connected to the author's own work: drafts, letters about writing, notes, annotated books, or similar evidence. It differs from a public record naming a person in a property dispute or on a printed title page. The skeptical argument is that an author of this range and productivity might be expected to leave some personal trace of the intellectual work behind the published name. The conventional reply is that survival is selective. Documents kept by courts and public offices have different chances of preservation from papers stored in a household. The task is to judge how unusual Shakespeare's surviving record is compared with genuinely comparable writers. It is insufficient either to count every missing item as a separate improbability or to dismiss their joint absence without a comparison.

The strongest skeptical objection concerns the difference between Shakespeare's public documentary existence and his private literary existence. Legal, financial, familial, and theatrical records survive, but there is no uncontested literary draft in his hand, substantial private literary correspondence, securely identified annotated library, or surviving notebook that reveals his working intellectual life. Given the range and productivity of the canon, that absence deserves explanation. Simply invoking the loss of old documents does not settle how surprising the particular absence should be. [50, 51, 52]

Nevertheless, surviving records are not interchangeable opportunities for a manuscript to survive. A deed can remain in an official archive after all papers in a household have disappeared. Recipient archives can preserve correspondence even when a writer's own collection is lost. Court papers may survive because litigation required their retention, while ordinary drafts were discarded. Many legal documents and no personal notebook can therefore be consequences of one preservation process rather than a hundred independent failures of literary evidence to appear.

Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe, John Webster, and John Fletcher are other dramatists used as points of comparison. The point of naming them is not that all had intact private archives. It is that particular kinds of personal evidence survive for them. An *autograph* is a document written in the

person's own hand, rather than merely a document bearing the person's name. The circumstances in which an autograph survives can matter as much as its existence. [4, 51]

Diana Price's comparative chart sharpens the question by seeking personal literary evidence distinguishable from evidence attached only to the public name. Under its inclusion rules Shakespeare has no positive category, while Webster has three and Kyd, Marlowe, and Fletcher have four each. That is a meaningful challenge to the claim that his record is wholly ordinary. It is not, by itself, a calibrated probability distribution. The result depends on the criteria for personal identification, the treatment of posthumous testimony, and the preservation circumstances of the selected writers. [51]

Kyd illustrates why the comparative history matters. The manuscript catalogue identifies a signed 1593 letter as autograph, while treating another letter more cautiously; no securely established manuscript of his dramatic works is known. His personal trace thus survives through the prosecution surrounding Marlowe rather than through an intact household literary archive. Oxford's correspondence survives through still different recipient and governmental channels, and Neville's largely through the papers of Robert Cecil and Ralph Winwood. None of these writers supplies a straightforward baseline for the chance that a dramatist's notebooks or books would remain. [3, 4, 86]

A proper comparison would choose writers before inspecting their archives, match them by occupation and period, and distinguish institutional from private preservation. It would also distinguish lifetime evidence from early posthumous attribution without pretending that either category can be omitted from the overall historical case. No completed survival-adjusted census of this kind is available. The missing archive can reasonably lower Stratford's probability, but an assertion that its probability under genuine authorship is one in a thousand is unsupported.

The will presents a related, narrower question. Its silence about books, manuscripts, and literary property is striking to a modern reader imagining the estate of an exceptionally productive author. Yet it is not a complete inventory. A broad residual bequest covers possessions not separately named, and no surviving inventory establishes what books or papers were present. Company ownership of scripts also complicates the expectation that a retired writer would dispose of every play as individual property. [70]

Neville's own will supplies a useful control. Proved in July 1615, it divides goods, plate, and household stuff between his widow and eldest son without separately enumerating a library or papers, although his ownership of books and his scholarly interests are independently documented. The comparison does not make Stratford's will uninformative. It does show that the omission of books from a will cannot be treated as nearly impossible for a learned man, and that it belongs within the archival question rather than as an independent demonstration that no literary materials existed. [86]

Education raises an analogous distinction between absence of documentation and affirmative incapacity. No surviving attendance record establishes Shakespeare's schooling, and no university education is securely documented. Local grammar-school attendance remains a biographical reconstruction. The canon requires acquired knowledge, and exceptional talent alone does not supply languages, books, or informed interlocutors. But the absence of a school record cannot be treated as

equivalent to proof that he received no substantial education. [25, 30]

The family argument is weaker than sometimes presented. Judith used a mark on a surviving deed, while Susanna signed a later property settlement. Such evidence does not establish either daughter's complete reading ability, much less her father's composing ability. Household literacy bears on educational opportunity, but it is largely dependent on the educational circumstances already under consideration. It should not become a second large penalty for the same uncertainty. [31, 68]

Similarly, the six surviving signatures offer too little material for confident psychological or literacy diagnosis. They differ in circumstances, condition, and form; the apparent awkwardness of a short signature is not a calibrated test of sustained writing capacity. Without a proper comparison, signatures cannot bear the weight of a conclusion that their writer was semiliterate. [66, 70]

Taken together, these observations support concern about the surviving literary profile. Their force is joint rather than additive. Missing books, missing drafts, estate silence, and failure to transmit papers may share causes. They motivate the skeptical starting assessment used here, but do not calibrate its numerical size. Specific knowledge in the works is assessed separately, conditional on that uncertainty.

## **4. Knowledge, Experience, and Literary Capability**

The knowledge displayed in the works presents a separate question from the absence of records about their author. A missing school register tells us something about the surviving biography; repeated use of a foreign-language source tells us something about the writing itself. Both deserve attention. Their effects may overlap, because education, travel, patronage, and access to books can help explain both a person's opportunities and the content of his work. The content evidence should receive an additional allowance without being treated as wholly independent of those opportunities.

A good knowledge argument specifies what the text knows, how accurately it knows it, and what routes to that information existed. The comparison is between plausible careers and information networks. It is too weak simply to answer every difficulty with an imagined informant. It is equally weak to assume that every unexplained acquisition required a new, independent accident. A writer who learned French, consulted bilingual associates, or repeatedly adapted continental books could use that resource across many plays.

### ***Untranslated Sources and Linguistic Access***

Many Shakespeare plays adapt earlier stories. The disputed question is often how the dramatist acquired a story written in another language. An English translation supplies an obvious route. If no contemporary English version is known, direct reading, a translation by an associate, an oral account, or an earlier adaptation remain possible. The absence of a known translation makes access more demanding; it does not prove which route was used.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, the Italian story in *Il Pecorone* combines a merchant's financial help, a flesh bond, a woman's successful intervention as a disguised lawyer, and a dispute over a ring. That connected sequence makes the source relationship much stronger than a resemblance involving only a familiar motif. The Royal Shakespeare Company identifies the untranslated *Il Pecorone* as the principal source. The 1755 London publication catalogued as ESTC T99010 confirms a later English translation of the tale; that entry is not an exhaustive proof that no earlier manuscript or printed rendering existed, but no English version contemporary with Shakespeare has been established. [26, 60]

For *Hamlet*, the French writer François de Belleforest retold the story of the Danish prince before Shakespeare's play, drawing on Saxo Grammaticus's Latin history. An earlier English play about Hamlet may also have supplied material; its text does not survive. The term *Ur-Hamlet* means that earlier play, not an authenticated early version of Shakespeare's surviving text. This missing intermediary prevents a simple inference from a French source to the surviving dramatist's personal fluency in French. Bevington places the surviving English translation of Belleforest in 1608, after Shakespeare's play. [5]

Cinthio's 1565 novella similarly supplies the central narrative of *Othello*, and another Cinthio tale lies behind *Measure for Measure*. French as well as Italian was a possible route, but the existence of the source and the language in which the dramatist encountered it are separate questions. These examples deserve collective weight for sustained access to continental literature. [5, 27]

Oxford's education and documented continental travel make such access unsurprising. His 1575 letter from Venice and 1576 letter from Siena supply direct evidence of his Italian experience; the latter includes an Italian expression as well as Latin. These establish access and some use of languages, not the degree of fluency required for every disputed source. [15, 16]

Neville's platform is at least comparable. Andreas Dudith's correspondence, read in its 2019 critical edition, places him in a learned exchange about books and ancient mathematics in 1581 and with Savile in Venice in January 1582; Padua, Florence, and other Italian cities are probable stages of the same journey. As ambassador to Henri IV in 1599 and 1600 he conducted negotiations, audiences, and correspondence in a French court for well over a year. The 1780 catalogue of the Billingbear library, the family seat, lists the Venice 1580 edition of Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, an Italian *Decameron* (Venice, 1555) containing the sources of *All's Well* and *Cymbeline*, and the 1576 Frankfurt edition of Saxo, the ultimate written source of the Amleth story. A family catalogue compiled in 1780 cannot date the arrival of each volume, and a later bequest supplied an alternative route for some holdings. But the coincidence of these untranslated sources with a household whose head is independently documented as a reader of Italian, French, Latin, and Greek books is consistent with the access the works require. [86, 94, 106]

Stratford's access should not be reconstructed as exclusively provincial or monolingual. The Bellott-Mountjoy litigation places him in a French immigrant household and records his participation in negotiations over a marriage in 1604. That is a documented social channel, although it does not prove fluent French or identify the supplier of any literary source. Florio's Italian-English dictionary

is also a real contemporary resource; a personal collaboration between Florio and Stratford remains a hypothesis. The sound comparison credits documented channels and distinguishes them from conjectured transactions. [13, 24]

### ***Italian Places, Names, and Art***

A second Italian argument concerns local knowledge rather than story sources. Could the playwright describe a route, a ferry, a place, or a work of art with an accuracy more naturally explained by travel? Such details could favor a documented traveller if they were accurate, distinctive, and not readily available from books or conversation. A generic Italian setting has much less force.

Two questions must be answered separately. First, does a proposed identification rescue a passage from an alleged mistake? Second, does the corrected reading strongly identify a particular traveller? Showing that boats could travel inland answers the first question. It does not automatically answer the second. Navigable waterways in northern Italy correct the crude objection that inland cities could not be approached by water. Scola Gagliardi and Togliani document a changing network of rivers, canals, and engineering works. They do not authenticate every proposed Verona-to-Milan route at the date of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Removing an alleged impossibility is valuable, but does not by itself identify a traveller as the author. [63, 71]

The *Merchant's* "Tranect" is compatible with a ferry context. Florio's 1598 dictionary records the relevant Italian vocabulary, which also shows that such vocabulary could be transmitted through English print. A rare or apparently local word deserves more attention than generic Italian scenery, but a proposed modern identification still requires period evidence. [24]

Richard Paul Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* argues that passages often dismissed as geographical mistakes fit Italian places more closely than conventional criticism allows. His proposed identifications are valuable leads. Their evidentiary force depends on whether the sites existed in the relevant period and whether the playwright's words identify them distinctively. A cumulative list of disputed identifications does not become reliable merely by growing longer. These arguments, if accepted, support any well-travelled candidate; they do not by themselves discriminate between Oxford and Neville, both of whom were in Venice. [18, 57]

Several much-discussed examples concern names. The proposed Gobbo di Rialto connection is suggestive rather than exclusive, because *gobbo* is also an ordinary descriptive word. Giulio Romano is a more substantial cultural reference; Rutter situates him in contemporary art and architectural discourse, including Serlio, and acknowledges the chronological difficulty in treating the 1611 English Serlio as a direct source. Oxford's letter of 24 September 1575 records borrowing 500 crowns from Baptisto Nigrone; the suggestion that Baptista Minola combines names associated with Oxford's Italian creditors remains conjectural. None of these receives a separate numerical multiplier. [15, 16, 24, 46, 57, 62]

Taken together, the untranslated-source pattern is stronger than the isolated topographical and name arguments. The reference model gives the language-and-continental-access block a conditional factor of 2.0 for Oxford and 2.0 for Neville, relative to Stratford, and 1.2 for the pooled residual. Oxford's

advantage rests on documented Italian travel and education; Neville's on documented Italian residence, a sustained French embassy, a classical education under Savile, and a family library that held several of the untranslated sources. These modest advantages recognize documented access without claiming that aristocratic birth or foreign travel was necessary for literary learning. The De Vere Society's materials sharpen a useful distinction: repeated access to untranslated continental narratives is more probative than a loose resemblance between a character and a historical person. Proposed local and autobiographical matches are not added as separate multipliers when they depend on the same underlying access to books, travel, and elite networks. [26, 27, 60, 79]

### ***Courtly, Diplomatic, Legal, and Aristocratic Knowledge***

*Courtly knowledge* means informed familiarity with elite institutions, relationships, and practices: royal households, diplomacy, wardship, ceremonial honors, and the social world surrounding them. The skeptical argument is that these features collectively fit a court insider more naturally than an actor whose private education and connections are imperfectly documented. The conventional reply is that plays drew on published sources, court performances, news, and associates with specialized knowledge.

