Possible source for Shakespeare's plays identified by plagiarism tool

By Alison Flood, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.20.18

Word Count **901**

Level **1220L**

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

Most of the time, plagiarism software is used by teachers to check student essays for copying. Now, the same software has uncovered a long-forgotten, handwritten document, from 1576, as the possible source for some of William Shakespeare's plays.

Independent scholar Dennis McCarthy and LaFayette College professor June Schlueter used WCopyfind software to compare passages from Shakespeare's plays with George North's 1576 manuscript, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion." The unpublished essay details the dangers of rebelling against the king.

The scholars were able to trace more than 20 passages back to the essay, such as the Duke of Gloucester's speech in "Richard III" and the details about Jack Cade's death in "Henry VI."

"Until now, no Shakespeare scholar has studied the manuscript, and it has probably remained little read," they write in their book, "A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels by George North." "Yet, as our analysis has revealed, 'Discourse' is not merely the only uniquely existent, evidently

uncopied document to have had a substantial impact on the canon; it is one of the most influential Shakespearean source texts in any form."

The Same Eight Terms

One comparison was done between the Duke of Gloucester's opening speech, and a passage from "Discourse." The scholars and their software found that each contained "a tight juxtaposition of the same eight terms: glass, proportion, fair, feature, deformed, world, shadow, Nature." The words occur within 77 words in "Discourse" and within 92 in "Richard III." Such similarities are more than coincidence, as a database of more than 60,000 early English books shows that no other work contained the same eight words in passages of up to 200 words.

Furthermore, when just four words, proportion, glass, feature and fair, were searched, no other work in the database used the words in such close formation. The words occur within a 31-word cluster in Shakespeare and a 16-word cluster in North.

Digital technologies now let scholars search across many texts to find such patterns. Making a comparison between two texts and the rest of the books written at the same time would have been impossible before computers. "While it may seem to some at first glance that anyone writing about a glass is liable to use proportion, fair and feature in the same passage, this is no longer a matter of conjecture ... no one else did," they write, adding that "before digitization, scholars simply could not conduct searches in a comprehensive and objective fashion."

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

Mirrored Storytelling

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

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

"It's showing why you should never rebel against a king ... he's trying to show 'hey I'm behind the Elizabethan aristocracy,'" said McCarthy of the North text. "Shakespeare used it for his own plays, particularly plays dealing with rebellion. It solves a lot of riddles scholars have debated."

The reaction to the discovery has been mixed. "New sources for Shakespeare do not turn up every day.... This is a truly significant one that has not heretofore been studied or published. The list of passages now traced back to this source is impressive," said professor David Bevington of the University of Chicago.

Some Scholars Less Convinced

Shakespeare scholar Sir Brian Vickers was less convinced, however. Vickers himself used plagiarism software to discover that "Edward III" was possibly written by both Shakespeare and English playwright Thomas Kyd.

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

University College London English professor John Mullan was also cautious about the significance of the discovery. "This book might well have been read by Shakespeare," said Mullan. "But there's an eight-volume hardback work about sources of Shakespeare. And it's a chastening experience — when you look at a particular play, "Henry IV, Part I" for example, it has nine lengthy chunks from different works. They're labeled as source, or possible source, or probable source."

He said there are different degrees of "sourciness."

Quiz

1   Read the selection from the section "The Same Eight Terms."

> *"While it may seem to some at first glance that anyone writing about a glass is liable to use proportion, fair and feature in the same passage, this is no longer a matter of conjecture … no one else did," they write, adding that "before digitization, scholars simply could not conduct searches in a comprehensive and objective fashion."*

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

(A)   It's extremely unlikely that Shakespeare just happened to use the exact same words as North.

(B)   There are certain common terms that every scholar uses when writing about glass.

(C)   Before digitization, scholars had to spend hours searching through texts manually.

(D)   Scholars are often biased when they are conducting searches in passages.

2   Are McCarthy and Schlueter suggesting that the discovery of North's "Discourse" should change the way scholars view Shakespeare's work? Which sentence from the article BEST supports your answer?

(A)   Yes; They also show how details of the final hours of the rebel Jack Cade in Shakespeare's "Henry VI, Part II" mirror North's poem about Cade's death.

(B)   Yes; "Shakespeare used it for his own plays, particularly plays dealing with rebellion. It solves a lot of riddles scholars have debated."

(C)   No; "It's showing why you should never rebel against a king … he's trying to show 'hey I'm behind the Elizabethan aristocracy,'" said McCarthy of the North text.

(D)   No; McCarthy was moved to track down the manuscript of "Discourse" after spotting a mention of it in a 1927 catalog of rare books, where it was described as "an original and unknown work."

3   Which section introduces a point of view that opposes McCarthy and Schlueter's?

(A)   Introduction [paragraphs 1-4]

(B)   "The Same Eight Terms"

(C)   "Mirrored Storytelling"

(D)   "Some Scholars Less Convinced"

4   Which sentence MOST accurately summarizes two main opposing perspectives in the article?

(A)   One group believes that Shakespeare plagiarized George North's work for his plays; the other group believes that Shakespeare was completely unaware of North's work.

(B)   One group believes that Shakespeare borrowed from most heavily from George North's works; the other group believes that Shakespeare was influenced by a number of sources.

(C)   One group believes that technology makes it possible for scholars to find new sources; the other group believes that all of Shakespeare's sources have already been discovered.

(D)   One group believes that Shakespeare wrote all of the work commonly attributed to him; the other group believes that most plays attributed to Shakespeare were written by George North.