The issue is cumulative. A single borrowed legal phrase may say little about the author's life. Repeated technically accurate reasoning or unusually intimate institutional detail could say more. But several examples may reflect one source or one informed associate, so they cannot automatically be multiplied as independent signs of aristocratic authorship. A count of words associated with hunting or law cannot measure this evidence. Neither can an impression that the author's dramatic voice sounds aristocratic. The canon stages many social positions, and theatrical success requires the ability to construct voices beyond one's own.

William Cecil, Lord Burghley, was connected to Oxford through wardship and marriage. Polonius is the older counsellor in *Hamlet* who gives his departing son advice about conduct, friendship, borrowing, and lending, and Burghley also left paternal precepts. A comparison reveals conventional prudence as well as differences: Burghley allows secured lending under some circumstances, while Polonius compresses his advice into a general rejection of borrowing and lending. A demonstrated pattern of unusual verbal dependence would be stronger than their common father-to-son form. Corambis, the name in the first quarto, and its proposed relation to Burghley's motto are interpretive possibilities, not authenticated decoding. [12]

*All's Well That Ends Well* supplies an important control on autobiographical inference. Painter's source story already contains a young count in royal custody, a physician's daughter raised alongside him, a marriage imposed by the king, departure for Florence, and substitution of the wife in another woman's bed. Much of the allegedly Oxford-specific sequence is therefore inherited. Any further authorship argument must identify distinctive departures from the source, rather than count the inherited sequence again. The same rule is applied to Neville below. [47]

The Danish-court argument has a sound historical basis for Oxford. Peregrine Bertie, married to Oxford's sister Mary, undertook the 1582 embassy to invest Frederick II with the Garter. This gives

Oxford a credible family route to information about the Danish court, though it does not demonstrate transmission of a particular report to the dramatist. Bevington notes that Belleforest already emphasizes Danish drinking, while Shakespeare adds contemporary aristocratic names. Neville, as ambassador, reported Danish naval preparations in 1599 and 1600, and he held an interest in the Sussex ordnance trade; Rubinstein, following James, adds that guns from that trade reached Denmark, a claim not independently verified here. Both candidates thus had routes to the material; neither route is documented as the play's source. [5, 38, 86, 87]

The names associated with Navarre in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the Garter material in *The Merry Wives* invite similar distinctions. Political names can travel through news, diplomacy, and literary circles. An actor in a company performing for court could encounter ceremonial material; a courtier could possess more intimate knowledge. Neither possibility alone measures the difference. [61]

The gravedigger's discussion in *Hamlet* of whether a drowning should count as self-inflicted has been compared with *Hales v. Petit*. Regnier develops the parallel in an Oxfordian argument, while Raffield treats Plowden and the case within conventional scholarship. Legal reasoning deserves weight beyond vocabulary. It does not follow that the author attended an Inn of Court: printed reports, legally educated associates, and audiences interested in law are competing routes. [53, 55]

Arthur Golding's family connection to Oxford is a genuine advantage in opportunity. His published English Ovid simultaneously weakens exclusivity: material made available by a translator can be used by readers outside his family. Latin learning, access to translation, and personal acquaintance with a translator should not receive three independent multipliers for the same allusion. [39]

Diplomatic knowledge deserves explicit mention because it is where Neville's record is strongest. The canon repeatedly stages embassies, negotiations, interpreters, treaties, and the reception of envoys: *Henry V's* French scenes and treaty, the embassy openings of *Hamlet*, the ambassadorial business of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Neville spent 1599 and 1600 conducting exactly such business and reporting it in detail. That is a distinctive opportunity, though dramatists also drew diplomacy from chronicles and news.

The courtly-and-diplomatic block therefore supplies a further factor of 1.25 for Oxford and 1.25 for Neville relative to Stratford, and 1.05 for the pooled residual, conditional on the biography and language blocks. Oxford's factor reflects court rank and household education; Neville's reflects diplomacy, Parliament, and service in the royal forest at Windsor. Their modest size reflects source inheritance, ordinary circulation, and overlap in underlying capabilities. Specific Neville correspondences, which go beyond general opportunity, are assessed separately in Section 11.

## 5. The Attribution Record

*Attribution* means assigning a work to an author. The attribution network includes printed names, literary references, theatrical colleagues, commemorative poems, and the Stratford monument. Its cumulative force depends on whether the different statements arise from independent knowledge or repeat a shared understanding. Ten repetitions of one report are not equivalent to ten independent observations of composition.

The First Folio is central. Published in 1623, after Shakespeare's death, it collected his plays and presented them under his name. Its opening material includes addresses associated with his theatrical colleagues John Heminges and Henry Condell and an elegy by Ben Jonson. The book was dedicated to the Herbert brothers, Pembroke and Montgomery. These documents and relationships explain why the Folio is both strong evidence for the conventional account and a focus of the skeptical response. [69]

The attribution record is a network of relationships and statements, not a collection of independent votes. Its force depends on what the documents claim, how their authors could know it, and how much their testimony would be expected under a concealed principal using an actor's public identity. Title pages copied from an accepted name have little power against that specific alternative. Personal recollection and explicit claims about composition have more, although their reliability remains open to examination.

### ***Public Naming, Personal Testimony, and Patronage***

The earlier witnesses perform different roles. Francis Meres named Shakespeare among admired English authors in 1598 and listed works, including some then unprinted. He supplied neither a Stratford biography nor an account of seeing the author compose. George Buc's consultation of an actor Shakespeare about another play demonstrates theatrical knowledge, which an intermediary might possess. Thomas Heywood's 1612 complaint about misleading attribution demonstrates both the commercial value of the name and limits on authorial control; it also implies that the author he had in mind was alive in 1612, which is consistent with Stratford and with Neville but not with Oxford. These sources establish the public literary and theatrical identity more securely than they distinguish the principal composer from a front. [8, 32, 43]

The Folio's signed addresses make a stronger claim: Heminges and Condell present a deceased colleague as the author and discuss his papers. Jonson's elegy connects the literary achievement with Avon. His later *Discoveries*, published in 1641, combines personal characterization with criticism of writing habits and a dramatic line. The ordinary reading identifies a writer known within the theatrical world. A concealed-principal hypothesis can accommodate these statements through an accepted public identity, mistaken knowledge, or deliberate endorsement. That explanatory possibility must be weighed; it should not be treated as disproved merely because the testimony is explicit. [34, 69]

The patronage connections make the alternative more concrete. The Folio's dedicatees were William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and his brother Philip, Earl of Montgomery. Pembroke became Lord Chamberlain in 1615 and supported Jonson. Montgomery married Susan de Vere, Oxford's daughter, in December 1604. These are genuine reasons to discount the apparent independence of the Folio's participants. They are also reasons why those participants could have shared knowledge of a genuine company author. Patronage supplies a possible mechanism for coordinated presentation; it is not documentary evidence that the patrons directed a false attribution. [40, 41, 69]

The family relationship must be stated precisely. Montgomery was Oxford's son-in-law. Pembroke was Montgomery's brother; an earlier proposed marriage between Pembroke and Bridget de Vere did not take place. The King's Men were a royal company from 1603, not simply the Herbert brothers' private enterprise. Pembroke's later office does not establish his control over all earlier references to Shakespeare. [33, 40, 41]

The Folio circle is also closely tied to Neville, and these ties are at least as numerous as Oxford's, though less intimate than a marriage. Pembroke sat with Neville on the Virginia Company's resident council under the charter of 23 May 1609, worked with him politically in 1612 and 1613, and later received the wardship of Neville's grandson. Leonard Digges, author of a Folio commendatory poem, was Neville's kinsman through Ursula Neville; his brother Sir Dudley Digges was Neville's colleague on the Virginia council and defended him in the Commons in 1614. Thomas Russell, the Digges brothers' stepfather and an overseer of Shakespeare's will, was half-brother of the Berkeleys into whose family Neville's daughter Elizabeth married in 1608 or 1609. Hugh Holland, another Folio poet, appears with Neville in the company of the *Convivium Philosophicum* at the Mitre, and Jonson, whose elegy heads the Folio's verses, addressed Epigram CIX to Neville. None of this documents a transfer of manuscripts or an agreed fiction. It does mean that a concealment arrangement centred on Neville would have had natural custodians among the people who later assembled and commended the Folio. [86, 98, 99, 111]

### ***Promotion, Ghostwriting, and the Limits of the Folio***

The Folio addresses promote a commercial book. Their contrast between earlier deficient texts and the collection's authority should not be accepted as neutral bibliography. Possible Jonsonian drafting further limits any inference that each phrase records an actor-editor's independent observation. The claim that Shakespeare's papers showed no blots cannot establish that the author never revised: received fair copies, theatrical copying, and promotional idealization are all possible. [6, 69]

Nevertheless, the person who drafts an address and the people who endorse it perform different acts. Even if Jonson wrote the prose, the company names attached to it still endorse a compositional attribution. The historical question becomes whether that endorsement reports a genuine understanding or maintains a front. Neither commercial interest nor ghostwriting makes falsehood inevitable. Conversely, the familiar assumption that colleagues must know the true author cannot be used to rule out the very arrangement under examination.

Jonson's mixture of criticism and praise is not intrinsically inconsistent. A writer can admire another's achievement while finding faults or competing with him. The instruction to attend to the book rather than the engraved face has an ordinary literary meaning. A coded denial is possible only as an additional interpretation; its probability cannot be inferred from Jonson's general capacity for irony. [34, 69]

### ***Lifetime Allusions and Alleged Counter-Signals***

The 1592 *Groatsworth* passage attacks an upstart theatrical figure through crow imagery and an allusion associated with Shakespeare. It can be read as an attack on a player borrowing from established writers. That is compatible with a front, but also with a dramatist who adapts, collaborates, and competes. Chettle's subsequent apology praises an unnamed person's writing; its identification with Shakespeare is a historical inference. [29]

John Davies's "English Terence" deserves a two-sided reading. The ancient association of Terence with assistance from aristocratic friends gives the skeptical interpretation a real literary basis, and Misha Teramura's scholarship makes that context worth considering. But Davies also associates Will with acting and praises his wit and honesty; on an ordinary reading this is a lifetime bridge between poet and player. Davies's 1603 *Microcosmos* is relevant in the other direction as well: it marks a stanza on players with the initials W.S. and R.B., and it also contains a sonnet headed to "the Noble, discrete, and wellbeloved Knight Sir Henry Nevill," glossing his name as "Ne-vile." The two entries do not connect the men, but they place both in the same poet's field of attention in the same year. [14, 37, 86, 100]

"On Poet-Ape" attacks appropriation but does not name Shakespeare. Sogliardo's heraldic pretensions may invite comparison with Shakespeare's social advancement, yet satire of purchased gentility is not evidence of a particular authorship transaction. The uncertain allusions are considered within the testimonial block, not multiplied as separate proof of concealment. [35, 36]

### ***The Monument and the Independent Meaning of Its Inscription***

The Stratford monument has an uncertain commissioning history and a debated visual history. These uncertainties limit claims about its original appearance. They do not remove its explicit literary content. In Weever's transcription, the inscription refers to what Shakespeare wrote and compares his art with Virgil's. It therefore has a literary meaning without borrowing that meaning from the Folio or from the present quill. The Folger's description places Weever's notebook after Shakespeare's death and likely around 1619; this is early local identification, not witnessed knowledge of composition. A local memorial can nevertheless perpetuate an established public identity. The De Vere Society also emphasizes the verses on the Stanley monument at Tong, which later antiquaries attributed to Shakespeare and which Oxfordians connect to Oxford's family network; the death date of Sir Thomas Stanley (1576) does not establish when the verses were written, and the tomb may have been commissioned around 1601-02. [23, 73, 76, 81, 82, 83]

Digges's private note on Lope de Vega, his later Folio poem, and his family connection through Thomas Russell create a social bridge while leaving the source of his knowledge uncertain. Private format does not automatically mean firsthand composition knowledge. Shared context does not automatically mean coordinated falsehood. [19, 69]

### ***How Much Weight Should the Joint Record Carry?***

The force of the attribution record depends on how expected that record would be under each explanation. Under concealed authorship, relevant questions include which insiders knew the arrangement, what they were willing to endorse, how the public name was maintained, and which statements survived. Under genuine Stratford authorship, the precise surviving record is not guaranteed either. A four-to-one evidentiary advantage for Stratford does not by itself mean that insiders had only a 25% chance of cooperating; that inference would require further assumptions about both the chance of cooperation and the chance that cooperation produced this particular record.

An established arrangement could make subsequent repetition routine. It is unreasonable to demand a new unlikely conspiracy for each title page or commendation. But an alternative cannot gain support merely by being defined as an arrangement that successfully produced exactly the evidence now available. The general cost of establishing and sustaining concealment is included in the starting assessment (Section 2); the testimony block asks only how much more expected this particular record is under genuine authorship than under an arrangement that already existed.

The reference judgment is a joint 1.5:1 advantage for Stratford over each concealed-principal hypothesis. The Folio endorsements, company relationships, and some commemorations are socially and institutionally connected and should not be multiplied as independent confirmations. The record still retains positive force because its overt compositional claims, personal criticism, and local identification are more direct under genuine authorship. The same ratio is applied to Oxford, Neville, and the residual: each requires the same basic arrangement, and the differences among them (Oxford's family tie to Montgomery, Neville's ties to Pembroke and the Digges family, Heywood's living author) are small enough to leave within this block. Values from near neutrality to materially stronger testimony remain defensible and are explored in Section 14.

## **6. Concealment, Social Convention, and the Public Name**

Anonymity and discretion were real features of early modern literary culture. Elite writers might prefer manuscript circulation or avoid public involvement in sensitive material. Commercial theatre attracted social hostility, even while enjoying aristocratic patronage and royal interest. These circumstances make concealment intelligible. They do not measure the frequency of sustained attribution to a real actor who served as the public author.

Several practices must be kept distinct: anonymous publication, an invented pseudonym, unauthorized attribution to a famous writer, and authorized use of another person's identity.

Evidence for the first three supplies context for the fourth, rather than a direct estimate of its prevalence. The vagabond statute's patronage exception also matters. Protected company members were not simply equivalent to unprotected wandering players; institutional patronage changed the legal situation without eliminating social disparagement. [72]

A universal stigma-of-print rule is too strong. May's study documents elite publication and challenges that broad prohibition. Yet learned prose, occasional poetry, closet drama, and regular playwriting for commercial performance are not identical activities. Genre-specific motives for discretion remain possible even when gentlemen sometimes printed works openly. The relevant question is whether a particular principal had a motive and mechanism for concealment in this setting. [42]

Neville's documented conduct supplies an unusually concrete answer to the motive question. He was a working politician whose career depended on royal favor, who sought the secretaryship of state after 1612, and whose correspondence shows acute sensitivity to public reputation: in April 1601 he begged Cecil not to publish his declaration about the Essex affair, fearing that an unqualified account would ruin his prospects of service. In October 1599 he wrote about arranging the printing of a work by Étienne Pasquier under a false Douai imprint, although the surviving letter does not show that the printing took place. John Davies singled him out in 1603 as "discreete." None of this shows that he concealed literary work. It does show a man with both reasons and practical experience to keep his name off sensitive publications. [86, 100]

Once a public identity was accepted, ordinary copying and endorsement could perpetuate it. The model must specify where it accounts for that arrangement: the starting assessment considers the possibility of concealed authorship, while the testimony block evaluates the observed form of endorsement. The same uncertainty about whether a front existed must not be charged repeatedly. A hypothesis specified only after seeing every document, however, has no independent predictive success.

Variant spellings and hyphenation contribute little without comparative controls. Early modern orthography was unstable, and a name's allusive potential does not establish pseudonymy. The connection between Shakespeare as literary name and Shakespeare as company member must be judged through the whole record; it cannot be decided from the difference between *Shakspeare* and *Shake-speare* alone. [77]

Autobiographical readings of the Sonnets require similar restraint. Literary speakers can transform patrons, grievances, social identities, and conventions into voices that do not map directly onto the writer's legal biography. A candidate's resemblance to one passage may generate a research hypothesis. It becomes strong identification evidence only if the interpretive rules are specific, independently defensible, and tested against other candidates and contemporary writing.

The strongest concealment argument concerns dependence: an accepted public identity makes many repetitions unsurprising. The remaining question is whether the particular testimony contains information beyond that identity. The joint allowance in Section 5 is an explicitly fallible answer. It treats sustained concealment as a serious historical possibility while requiring the same standards of source interpretation on both sides.

## 7. Oxford's Writings and the Stylistic Question

A stylistic argument asks whether writings securely attributed to a candidate resemble the Shakespeare canon. It can be positive evidence if a distinctive habit appears across comparable works. It can be negative evidence if a candidate's characteristic style consistently differs. But the comparison becomes difficult when the candidate's surviving material consists mainly of letters and the disputed material consists of drama. The same person may write very differently in a petition and in a character's speech. This problem applies equally to Oxford and to Neville.

Oxford offers substantial education, court experience, literary patronage, and a genuine reputation for poetry. These are positive capability evidence. His surviving literary sample is small and partly disputed, making confident exclusion on the ground of poor poetry unwarranted. At the same time, capability does not establish the particular identity under investigation.

Alan H. Nelson's collection of Oxford's letters and other documents provides a substantial prose sample. Its 77 numbered document pages yield 76 nonempty transcriptions, with 44,397 tokens retained under the extraction rules described in the appendix. A *token* is a counted unit of text, usually a word. The collection includes personal correspondence, interrogatories, business letters, and memoranda. It is not a collection of polished dramatic or literary prose, and its size cannot remove that difference of genre. [3, 44]

The letters reveal more than bureaucratic routine. A debt letter constructs an argument from necessity and reputational injury; letters about forest suits organize grievance and remedy; a 1603 letter extends a shipwreck metaphor through grief, political transition, and the writer's position. These examples make the assertion that Oxford's prose lacks imaginative or argumentative capacity untenable. They do not identify the author of *Hamlet* or *The Tempest*. One recurring Oxfordian pattern concerns labor and reward: those who produce value are distinguished from those who receive its benefits. Its recurrence in a published poem and a business letter is meaningful within Oxford's named writings; its broader presence in Shakespeare is less distinctive because proverbial language supplies a competing explanation. Searching a very large canon for any resemblance to a smaller corpus creates many opportunities for accidental or conventional matches. [17, 44]

### ***Stylometric Results and Their Limits***

*Stylometry* means measuring patterns in writing, such as the relative frequency of common words. Its attraction is that a writer may repeat unobtrusive habits without consciously choosing them. Its limitation is that genre, date, editing, and the reference sample can influence the same measurements. A nearest match is merely the closest among the choices offered. It is not proof that the true writer is included among those choices.

An exploratory comparison uses 126 plays and approximately 2.61 million dialogue tokens, carrying seven conventional author labels: Chapman, Heywood, Jonson, Marlowe, Middleton, Shirley, and Shakespeare. It compares frequencies of common function words and holds out entire plays when their author label is tested. The main test correctly classifies 87 of 126 plays, or 69.0%. Removing

personal pronouns produces 89 correct, or 70.6%. A matched verse-to-prose stress test shows a substantial decline: among 78 plays with sufficient material in both forms, verse queries are classified correctly 57 times, prose queries 42 times. These results indicate detectable author-label structure and significant transfer risk even within drama. [20, 21, 69]

Oxford's nearest dramatic label changes with feature choice, document selection, orthography, and weighting. Shakespeare is sometimes the nearest label and often close to it; other settings favor Chapman, Heywood, Middleton, or Marlowe. Resampling likewise shows instability. These findings prevent confident presentation of Oxford's prose as an obvious stylistic mismatch, but they do not support a numerical probability of identity. A useful identity test would need authenticated letters and dramatic writing from multiple authors, comparable dates and sample lengths, and calibration of same-author and different-author distances across genres. The reference model therefore assigns the exploratory Oxford resemblance a neutral multiplier of one.

Descriptive changes from *hath* and *doth* toward *has* and *does* are visible between conventionally early and late groups of Shakespeare plays. Oxford's surviving letters favor the older forms, but formal letters can preserve older usage while dialogue changes. Those cross-genre observations are not a validated identity test. A different question is whether development within the dramatic canon continues across the works that first appeared after Oxford's death. The new studies in Section 7.1 and the chronology assessment in Section 8 address that question.

Neville's prose has been subjected to a more elaborate set of tests, using a corpus roughly three times the size of Oxford's and a control corpus of contemporary correspondence. Those results, which are modestly positive but short of conventional significance, are discussed in Section 11.

### **7.1. New Computational Research: Marlowe and the Later Canon**

For this inquiry, two computational studies were commissioned, one conducted with ChatGPT (OpenAI) and one with Claude (Anthropic). Both were delivered on 9 October 2026 with analysis code and numerical results. They are executed stylometric studies, not impressions produced by asking an AI which author a play sounds like. They draw on overlapping historical texts and related techniques, so their agreement is corroboration across two implementations rather than two statistically independent experiments. [112, 113]

The principal question was deliberately demanding: do Marlowe's securely attributed habits persist in later Shakespeare, and do those later plays resemble him more closely than comparable dramatists once ordinary stylistic change is taken into account? This addresses the main positive prediction of a theory in which Marlowe survived his recorded death in 1593 and continued as the principal writer under the Shakespeare name. Merely finding Marlovian echoes in an early history is insufficient.

| Study                     | Scope                                                                                                                          | Principal result                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>ChatGPT (OpenAI)</b>   | 125 play texts, about 2.5 million dialogue tokens; whole-play holdouts, alternative historical texts, rolling passage windows. | No play dated 1600-1613 assigned to Marlowe by the principal methods; no Marlowe winner among 338 later rolling windows under passage-matched training. |
| <b>Claude (Anthropic)</b> | 471 play texts, about 8.9 million dialogue tokens; four-play Marlowe core; nine long-career dramatists as benchmarks.          | Distance from Marlowe to later Shakespeare (0.949) exceeds every early-to-late distance among the nine same-author benchmarks (0.445-0.827).            |
| <b>Together</b>           | Overlapping public texts and related methods; corroboration rather than independent replication.                               | No affirmative support for Marlowe as the continuing principal. Early affinities remain compatible with influence or collaboration.                     |

Table 1. The two computational studies of Marlowe and the later canon.

The ChatGPT study covered 125 play texts and about 2.5 million dialogue tokens, with 112 nominal single-author plays used for its principal validation. It applied several families of measurement: function-word frequencies, character sequences, word sequences, word-adjacency networks, structural features, and local passage comparisons. Whole plays were excluded from training when tested, and the two parts of *Tamburlaine* were withheld together. It also tested alternative historical texts, restricted Marlowe reference sets, serious-drama subsets, and early-to-late transfer. [112]

Its result is adverse to persistent Marlowe authorship. None of the whole plays dated 1600-1613 was assigned to Marlowe by the principal frequency and character methods. A model trained on passages returned no Marlowe winner among 338 rolling windows drawn from later Shakespeare. Some alternative specifications produced isolated late matches, but those did not persist under passage-matched training and controls. The strongest stable Marlowe similarities clustered in the early histories. By contrast, a reference trained only on Shakespeare plays through 1599 recognized 15 of 16 later plays using function words, and all 16 using character sequences. [112]

The Claude study assembled a larger corpus of 471 play texts and about 8.9 million dialogue tokens, of which 325 were classed as secure single-author texts; its whole-play validation used an eligible subset of 234 plays. Its distinctive contribution is an explicit benchmark for stylistic change over a career. A four-play Marlowe core stands at a function-word distance of 0.949 from later Shakespeare, while the early-to-late distances for nine long-career dramatists range from 0.445 to 0.827. Later Shakespeare is thus further from Marlowe than any of these writers is from his own earlier self. Shakespeare's own early profile is the nearest early profile to the later plays. [113]

Both studies have limits that prevent a calibrated numerical rejection. The stronger methods recognize only two to four of six nominal Marlowe plays when each is held out, despite overall recognition of about 83-88%, so failure to detect late Marlowe is not proof that no Marlowe material could be present. Some long-career authors also lose recognizable signatures across decades. The rolling windows overlap and are not 338 independent trials. The career benchmark rests on only nine same-author comparisons, and the larger study's text preparation repeats some dialogue adjacent to embedded stage directions, which should be corrected before its precise figures are relied on. Neither study used validated syntactic parsing or full metrical scansion. For these reasons the paper uses both studies qualitatively and draws no likelihood ratio or numerical Marlowe probability from either.

These qualifications limit numerical precision; they do not turn the substantive result into a neutral finding. A survival theory already faces the documentary record of Marlowe's death. To become a serious principal-authorship contender it needs compelling positive continuity, especially where later Shakespeare can be distinguished from its contemporaries. Both studies fail to supply that support, while both find continuity within the Shakespeare canon itself. The strongest defensible conclusion is that the research weighs against Marlowe as the continuing principal and supplies no affirmative basis for that theory. Marlowe remains below 1% within the residual allocation; that ceiling is a historical judgment informed by the tests, not a measured posterior.

### ***Henry VI and the Wider Collaboration Question***

The 2016 New Oxford Shakespeare credited Marlowe as a collaborator on the three *Henry VI* plays, but specialists dispute the attribution. Both new studies locate early Marlowe-like material, especially in the histories. Influence, shared sources, imitation, revision, and direct collaboration remain competing explanations, and estimates of Marlowe's share in particular plays remain interpretive. The present studies do not settle the scene attributions. [112, 113, 115]

The later canon's recognizable profile is more compatible with a continuing dominant voice than with an unrestricted succession of unrelated principals. It does not identify that voice as Stratford, Neville, or Oxford, and it does not count the people who contributed to the texts. Known collaborations need not be stylistic outliers in a whole-play test: the larger study places several proposed or established collaborations within the secure Shakespeare range, with *Henry VIII* the clear outlier. A coherent canon can include editors, collaborators, and a concealed principal. The tests do not refute every collective or concealed-authorship arrangement.

The studies are a significant addition to the inquiry because they test a candidate-specific prediction with comparative data. Their force is chiefly negative for Marlowe. They neither establish Neville's identity nor dissolve the historical evidence linking the works with Stratford. Their separate implication for Oxford concerns continued stylistic development and is assessed with chronology below.

## **8. Chronology and Posthumous Revision**

The chronology argument is straightforward in principle: a person cannot newly compose a passage after his death. Its historical application is harder because plays could be revised, performed long after composition, and printed from texts containing several stages of work. A late performance date does not by itself prove late composition. A passage demonstrably using a later source presents a stronger problem.

The question for an earlier-dead candidate is therefore how much of the later text can plausibly be attributed to earlier material and how much requires later writers. A theory of a few revisions is less demanding than a theory in which other dramatists supplied much of the received play. Principal authorship can accommodate collaboration, but it must retain an identifiable principal contribution.

Oxford died in June 1604. The received canon contains a substantial pattern of later production, performance, collaboration, and apparent source use. A 1611 performance proves that a performable version existed by then; it does not prove composition in that year. A demonstrable dependency on a post-1604 source can date the dependent passage, but an additional inference is required to date the entire play or identify the writer of every layer. Oxfordian objections to careless chronology are therefore valid even where the cumulative late-production pattern remains adverse. [75]

The De Vere Society's dating project is right to separate composition from first performance, publication, and the possible date of a source; exact composition dates are often uncertain. Its broad possible ranges do not, however, make an earliest conceivable date as probable as the conventional date. The project justifies a softer, more explicit chronology penalty, not its removal. [80]

Samuel Harsnett's 1603 publication is discussed because of its relationship to material in *King Lear*. That date precedes Oxford's death, so the source cannot by itself exclude him. Late-1604 performances of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* do not require composition after Oxford's death. Comparable topical arguments about *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* are stronger cumulatively than as isolated calendar stamps. [59]

*The Tempest* presents one of the more substantial late-source questions. The conventional argument rests on a constellation of narrative and verbal relationships with the 1609 wreck of the *Sea Venture* on Bermuda and subsequent Virginia accounts, especially William Strachey's letter dated July 1610, which circulated in manuscript before Purchas printed it in 1625. The Oxfordian response identifies earlier sources and disputes the priority and circulation of Strachey's account. Reedy's comparative study argues for its relationship to a 1610 Virginia Company publication; a full independent collation of the surviving witnesses is not part of this assessment. On balance, later composition of the received *Tempest* is more probable than an entirely pre-1604 text. [54, 56, 64, 67]

*Henry VIII* likewise supplies substantial late-production evidence through Wotton's 1613 account of a new play and the independently studied Fletcher collaboration. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and other later collaborative works reinforce the pattern. These observations favor a principal who was alive and active until about 1613. They do not exclude every possible earlier contribution. [48, 78]

The chronological difficulties should not be multiplied play by play as independent rescues. One account of stored manuscripts and company revision could address several works. But that account should predict which material is early, which is late, and how the layers relate. Continuously redefining the original author's contribution after every adverse finding makes the hypothesis too accommodating to test.

Neville's dates remove this problem rather than mitigate it. He died on 10 July 1615, after the last plays conventionally assigned to the canon and at a time when the received chronology shows the principal's output ending in collaboration. His career also intersects the late-source question directly: the second Virginia charter of 23 May 1609 names him to the company's council, the body under whose authority the 1610 *True Declaration* was issued and among whose members Strachey's manuscript is thought to have circulated. Neville's case requires no revised chronology, and none is assumed here. [86, 98]

### ***Continued Development after 1604***

The later plays do not merely appear after Oxford's death. On the received chronology they continue the canon's stylistic development. Metrical habits such as feminine endings (an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line), run-on lines, and speeches that end in mid-line rise across the canon and reach their highest levels in the late romances and in the Shakespeare portions of *Henry VIII*. Elliott and Valenza discuss these continued trends explicitly, and the larger of the two new studies finds the same directional change in its verse measures and grammatical habits. [113, 114]

It might be objected that penalizing Oxford for this development counts the chronology evidence twice. The objection is only partly correct. The late-source argument asks whether some passages postdate 1604, and an Oxfordian can answer it with a reviser who inserted topical material into a stored play. The development argument asks a different question: whether habits spread across entire plays, which writers rarely control consciously, kept changing in the same direction as before. A reviser adding Bermuda material would not be expected also to raise the rate of feminine endings across the whole play in line with the original author's earlier trajectory. To meet the development evidence, the Oxford hypothesis needs a further assumption: either the company released Oxford's remaining manuscripts in close to their order of composition, or later revisers extended his stylistic trajectory as they worked. Each is possible. Neither is required by the late-source evidence alone.

There is also a genuine dependence. The late dating of the plays that show the most advanced style rests partly on the same evidence weighed above, chiefly the Strachey material and the record of *Henry VIII*, and some traditional dates elsewhere in the canon were themselves inferred partly from metrical style. A trend computed from dates partly inferred from style partly assumes what it measures. The development evidence therefore deserves a separate but modest factor, not a large independent one.

The reference model accordingly treats the two observations as related but distinct. Oxford receives 0.35 for late sources and production, and a further 0.75 for continued development, a combined 0.26, roughly a four-to-one disadvantage relative to Stratford. Neville and Stratford, who were alive throughout the relevant period, are neutral on both. The residual retains a composite 0.80 for its heterogeneous chronology constraints, which include several candidates alive through 1613; Marlowe's tiny share is not used to penalize every residual candidate. Section 14 shows the effect of removing the development factor entirely and of doubling its strength.

## **9. Manuscripts and Handwriting**

Physical evidence can narrow the gap between opportunity and composition. A securely identified draft might connect a writer with a text directly. A watermark or ownership note usually establishes something less direct. *Provenance* means the documented history of an object's ownership and transmission. Physical documents can potentially distinguish the hypotheses more sharply than biographical resemblance. Their usefulness depends on keeping textual authorship, handwriting identity, paper source, and ownership separate.

*Hand D* is the label assigned to one contributor's handwriting in the surviving manuscript of the play *Sir Thomas More*. Its proposed identification as Shakespeare's hand is potentially important because it would connect sustained writing with the Stratford man. But the limited Stratford signatures are a weak comparison with continuous secretary-hand writing, and institutional descriptions qualify the attribution. Script convention, speed, age, and writing conditions affect appearance, while a signed letter may have a secretary's body text. [7, 52, 74]

Neville's proponents have proposed the opposite identification. John Casson and William Rubinstein reproduce paired images in which forms in *Hand D*, including an unusual capital C used at the start of common words and the spelling *hmi* for *him*, are set beside Neville's letters and annotations in the Worsley manuscripts. The resemblance in the selected examples is genuine, and the open capital C in particular is the kind of habit that could matter. But the comparison was made by advocates who knew which identification they sought, on a small number of selected forms, without comparable sets from other writers of the period. [87, 89, 91]

Handwriting identification requires authenticated examples of sustained writing, multiple documents, comparable scripts, and tests of how reliably the procedure distinguishes writers. A sound test must allow an unknown writer rather than force a choice among an artificially small set. Neither the Stratford nor the Neville identification of *Hand D* has yet passed such a test. The reference model therefore gives handwriting no numerical weight in either direction. A blinded study by a qualified palaeographer, comparing *Hand D* with whole pages of authenticated Neville autograph and with other candidate hands, is among the most valuable inexpensive tests available. A positive result would be the strongest single piece of evidence for Neville yet produced; a negative one would remove a concrete part of his case.

A *watermark* is a feature formed in paper during manufacture. Casson's watermark study identifies suggestive similarities among papers associated with the Northumberland manuscript, *Hand D*, and contemporary figures. Similar features also appear in papers associated with other people, and some initials differ. A common paper supply is an alternative to common authorship; even a precise common-mould match would connect paper batches before it identified a writer. [11]

Annotated books present the same structure. The annotated Belleforest volume is potentially relevant to *Hamlet*, but its early provenance and the annotator's identity remain uncertain. Annotations in a copy of Hall's chronicle were once attributed to Shakespeare and later claimed for Neville; Keen and Lubbock's earlier findings that the annotator showed Catholic sympathies, and that a supposed ownership mark is probably a later pressmark, weigh against the Neville identification for that volume. The Audley End books are more promising because their family provenance is secure, and they are discussed with the Northumberland manuscript in Section 11. [10, 28, 86, 108, 109]

## 10. The Sonnets Dedication and Literary Mourning

The Sonnets were published in 1609 with a short dedication referring to an “ever-living poet.” If the expression implied that the author was already dead, it would create a problem for the conventional account: the Stratford man lived until 1616. Oxford, who died in 1604, would fit that reading more readily. If the expression could praise the enduring fame of someone still alive, the apparent contradiction disappears. The dispute turns on usage and context, not on the modern sound of the phrase.

The stronger claim that the expression could only refer to a deceased person is false. *Polimanteia*, published in 1595, applies the expression “euer-liuing Empresse” to Elizabeth in a passage about conferring immortality through writing. Elizabeth was alive. This is a human use in a literary-immortality context before the Sonnets. The counterexample defeats lexical exclusivity without proving the intended meaning of the dedication. A posthumous reading remains possible; it cannot be treated as a near-zero likelihood under a living-author hypothesis. [49, 58]

A concordance search also shows why raw counts need careful interpretation. A historical-spelling EarlyPrint search over indexed years 1500-1616 retrieves 754 occurrences in 460 documents, whereas a narrower modern-spelling pattern finds only 32 in 28. The contexts include theology, fame, abstract qualities, and memorial language, and duplicate witnesses of one dedication are not separate historical usages. These counts establish the retrieval problem, not the proportion of living human poets described in this way. [22]

The reference model gives Oxford a modest 1.25 advantage for the epithet, allowing some posthumous suggestiveness without treating it as proof. Neville, alive in 1609, is treated like Stratford and receives a neutral factor. So does the residual, whose members’ mixed death dates do not support a reliable aggregate adjustment.

The dedication’s other features have been read in Neville’s favor. The Sonnets were entered in the Stationers’ Register on 20 May 1609; three days later the second Virginia charter named Pembroke, Southampton, and Neville to the company’s council, and the dedication’s closing phrase, “the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth,” uses the vocabulary of venture investment that Katherine Duncan-Jones connected with the Virginia enterprise. Feinstein argues that “Mr. W.H.” is Pembroke, which places the dedicatee among Neville’s documented political allies. These readings are suggestive rather than probative: the identity of W.H. is unresolved, “adventurer” was common commercial language in 1609, and the coincidence of dates does not show who supplied the manuscript. They are included in the documentary block of Section 11 at modest weight. [86, 98]

The supposed absence of mourning at Shakespeare’s death needs a specified interval. The research does not establish a securely dated immediate printed funeral elegy in 1616. That narrow absence differs materially from no contemporary literary mourning. The elegy traditionally attributed to William Basse honors Shakespeare as a tragedian and is generally placed between 1616 and 1623. The remaining narrow gap belongs with expectations about archival survival already incorporated in the starting probability. It is not charged again as an independent likelihood penalty. [45]

## 11. The Case for Sir Henry Neville

The Neville hypothesis was first proposed by Brenda James and developed with William D. Rubinstein in 2005. It was extended by John Casson, Mark Bradbeer, James Leyland, James Goding, David Ewald, and others, and was framed as a testable hypothesis by Leigh, Casson, and Ewald in 2019. It has now been consolidated in Ken Feinstein's *Henry Neville and the Works of Shakespeare* (version 0.94.367, October 2026), a 635-page study that reorganizes the case around primary documents, distinguishes what each record establishes from what is inferred, and corrects several earlier overstatements. This section draws principally on Feinstein's study, on Rubinstein's 2024 summary, and on independent checks of selected sources: Dudith's letters in their critical edition, the printed Chamber dedication, Tycho Brahe's 1590 letter to Thomas Savile, the Stationers' Register stay of 1600, the printed Neville correspondence in Winwood and Lodge, and the 1609 Virginia charter. [86, 87, 88, 89, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 104, 105]

The argument here is cumulative. No single document names Neville as the author of any play or poem. The case rests on a convergence of records of different kinds (a dated life, a large body of his own prose, books, contemporary tributes, and social connections) on one person, and on a number of places where the works depart from their sources in directions that his documented experience explains.

### **Who Neville Was**

Henry Neville was born in the early 1560s (the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* gives 1561/2; Feinstein argues for 1563) into a family descended from the Nevilles of Abergavenny and, through them, from John of Gaunt and the earls of Westmorland. His mother was a niece of Sir Thomas Gresham; his stepmother was Francis Bacon's half-sister; his wife, Anne Killigrew, was Bacon's first cousin through the learned Cooke sisters. The family seat was Billingbear, near Windsor, and he held keeperships and forest offices in Windsor Forest. He matriculated at Merton College, Oxford, in December 1577 as a pupil of Henry Savile, the classicist, mathematician, and later translator of Tacitus, and travelled with Savile on the Continent for about four years. He sat in Parliament from 1584 until his death, managed ordnance and ironworking interests in Sussex, served as ambassador to Henri IV in 1599 and 1600, was implicated in the Essex rising of February 1601, spent two years in custody, most of it in the Tower, and was released with Southampton in April 1603. Under James he was a leading parliamentary figure, sought the secretaryship of state after Salisbury's death in 1612 without success, and sat on the Virginia Company's council. He died on 10 July 1615. [84, 86]

### ***Education, the Continent, and a Scholarly Network***

Neville's qualifications are not merely inferred from what the works require. Andreas Dudith's letter of 7 August 1581, addressed to him, refers to his books, asks him to press Savile for explanations of ancient mathematics and Copernicus, and praises a letter Neville had written. Dudith's letter of January 1582 places Savile in Venice with Neville. Other records place the party at Nuremberg in 1580 and at Prague and Breslau in 1581, and they met astronomers and collectors including Hagecius, Paul Wittich, Sambucus, and Gian Vincenzo Pinelli. Padua, Florence, and other Italian cities are probable but less securely documented stages. [86, 94]

This was a network in which literature, astronomy, and classical scholarship mixed. Tycho Brahe's letter of 1 December 1590 to Thomas Savile, Henry's brother, sends books and engraved portraits, asks for the judgments of Dee and Digges, and solicits responses from poets. Tycho's portrait bears the ancestral names Rosenkrans and Guldensteren. The letter establishes a real English route by which those two names, used together in *Hamlet*, reached the Savile circle. It does not show that Neville saw the portrait, and the invitation to poets widens rather than narrows the possible audience. [105]

### ***The Embassy Years and the Plays of 1599-1601***

The densest concentration of Neville evidence falls in the period when he was in France and the canon produced *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*. His dispatches from these years survive in large numbers, chiefly in Winwood's *Memorials* and the Cecil Papers. Several contain particular combinations of circumstance or wording that recur in plays of the same years, often at points where the play departs from its known source.

***Twelfth Night*.** On 29 January 1601 Neville wrote to Winwood about the visit of Don Virginio Orsino to Elizabeth's court; his own autograph draft spells the name "Orsino," the play's form. Leslie Hotson had argued in 1954 that the play was written for that visit, and Robert K. Turner connected this letter to the play's dating in 1975, both independently of any authorship argument. Because the visit was a public court event, the name alone shows topicality rather than private access. On 15 November 1600 Neville had asked Winwood to check whether a prisoner in Venice was the "true Sebastian" of Portugal, identifiable by marks on his body; the play's recognition scene turns on a twin named Sebastian identified by a father's mole. On 29 June 1599 Neville hoped to "extort some reason" from the French; Olivia speaks of extorting reasons from a clause. Feinstein's searches of EarlyPrint found no closer printed parallel before 1623. And Neville reported Henri IV's courtesy, *Je me dirai son serviteur*, which Viola echoes as *votre serviteur*. Neither of the main sources, Riche and *Gl'Ingannati*, supplies the pairing of an Orsino and a Sebastian. [86, 96, 116]

***Julius Caesar* and *Othello*.** Neville's dispatch of 7 August 1599 reports a man pulling another by the cloak to request a private word, followed by accusation and violence, and Henri IV coming out "in his shirt" with a sword after a night disturbance. In *Julius Caesar*, Casca asks Brutus whether he pulled him by the cloak because he wished to speak with him. In *Othello*, a stage direction in the 1622 quarto brings a character on in the night "in his shirt," a detail absent from Cinthio, whose narrative supplies the play's plot; stage directions may record theatrical practice rather than the author's text. The

dispatch was printed only in 1725. These are two uses of one report and are counted once. [86, 96]

***All's Well That Ends Well.*** In April 1600 Neville reported the dispute over Henri IV's written promise to marry Henriette d'Entragues if she bore him a son, and the question of whether the document could be retained. The play's final scene, which has no counterpart in Painter or Boccaccio, brings a young woman before the French king with a written petition pressing a nobleman's promise of marriage. The scandal was widely known, so this parallel shows topicality more than private access. [86, 96]

***Henry V.*** Holinshed leaves the Earl of Westmorland in England to guard the Scottish marches. The play brings him to France, gives him a prominent place beside the king, and assigns him the wish for more men that provokes the St Crispin's Day speech, a wish Holinshed gives to an unnamed member of the host and the 1600 quarto gives to Warwick. Westmorland was Neville's direct ancestor. Robert Boies Sharpe suggested long ago that the change might honor the Nevilles. The play's French scenes, its interpreter, and its treaty negotiation fit the work Neville was doing in the summer of 1599, and David Womersley has used Neville's own pre-departure letter to read the play's French politics. [86]

***The Tempest and Naples.*** Neville's dispatch of 26 May 1599 describes a dispute over the annual tribute and homage of Naples. Prospero describes Antonio's bargain with Naples in precisely those terms, annual tribute and homage, reversing the direction of the obligation. [86]

Two observations govern the weight of these parallels. First, they are not independent: several come from the same small group of dispatches, and the same period of diplomatic news reached other English readers. Second, the question under Stratford is not whether such conjunctions are possible but how often a learned correspondent's letters would yield conjunctions of this specificity with plays written in the same months. Feinstein's own notes supply counterexamples to some weaker parallels: earlier printed uses of an "underhand" dissuasion formula, a words-and-deeds contrast in Hoby, and a "kind offers" phrase already in the 1598 quarto of *1 Henry IV*. Those are excluded here. What remains is a set of particulars that cluster in time with the embassy and frequently mark the dramatist's additions to his sources. [86]

### ***The Ague Letter and Henry VIII***

The most specific single correspondence is late. In an undated letter to the Earl of Salisbury, conjecturally placed in early 1608 by the Hatfield calendar and printed by Lodge in 1791, Neville excuses his absence by explaining that an ague has kept him a prisoner in his chamber. In the opening scene of *Henry VIII*, Buckingham explains that an "untimely ague" kept him "a prisoner in my chamber" when the two kings met at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. The chronicle places Buckingham at the festivities; C. Knox Pooler found no source for the ague. The scene belongs to the Shakespeare portion of the play in the scene allocations of Plecháč and earlier attributors. A detail invented by the dramatist, in the Shakespeare-assigned part of a collaborative play, matches a combination of circumstances in a letter written by Neville a few years earlier. [48, 86, 97]

The parallel deserves a controlled test: how often do contemporary letters of excuse combine an ague, chamber confinement, and an explanation of absence? If the combination proves routine, much of its

force disappears. If it proves rare, this becomes one of the most direct textual links any candidate possesses. The same play omits Neville's grandfather, Sir Edward Neville, from the banquet episode in which Holinshed names him; that scene is generally assigned to Fletcher, and the omission is not counted.

### ***Windsor, the Forest, and The Merry Wives***

*The Merry Wives of Windsor* is Shakespeare's most locally detailed play: Datchet Mead and the Thames laundry trick, Frogmore, Eton, the castle ditch, Herne's Oak, a ghostly former keeper, a sawpit, and the keeper's share of a buck. Neville was the Windsor family's man in exactly this landscape. He sat for New Windsor in 1584 and 1593, held keeperships of walks in Windsor Forest, was instructed in 1599 to restrain deer-killing in Mote and Sunninghill Parks, and was confirmed in 1607 as keeper of both parks and riding forester. His letters speak of "my keepers" and "my walk," a shortage of bucks, and the gift of a stag. In April 1595 the queen sent him to escort the Württemberg envoy seeking the Garter, whose party has been connected with the play's "cosen garmombles." The Folio's fairy blessing describes the Garter chairs and motto. A London playwright could obtain Windsor topography by visiting; the forest administration and keeper's customs are a closer fit to a local officer. [86]

### ***Ancestors in the Histories***

The history plays repeatedly enlarge Neville ancestors beyond their sources. John of Gaunt receives a brief death notice in Holinshed; in *Richard II* he receives the great deathbed speech and about a quarter of the dialogue up to his death. Westmorland's transfer to Agincourt is noted above. The Nevilles were a famous medieval family, and any dramatist of English history would give them roles; the argument rests on the direction of the departures rather than on the presence of the name. Feinstein treats this as supporting rather than primary evidence, and it is weighted accordingly. [86, 90]

### ***Disgrace, the Tower, and the Darker Plays***

The canon's turn toward tragedy and problem comedy after 1600 coincides with Neville's fall. He was recalled from France, drawn into the Essex conspiracy at Drury House on 2 February 1601, named by Southampton, confined first at Chelsea and from 1 May in the Tower, fined £10,000 (later accepted at £5,000), and stripped of offices. His letters of 1601 and 1602 plead with Cecil to "wipe away this blot," fear that a "naked" account of his conduct will leave the world knowing only the worst of him, and describe his estate sold off to satisfy sureties. Hamlet dies asking Horatio to report his cause aright lest he leave "a wounded name" behind him. In his autograph declaration of 2 March 1601 Neville quoted the Tacitean maxim that such enterprises are judged only by their completion; Macbeth's "If it were done" soliloquy turns on the same problem of consequence. [86]

These parallels are thematic and should be weighted lightly: *Hamlet* is probably earlier than the rising, and tragedy needs no personal catastrophe to explain it. Their value is that they show the shape of the canon is not merely compatible with Neville's life but repeatedly finds language that his own letters used for his own circumstances.

### ***Sureties, Release, and the Sonnets***

The Sonnets' legal vocabulary is unusually concrete. Sonnet 134 describes a friend who "came debtor" for the speaker under a bond and "pays the whole, and yet am I not free"; Sonnet 133 speaks of bail and jail. Neville's letters of 1601 and 1602 describe friends who "stood bound" for him, sureties whose lands were made over on his behalf, and his inability to free them until pardoned. Sonnet 107, generally read as marking Elizabeth's death and James's peaceful accession in 1603, speaks of a love "supposed as forfeit to a confined doom." Sidney Lee and others read the line as Southampton's release from the Tower. Neville was released with Southampton by the same warrant in April 1603. [86]

Sonnet 121 begins "'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed." The Neville motto was *Ne vile velis*, and contemporaries punned on it: John Davies glossed the name "Ne-vile" in 1603, and the *Convivium Philosophicum* of about 1611 has *Ne vile aestimet Henricus*, "let not Henry esteem it vile." The 1593 title page of *Venus and Adonis* carries the Ovidian epigraph *Vilia miretur vulgus*. Puns of this kind are flexible and need controls, and the motto belonged to more than one member of the family. But the vile/esteem pairing appears both in a sonnet and in a contemporary pun on Neville's name. [86, 100, 111]

### ***The Virginia Council and The Tempest***

The *Tempest* draws on Strachey's *Sea Venture* account, dated July 1610 and circulated in manuscript before printing in 1625. The 1609 charter names Neville to the Virginia council alongside Bacon, Southampton, Pembroke, Digges, and Brooke. Bullough suggested "perhaps Sir Henry Neville" as an intermediary. Neville therefore had a plausible access route, but so did Bacon and other insiders; membership does not distinguish Neville from them. Stratford could also receive material through such intermediaries. The council connection contributes only limited opportunity evidence within the documents and network block, not an exclusive Neville identification. The claim of confidentiality under oath is unsupported and is not relied on here. [86, 87, 98]

### ***Books, Annotations, and the Northumberland Manuscript***

The 1780 catalogue of the Billingbear library (Royal Berkshire Archives, D/EN/F37/1) lists, among some 500 titles, Cinthio's *Hecatomithi* (Venice, 1580), an Italian *Decameron* (Venice, 1555), Saxo Grammaticus (Frankfurt, 1576), Chaucer (1602), and the Greek and Latin historians behind the Roman plays. Books from the collection survive at Audley End with annotations attributed to Savile and Neville, including a Tacitus and a Dionysius. In Neville's annotation to Dionysius's *Roman Antiquities* the name of Tarquinius Collatinus, Lucrece's husband, appears in a chronological note. The catalogue's 1780 date cannot establish when each volume arrived, a later family bequest supplied some foreign books, and hand attributions require independent palaeographic confirmation. The library nevertheless shows a household in possession of several sources that Shakespeare used in languages Stratford is not documented as reading. [86, 106]

The Northumberland manuscript at Alnwick Castle is a collection of Elizabethan political and literary writings, dated by the Folger to about 1598 and by Peter Beal to about 1597. Its burnt outer leaf carries a contents list that includes *Rychard the second* and *Rychard the third*, repeated pen trials of the name

William Shakespeare, a misquotation of *Lucrece*, and Bacon's name and essays. Near the top of the same leaf appear the name *Nevill* (or, on Feinstein's reading, *Nevills*) and the Neville motto *Ne vile velis*, twice. Burgoyne, the manuscript's first editor, proposed in 1904 that it was made for or belonged to a Henry Neville. Pen trials are not signatures and a contents list is not a manuscript of the plays. But it is one of very few manuscripts of the 1590s in which Shakespeare's name is written out beside titles of his plays, and it bears Neville's name and motto. [2, 9, 86]

A third object points the same way. *The Encomium of Richard III*, a defense of the king against his portrayal by "indiscreet chroniclers and witty play-makers," survives in a revised manuscript (British Library Add MS 29307) dedicated to Neville by "Hen. W." The revision adds attacks on the theatre absent from earlier versions. The dedicator has been identified both as Southampton (Henry Wriothesley) and as Henry Wotton, and the text does not name Shakespeare. A paradoxical defense of Richard addressed to Neville is consistent with a joke on the author of *Richard III*; it is also consistent with ordinary learned patronage. [86, 103]

On 4 August 1600 the Stationers' Register recorded an order to stay *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. Fane's letter from Dover announcing Neville's return from Boulogne reached London on the night of 3 August. The coincidence is close, the purpose of the stay is disputed, and the grouping includes Jonson's play; it is weighted as a suggestive coincidence. [86, 104]

### **Contemporary Witnesses**

Several contemporaries described Neville in terms that are unusual for a diplomat with no acknowledged literary work.

- **John Chamber (1600)**. Chamber's Latin address prefixed to his Paris edition of Barlaam praises Neville's genius, says the Muses sing through him, and credits Thalia, the Muse of comedy, with giving him the eloquence to pour forth whatever he wishes. It also records that Neville repeatedly urged the book's publication. The original printed page has been inspected, and the praise is addressed to Neville. Chamber's will of 1604 named Neville and Savile as executors charged with publishing his unprinted works. [95]
- **Charles Fitzgeoffrey (1601)** calls him "Aonian Neville," Aonia being the home of the Muses. [102]
- **George Carleton (1603)** dedicates his *Heroici characteres* to Neville as one who has "made leisure for our Muses." Carleton later married Neville's widow. [101]
- **Ben Jonson** opens Epigram CIX, "To Sir Henry Nevil," with "Who now calls on thee, Nevil, is a Muse." Leyland and Goding noted its closeness to Sonnet 38, where the poet's friend is asked to be the tenth Muse; Feinstein's EarlyPrint search found the combination only in Jonson's 1616 *Workes* and witnesses of the Sonnets. CIX and Sonnet 29 also share a rhyme pair in the same position. [86, 99]

- **John Davies of Hereford (1603)** calls Neville “discreete” in a heading he gives to no one else in the volume and glosses his name “Ne-vile.” [100]

Muse language is common in dedications, and Chamber’s praise of eloquence does not name a play. But the cluster is distinctive: Thalia specifically, “Aonian,” “made leisure for our Muses,” and Jonson’s “is a Muse” with its Sonnet 38 echo, all addressed to a man who published no poetry. The witnesses are not independent of one another: Chamber, Carleton, and Savile were Merton men, and Carleton’s son-in-law Thomas Vicars later wrote the coy periphrasis “the poet who takes his name from shaking and spear.” Vicars’s wording does not mention Neville, and it is not counted. [86, 107]

### ***Transmission Routes***

A concealment theory needs a plausible mechanism, and Neville’s documented circle supplies more than one. Humphrey Fludd, a royal trumpeter, carried diplomatic letters between London and Paris during Neville’s embassy; in 1612 he appears in the Bellott-Mountjoy depositions as Stephen Bellott’s stepfather, the man who placed Bellott in the Mountjoy household where Shakespeare lodged. In 1619 Thomas Walkley printed Beaumont and Fletcher’s *A King and No King* from a manuscript supplied by Neville’s son, showing that the family held and passed on playbooks. The Folio-circle connections described in Section 5 complete the picture. None of these is a documented transfer of a Shakespeare manuscript, and the Fludd link equally improves Stratford’s access to continental news. They show that the arrangement the theory requires was socially available. [13, 86]

### ***Linguistic Tests***

Neville’s prose has been tested against the canon more elaborately than that of any other candidate examined here, with a frozen feature set, a large control corpus, and a declared significance threshold. Feinstein’s principal study selected 180 features from Neville’s prose (about 136,000 words across 169 letters and three longer documents), scored them across 236 plays dated 1590-1615, and compared them with 1,412 letters from the Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence. Shakespeare’s plays carry more of the Neville-derived features: a mean score of 0.394 against 0.330, a Shakespeare play outscoring a non-Shakespeare play in about 69% of pairings, and an adjusted advantage of about 0.44 standard deviations that survives every single-play and single-feature deletion. Eight of the twenty highest-scoring plays are Shakespeare’s, against 15% of the sample, and *Henry VIII* ranks first. The primary permutation test gives  $p = 0.117$ , above the declared 0.05 threshold; restricting the correspondence control to 1580-1620 gives 0.077. An earlier two-word-sequence study ranks Shakespeare’s plays above others in 82% of pairings, falling to 74% with matched lengths. [86]

The limits are real. The second-ranked play is Chapman’s *Byron*, a drama of French court politics, which shows that subject and register contribute to the scores. A comparison correspondent, John Chamberlain, shows similar affinity under one metric. The design cannot separate authorship from shared political language, the study was rerun by a researcher who knew earlier results, and full reproducibility materials have not been deposited. The fair reading is a consistent positive signal that does not meet the declared significance threshold and is partly explained by register. It is evidence worth having and is included at modest weight within the correspondence block.

## ***The Difficulties***

An advocate who ignores the weaknesses of the case does the candidate no service. Five require explicit weight.

**No literary work survives under his name.** Neville's surviving writing is letters, a legal defense, a confession, and political advice. No verse, no play, and no letter discussing plays, players, or poems has been found in a correspondence of some 169 letters. Under a concealment hypothesis the silence of official correspondence with Cecil and Winwood is expected, but the absence of any acknowledged occasional verse from a man praised as a favorite of the Muses is a genuine cost. It is the main reason his starting probability is below Oxford's.

**The embassy workload.** From May 1599 to the summer of 1600, and again from late 1600, Neville was conducting an embassy in France. The received chronology places several major plays in these months. Composing them abroad and delivering them to a London company is possible, and the diplomatic post supplied a channel, but it adds logistical demands that the Stratford hypothesis does not face.

**Southampton.** The *Venus* and *Lucrece* dedications of 1593 and 1594 are addressed to Southampton with marked warmth. In his declaration of March 1601 Neville said he had not spoken with Southampton since the earl was a child in Burghley's house. Southampton was Burghley's ward until 1594, so the statement does not exclude contact in the early 1590s, and it was made by a prisoner minimizing his ties to a convicted traitor. David Kathman nonetheless rightly presses it as a difficulty: no document shows a close relationship between the two men before the crisis of 1601. [93]

**Dependence among the parallels.** Many of the strongest correspondences derive from a few embassy dispatches, and news of the French court reached other English readers. The model counts the letter parallels as one block rather than many. A related caution concerns identity: other men named Henry Neville were active in these years, including a member of the Abergavenny line, so items that bear only the name, such as the Northumberland inscription, depend on context for their identification with the Billingbear Neville.

**Unverified physical evidence.** The handwriting comparisons with Hand D and the hand attributions of the Audley End annotations have not been tested by an independent palaeographer. Until they are, they carry no numerical weight.

## ***Earlier Claims Set Aside***

Some arguments made for Neville do not survive scrutiny and are excluded from the assessment. The “Tower Notebook” of 1602 bears neither Neville’s name nor his hand. The annotated Hall chronicle has a better-documented history pointing elsewhere. The cipher readings of the Sonnets dedication depend on unconstrained choices of grid and selection. Rubinstein’s 2024 summary contains checkable errors: Bacon died in 1626, not 1642; Neville was in custody for about two years rather than three; the claim that Strachey’s letter was sworn confidential is unsupported; nothing establishes that Southampton copied the *Encomium*; and the identification of Neville’s funeral in Beaumont’s verse letter and the inferences from Jonson’s “Gresham College” signature and from James Walter’s 1889 report of meetings with Savile are speculative. Feinstein’s study is markedly more careful and builds its case on other evidence. Setting these claims aside strengthens rather than weakens what remains. [28, 86, 87, 88, 93, 109]

## ***How the Neville Evidence Is Weighted***

Neville shares two blocks with Oxford: language and continental access (2.0) and courtly and diplomatic knowledge (1.25), both discussed in Section 4. Unlike Oxford, he incurs no chronology or development penalty (1.0) and receives no advantage from the 1609 epithet (1.0). Like every concealment hypothesis he bears the 1.5:1 cost of the attribution record. Three further blocks are specific to him.

- **Letter and life correspondences: 1.8.** This block combines the embassy-period parallels in *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *All’s Well*, *Henry V*, and *The Tempest*; the ague letter and *Henry VIII*; the Windsor material; the ancestral departures in the histories; the Tower and surety language; and the modest stylometric signal. It is held below 2 because the parallels are mutually dependent, were found by motivated search through a large correspondence, and include topical news available to others.
- **Documents, witnesses, and network: 1.4.** This block combines Northumberland, the *Encomium* dedication, the Stationers’ stay, literary tributes, and transmission links. Virginia council membership supplies shared opportunity, not a Neville advantage over Bacon. The 1.4 is a provisional joint judgment, without an independent multiplier for membership; dependence and ordinary patronage limit its force.
- **Neville-specific difficulties: 0.6.** This block charges the embassy workload, the Southampton statement, and the silence of his correspondence about literature. The absence of any acknowledged verse is already reflected in his starting probability and is not charged again.

The three specific blocks combine to  $1.8 \times 1.4 \times 0.6 = 1.512$ . With the shared blocks, Neville’s total evidence factor relative to Stratford is approximately 2.52. These are stated judgments. A reader who regards the letter parallels as the kind of coincidence any large correspondence would generate, or who weighs the difficulties more heavily, will set these blocks lower; Section 14 shows the consequences.

## 12. Comparing the Alternative Principals

Evidence against one candidate is not automatically evidence for a particular rival. Reducing Oxford's relative plausibility increases the normalized shares of all remaining hypotheses according to their other weights, and because Neville holds the largest remaining share, much of what Oxford loses passes to him. A negative Marlowe result cannot itself establish Neville. Nor does reducing a prior because of a declared skeptical assessment create new historical evidence.

Neville is the leading candidate in the reference assessment. He combines documented learning, Italian residence, a sustained French embassy, a large surviving correspondence, and a lifespan that fits the received chronology. His particular letter-to-play correspondences, literary tributes, source access, and transmission connections are considered in Section 11. Their force is limited by motivated selection, shared topical language, dependent witnesses, and unverified physical evidence. No contemporary document unambiguously identifies him as the principal author. His lead is conditional on how those points are weighed.

Oxford has acknowledged poetry, a contemporary literary reputation, court experience, patronage, and Italian travel. He consequently retains a larger starting share than Neville. His posterior falls below Neville's chiefly because the canon's later sources, production, and continued development impose a problem for someone who died in 1604. Stored manuscripts and later revision are possible explanations; they must account for the received texts rather than merely make earlier origins conceivable.

John Fletcher is treated as an identifiable collaborator and possible reviser, rather than as the principal behind most of the canon. *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* provide substantial collaboration evidence. Walkley's 1619 edition of *A King and No King* was supplied through Neville's son, documenting the household's involvement in playbook transmission. It does not establish that Fletcher received or revised Shakespeare material from Neville. [48, 85, 86]

Marlowe is now a particularly weak principal-authorship possibility. The two computational studies find early affinities without the strong, persistent late signature that would give a survival theory positive traction. Given the record of his death, the absence of that support leaves him below 1% in the residual. Early collaboration remains a separate, open question.

William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby, had literary and theatrical interests and lived until 1642, so he avoids the premature-death problem. The weakness is identification: little suitable writing survives for a decisive comparison, and no direct bridge from his activities to principal composition of the canon has been established. He merits a limited place among alternatives, not a large allocation based on lifespan and opportunity alone.

Bacon receives a qualitative assessment below. North and Florio pose a source-transmission problem: resemblance can identify material used by a playwright rather than the playwright. Mary Sidney's learning and literary activity justify consideration, but principal authorship still requires a theatre connection and a textual case. An unidentified candidate should not inherit the combined strengths of every named alternative.

## 12.1. Francis Bacon: Association, Contribution, and Principal Authorship

Bacon merits an explicit assessment beyond his legal and philosophical interests. His candidacy has genuine documentary starting points: the Northumberland collection contains copies of his writings alongside Shakespeare-related inscriptions; his autograph *Promus* provides a body of collected expressions for textual comparison; and his involvement in court and Inns of Court entertainments supplies a plausible literary setting. These establish capability and connections. The disputed step is whether they identify him as the principal composer of the canon. [9, 119-122]

### ***The competing Northumberland interpretation***

Baconian readings emphasize the repeated proximity of the names Bacon and Shakespeare, the listing of *Richard II* and *Richard III*, and the proposed reading “Mr. ffrancis William Shakespeare.” Burgoyne’s introduction already noted the combined-name reading; Phoenix develops it into a concealed-authorship argument. The juxtaposition is real and deserves consideration. Its interpretation as a coherent attribution, rather than overlapping entries and pen trials, remains disputed. Neither the missing play texts nor an authenticated compositional draft survives in this collection to settle that inference. [9, 119]

The surviving contents include writings by more than one author. A collection containing Bacon’s texts need not consist entirely of his compositions. Even if some cover writing were securely identified as Bacon’s, writing an inscription, possessing a text, and composing it would remain distinct propositions. Conversely, identifying Neville’s hand or his family’s ownership would not establish his authorship of the listed plays. The Bacon and Neville interpretations must meet the same standard: authenticated hands, secure provenance, and evidence distinguishing composition from copying or circulation. The author of the Phoenix study acknowledges that the identity and number of penmen have not been determined. [9, 119]

Bacon’s name is expected in a collection containing his own writings, regardless of who wrote the plays. Neville’s name and motto are not explained by the surviving contents in that way, which supports a modest association within Section 11’s documents block. Ownership, copying, or patronage can still explain them; this is not a compositional attribution. Casson’s suggestive watermark similarities, discussed in Section 9, do not settle either reading. Similar designs occur in other papers, some initials differ, and a common supply remains an alternative to common authorship. Related physical associations are not independent confirmations. [9, 11, 119]

### ***The Promus and controlled textual comparison***

The *Promus of Formularies and Elegancies* survives as autograph notes and drafts in British Library Harley MS 7017. Its contents make a stronger research target than broad similarities of worldview. A cluster of unusual expressions, securely preceding their appearance in a play and demonstrably absent from plausible shared sources, could favor a direct relationship. But much of a commonplace book is collected language. Biblical, classical, proverbial, and translated sources can explain resemblance without common authorship. A private notebook's survival does not make its collected expressions private inventions. [120, 121]

The required comparison would fix the strongest proposed parallels before testing, inspect dates and source histories, search contemporary controls, account for spelling variants and corpus coverage, and distinguish borrowing from habitual authorial usage. Counting every resemblance across a large notebook and a large canon creates selection opportunities. The standard should also govern Neville's letter parallels. The present assessment has not carried out a controlled, entry-by-entry audit of the *Promus*; neither a large positive factor nor a categorical rejection is warranted from raw parallel counts. [120, 121]

### ***Clarke's contribution hypothesis***

Barry R. Clarke's research applies rare-collocation profiling to *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *The Tempest*, relating the first two to the Gray's Inn setting and the third to Virginia Company material. It proposes Bacon contributions, rather than demonstrating that he supplied most of the canon. This is a substantive alternative to an all-or-nothing Bacon theory and should not be dismissed as merely a claim about philosophical interests. [120, 122]

Rare correspondences can indicate contribution, but also common sources, transmission, or borrowing. The thesis recognizes that better controls matched to *The Tempest* in length, date, and genre would strengthen the inference. Recognizing a known attribution in a test case is useful without calibrating a historical likelihood ratio for Bacon. The Gray's Inn and Virginia connections therefore support opportunities to investigate; they do not yet identify the principal. Any demonstrated Bacon contribution could be accommodated under another principal-authorship category, since collaboration is allowed in every category. [120]

### ***Comparative consequence and research limits***

These arguments warrant qualitative coverage but do not supply a defensible new numerical factor. Within this reference model Bacon cannot exceed the residual's 10.9%, below Oxford and Neville; that limit reflects the starting allocation and pooled evidence factors rather than a completed assessment of his evidence. A separate numerical assessment would require a defensible prior, candidate-specific chronology and access factors, and controlled textual evidence. The reference weights remain provisional. Selected Phoenix and Clarke passages, the *Promus* catalogue, and the 2019 publisher description were consulted; no full-book review, forensic authentication, or independent replication is claimed. [119-122]

### 13. From Prior to Posterior

The reference calculation has four mutually exclusive categories: Stratford as principal author, Oxford as principal author, Neville as principal author, and every other principal-authorship explanation together. Collaboration is allowed under each category and is not assigned a second overlapping probability share. A theory with no identifiable principal belongs in the residual.

The starting probabilities are 10% Stratford, 39% Oxford, 31% Neville, and 20% residual. The Stratford value is a declared skeptical judgment conditioned on the documentary profile described in Sections 2 and 3, and it includes the general cost of sustained concealment. It is not an archival base rate, a finding of either computational study, or an estimate derived from the views of any intended audience. The other starting shares are likewise judgmental.

| Evidence group                             | Stratford    | Oxford       | Neville      | Residual     |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Joint attribution record                   | 1.000        | 0.667        | 0.667        | 0.667        |
| Chronology: late sources and production    | 1.00         | 0.35         | 1.00         | 0.80         |
| Continued stylistic development after 1604 | 1.00         | 0.75         | 1.00         | 1.00         |
| 1609 epithet                               | 1.00         | 1.25         | 1.00         | 1.00         |
| Language and continental access            | 1.00         | 2.00         | 2.00         | 1.20         |
| Courtly and diplomatic knowledge           | 1.00         | 1.25         | 1.25         | 1.05         |
| Neville letter and life correspondences    | 1.00         | 1.00         | 1.80         | 1.00         |
| Neville documents, witnesses, and network  | 1.00         | 1.00         | 1.40         | 1.00         |
| Neville-specific difficulties              | 1.00         | 1.00         | 0.60         | 1.00         |
| <b>Combined evidence factor</b>            | <b>1.000</b> | <b>0.547</b> | <b>2.520</b> | <b>0.672</b> |
| Starting probability                       | 10%          | 39%          | 31%          | 20%          |
| Unnormalized weight                        | 0.10000      | 0.21328      | 0.78120      | 0.13440      |
| <b>Posterior</b>                           | <b>8.1%</b>  | <b>17.4%</b> | <b>63.6%</b> | <b>10.9%</b> |

Table 2. Reference calculation. Factors are relative to Stratford.

The attribution factor displayed as 0.667 is computed as exactly 1/1.5. Oxford’s chronology factor of 0.35 and development factor of 0.75 are separate entries, combining to about 0.26, for the reasons given in Section 8. The continental-access and courtly-knowledge allowances are 2.0 and 1.25 for both Oxford and Neville. Neville’s specific blocks are 1.8, 1.4, and 0.6, for a net 1.512. The handwriting comparison has no numerical weight. No likelihood ratio from either computational study is applied.

The resulting relative evidence factors are 1.000, 0.547, 2.520, and 0.672. Multiplication by the starting shares gives weights of 0.10000, 0.21328, 0.78120, and 0.13440, totalling 1.22888. Normalization yields 8.1% Stratford, 17.4% Oxford, 63.6% Neville, and 10.9% residual. For ordinary discussion these are about 8%, 17%, 64%, and 11%. The starting 10% Stratford share is therefore distinct from his roughly 8% posterior.

The conclusion is conditional rather than statistically calibrated. Neville’s lead reflects the declared allocation of starting weight, his comparative source access and lifespan, and the modest net allowance for his specific case. The negative Marlowe result does not prove Neville, and the Oxford chronology and development problems benefit Stratford as well as Neville. None of the candidate percentages is a measured historical frequency or a classifier’s identity probability.

If all three Neville-specific blocks are neutral, his posterior is 53.6%. His strong position therefore does not rest exclusively on the proposed correspondences, but those correspondences remain important to his lead. Because the knowledge blocks and the documentary tributes overlap with the general capability reflected in the starting shares, Section 14 also shows the result when those blocks are set to neutral. A reader who regards Neville’s acknowledged-literature deficit as much more serious, or starts from a strong conventional attribution prior, can obtain a very different result. Section 14 makes that dependence explicit.

## 14. Sensitivity and Competing Assessments

The uncertainty concerns the assumptions, not rounding. The first table varies Stratford’s starting share and the joint attribution-record advantage. When Stratford’s share changes, Oxford, Neville, and the residual keep their reference proportions of 39:31:20. Each cell gives Stratford’s posterior followed by Neville’s posterior, in percent.

| Stratford prior | Network 1:1 | Network 1.5:1     | Network 2:1 | Network 4:1 |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 5%              | 2.7 / 67.3  | 4.0 / 66.4        | 5.3 / 65.5  | 10.1 / 62.2 |
| <b>10%</b>      | 5.6 / 65.3  | <b>8.1 / 63.6</b> | 10.6 / 61.9 | 19.1 / 56.0 |
| 20%             | 11.7 / 61.1 | 16.6 / 57.7       | 21.0 / 54.7 | 34.7 / 45.2 |
| 50%             | 34.7 / 45.2 | 44.4 / 38.5       | 51.5 / 33.5 | 68.0 / 22.1 |
| 80%             | 68.0 / 22.1 | 76.1 / 16.5       | 81.0 / 13.2 | 89.5 / 7.3  |

Table 3. Stratford posterior / Neville posterior (%), by Stratford’s starting share and the attribution-record ratio. Reference cell in bold.

The 10% starting share is intentionally skeptical. Readers who regard the attribution network and the documented theatrical career as much stronger starting identification will reasonably consider higher values. The table provides those cases rather than claiming that the paper's prior follows from a measured reference class. Because the starting odds and the attribution ratio simply multiply, some cells coincide: a 20% prior with a 4:1 network gives the same result as a 50% prior with a neutral network. The two judgments are interchangeable in their effect, which is why the same documents must not be counted both inside a high prior and again as fully independent evidence.

The next table changes Neville's starting share while keeping Stratford at 10% and Oxford at 39%; the residual absorbs the balance. Columns vary the combined weight of the three Neville-specific evidence blocks. Each entry gives Neville's posterior, in percent.

| Neville prior | Specific ×0.5 | Specific ×1.0 | Specific ×1.512 | Specific ×2.5 |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|
| 21%           | 25.4          | 40.5          | 50.7            | 63.0          |
| 26%           | 31.0          | 47.4          | 57.7            | 69.2          |
| <b>31%</b>    | 36.6          | 53.6          | <b>63.6</b>     | 74.3          |
| 36%           | 42.0          | 59.2          | 68.7            | 78.4          |
| 41%           | 47.3          | 64.2          | 73.1            | 81.8          |

Table 4. Neville posterior (%), by Neville's starting share and the combined weight of the three Neville-specific blocks. Reference cell in bold.

The reference combined factor is 1.512. Reducing it can substantially lower Neville's posterior, while a higher starting share or a stronger controlled correspondence result can raise it. A majority in one declared model is not equivalent to an independently demonstrated identification.

The final table shows specific historical alternatives to the reference inputs. Each row gives posteriors in percent.

| Scenario                                       | Stratford  | Oxford      | Neville     | Residual    |
|------------------------------------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| <b>Reference</b>                               | <b>8.1</b> | <b>17.4</b> | <b>63.6</b> | <b>10.9</b> |
| No separate development factor                 | 7.7        | 21.9        | 60.1        | 10.3        |
| Development factor 0.50                        | 8.6        | 12.3        | 67.5        | 11.6        |
| Oxford chronology 0.25                         | 8.6        | 13.0        | 66.9        | 11.5        |
| Oxford chronology 0.50                         | 7.6        | 23.1        | 59.2        | 10.2        |
| Neville difficulties 0.35                      | 11.1       | 23.6        | 50.4        | 14.9        |
| Neville correspondences 1.2                    | 10.3       | 22.0        | 53.8        | 13.9        |
| Neville documents neutral                      | 9.9        | 21.2        | 55.5        | 13.4        |
| All Neville-specific blocks neutral            | 10.4       | 22.1        | 53.6        | 13.9        |
| Knowledge blocks and Neville documents neutral | 19.4       | 16.6        | 43.3        | 20.7        |
| Skeptical Neville reading                      | 16.4       | 34.9        | 26.7        | 22.0        |

| Scenario                         | Stratford | Oxford | Neville | Residual |
|----------------------------------|-----------|--------|---------|----------|
| Knowledge allowances neutral     | 16.5      | 14.1   | 51.7    | 17.6     |
| Neutral attribution record       | 5.6       | 17.8   | 65.3    | 11.2     |
| Stratford prior 50%; network 4:1 | 68.0      | 6.0    | 22.1    | 3.8      |

Table 5. Posteriors (%) under alternative inputs. Unlisted inputs keep their reference values.

The development rows bear on the question raised in Section 8. Treating the development evidence as wholly dependent on the late-source evidence (no separate factor) moves Oxford to 21.9% and Neville to 60.1%; doubling its strength moves Oxford to 12.3%. The development factor is therefore a meaningful but secondary component; Oxford's larger difficulty remains the cumulative post-1604 production and source problem.

The row that sets both knowledge blocks and Neville's documentary block to neutral addresses the overlap between general capability, already reflected in the starting shares, and the specific access and tributes credited later. Even with all of that evidence removed, Neville remains the leading single candidate at 43.3%, with Stratford at 19.4%. The skeptical Neville scenario combines a correspondence weight of 1.2, neutral documents and witnesses, a difficulty factor of 0.35, and a language factor of 1.5. It shows that his lead depends on positive assessments of several parts of his case: under that reading Oxford leads. The conventional-prior scenario illustrates an equally important disagreement: strong starting identification of Stratford and substantial weight for the attribution record produce a Stratford-led result from the same framework.

The residual also remains a modeling choice. With Stratford held at 10% and the remaining non-Stratford share divided between Oxford and Neville in their reference ratio, a starting residual of 15% gives a posterior residual of about 8.0%, one of 27% gives about 15.4%, and one of 35% gives about 21.1%. These are alternative allocations, not confidence bounds. An unknown principal or an underspecified group cannot be made compelling merely by pooling the strongest features of known candidates.

These tables are sensitivity calculations using subjective conditional factors. They are not frequentist confidence intervals, empirical likelihood estimates, or independent confirmations of the historical conclusions. Readers can reject the allocations while still examining the documents and executed tests on which the qualitative assessment rests.

## 15. Conclusion

The surviving record connects the Shakespeare name with the London theatre, its company, and the Stratford man. The Folio, Jonson, theatrical colleagues, and the monument have real evidentiary force. Their relationships and transmission require joint assessment rather than counting each repetition as an independent eyewitness to composition. No contemporary document presently establishes a concealed script-supply arrangement or identifies an alternative principal unambiguously.

The paper gives substantial weight to the works' continental sources, diplomatic interests, and courtly knowledge. Oxford and Neville had documented opportunities that fit those features. Neville's letters, source access, literary tributes, and transmission connections supply a developed candidate-specific case, though motivated selection and the absence of acknowledged verse or drama remain material weaknesses.

The two computational studies conducted with ChatGPT and Claude are a substantial new part of the research. Their common finding is negative for Marlowe as the continuing principal: early affinities do not become a robust late-Marlowe signature. Neither study supplies the strong affirmative continuity needed to overcome the documentary record of his death. Their limitations prevent a precise historical Bayes factor; they do not supply positive support for survival. Marlowe remains a remote possibility below 1% within the residual. Early collaboration is a separate issue.

Oxford faces two related but distinct difficulties: late sources and production, and the continuation of stylistic development into plays that first appeared after his death. Stored manuscripts and revision are possible, but they must explain both the post-1604 material and the changing yet recognizable profile. These difficulties moderately favor candidates alive during the late period, including both Neville and Stratford, without proving which person supplied the writing.

The reference calculation gives approximately 64% Neville, 17% Oxford, 8% Stratford, and 11% for all remaining explanations combined. The 10% Stratford starting share, candidate allocations, and conditional weights are explicit judgments. These percentages express the author's conditional assessment, not consensus scholarship or laboratory measurement.

The most useful next evidence is identifiable: blinded handwriting comparison with authenticated autographs; controlled searches for Neville's letter-to-play conjunctions in contemporary correspondence; specialist examination of the relevant Cecil Papers and Audley End annotations; independent replication of the Neville feature study; and a refined, fully validated rerun of the Marlowe studies. For Oxford, an externally anchored chronology-and-style analysis should separate early manuscript layers from late revision. For Stratford, a matched archival-survival study would better ground the disputed starting assessment. Direct evidence of composition or manuscript transmission could change the ranking far more than additional loosely controlled resemblance.

## Appendix. Sources, Methods, and Limitations

The De Vere Society's materials were useful as a guide to arguments and primary-source leads. Its stated purpose is to advance Oxford as the author, so its interpretations are treated here as advocacy claims to test rather than as neutral adjudications. The same applies to the Neville literature, whose authors advance Neville. [79]

**Neville sources.** Ken Feinstein's *Henry Neville and the Works of Shakespeare*, version 0.94.367 (9 October 2026), was read in its online chapter edition, which reproduces the same version as the 635-page PDF, including the front matter, all 61 chapters, and Appendices A-L. Feinstein describes the study as a work in progress prepared with AI assistance; its archival citations should be verified before reliance, and this paper distinguishes claims it reports from claims independently checked. Independently checked items include Dudith's letters of 7 August 1581 and January 1582 in the 2019 critical edition; the printed Chamber dedication of 1600; Tycho Brahe's letter of 1 December 1590 to Thomas Savile; the Stationers' Register stay of 4 August 1600; the printed texts of selected Neville dispatches in Winwood and of the ague letter in Lodge; and the council list of the Virginia charter of 23 May 1609. A separate review, *Henry Neville and Shakespeare: Evidence, Access, and Authorship*, was consulted for its source checks and its critique of the statistical work. Rubinstein's 2024 article was read in full. The older Neville books by James, Casson, Bradbeer, and their collaborators were considered through their cited claims and later summaries rather than read cover to cover. Manuscript originals, including the Northumberland manuscript, BL Add MS 29307, the Audley End annotations, and Cecil Papers 124/100, were not examined. No forensic handwriting identification has been performed. Feinstein's statistical results are reported results; they have not been rerun for this paper. [86, 87, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 104, 105, 110]

**Oxford and dramatic benchmark.** Historical documents, literary interpretation, and exploratory numerical comparisons supply different kinds of evidence. A transcription gives access to a document's wording; it is not fresh authentication of the original manuscript. The Oxford extraction uses Nelson-derived transcriptions rather than newly authenticated readings of all original documents. It removes the modern descriptive layer, addresses and endorsements where specified, bracketed glosses, and cancelled readings while retaining added readings. A limited explicit spelling map supports the normalized comparison. The resulting 44,397 tokens are a working corpus, not a new diplomatic edition. The dramatic benchmark excludes speaker labels, stage directions, and editorial notes. It compares standardized frequencies of 90 common function words, weights training plays equally, and holds out whole plays. Query passages use the first and last 1,000 dialogue tokens. The seven-label sample contains 14 Chapman, 18 Heywood, 16 Jonson, 5 Marlowe, 15 Middleton, 29 Shirley, and 29 Shakespeare plays. Sensitivity checks vary spelling, pronouns, morphology markers, period, query length, document weighting, and resampling. These checks are exploratory; no calibrated false-acceptance distribution has been established for any candidate.

**EarlyPrint.** The EarlyPrint search uses original-word annotation and indexed dates from 1500 through 1616. Historical spelling and tokenization substantially affect retrieval. The 754 returned contexts were retained, but no exhaustive deduplicated classification of living and deceased human

referents was completed. The Elizabeth example was checked against the original scan; its evidentiary role is to refute exclusivity rather than estimate typical usage.

**Computational studies of Marlowe.** The two reports of 9 October 2026, with their accompanying code, manifests, feature matrices, and results, are the sources for Section 7.1. The studies share public text sources and several feature families, so their convergence is not multiplied as independent likelihood evidence. Key figures were checked against the delivered result files. Both studies are exploratory: validated syntactic parsing, full metrical scansion, candidate-identity calibration, and a controlled post-1604 change-point test remain to be done, and the larger study's text preparation and validation need refinement before its precise figures are relied on. Neither study's numerical likelihood ratios or authorship probabilities are used in the model; the paper relies on their qualitative findings. [112, 113]

**Probability model.** All posterior figures, including the sensitivity tables, were computed directly from the stated starting shares and block factors. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place and may not sum exactly to 100.

**Outstanding work.** The full comparative archival census, a blind Hand D identification, complete manuscript provenance for the Neville leads, controlled corpus tests of the Neville letter parallels, and an independent full Strachey witness collation remain incomplete. These limits bear on the numerical weights and should not be replaced by confident claims of authentication.

## Authorship and Research Assistance

Rodney Malpert conceived and directed the inquiry and is the author of the paper. He specified the comparison of competing historical explanations, the research brief for the Marlowe studies, and the substantive questions about attribution, continental knowledge, source access, chronology, and concealed authorship. The probability judgments are his stated assessment, developed with analytical assistance.

ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic) assisted with historical research, calculations, critique, and drafting. Claude developed the detailed Neville assessment from Feinstein's study and selected source checks; ChatGPT prepared a separate Neville review. ChatGPT conducted the 125-play Marlowe study, and Claude conducted the 471-text study with its long-career comparison. Both contributed to integrating the studies, building and checking the probability model, and preparing the text. The reports and historical sources are credited individually. AI assistance and deposited computation do not substitute for independent scholarly verification. Responsibility for interpretation and conclusions remains with Malpert.

## About the Author

Rodney Malpert holds a degree in English from Oklahoma Christian University, and a J.D. and an M.A. in Government from Cornell University, where he also pursued doctoral work in Government. A lawyer and former adjunct professor at Southern Methodist University and Arizona State University law schools, he has edited and coauthored business-immigration legal treatises published by Law Journal Press. His current writing examines historical, philosophical, and public-policy questions through comparative evidence and explicit probabilistic reasoning.

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