

The Northumberland Manuscript



A collection of 16th century manuscripts predating 1597 that once contained the manuscripts of two Shakespeare plays together with writings by Francis Bacon.

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The Northumberland Manuscript¹ is a collection of manuscripts, penned in Elizabethan script, that once contained two Shakespeare plays (*Richard II* and *Richard III*) as well as a play by Nashe (*The Isle of Dogs*) and an unknown play, *Asmund and Cornelia*, all bound with philosophical and poetical writings known to be by Francis Bacon, and a contents page that not only links Francis Bacon with William Shakespeare's name but also appears to indicate that Bacon is the actual author of *Richard II* and *Richard III*, using the name of "William Shakespeare". This name written on the contents page is the first known use of the name 'William Shakespeare' in connection with any Shakespeare play.

The collection, which consists of a parchment folder containing several manuscripts of 16th-century works stitched together, was discovered in 1867 in an old black box of papers at Northumberland House, Charing Cross, London, by a Mr. John Bruce. In 1870 it was edited and a few pages of it were printed by James Spedding. It was more fully examined and reproduced in facsimile with a transcription in modern script by Frank J. Burgoyne, the Lambeth Librarian, in 1904.²

The cover page, which acts as a contents page, is written on mostly in one hand, with additional words and phrases by one or two other persons, whilst the collection itself is in two or more handwritings, clearly done by scribes. The chief penman of the contents page has been identified as John Davis of Hereford, a poet, scrivener and teacher of penmanship who was employed by Francis Bacon as one of his "good pens".

This cover page has a list (incomplete)³ of contents written in a column down the right-hand side of the sheet, together with the names of the authors of the various works. Some extra names, phrases and words are interspersed at various points. The list starts off at the top with the name "Mr. ffrancis Bacon", beneath which is written "of Tribute or giving what is dew". ("Of Tribute" was written by Bacon for the Philautia Device that Essex presented before the Queen on her Accession Day Tournament, 17 November 1595.) Beneath this, three cryptic symbols have been carefully drawn, including the mirror symbol of Pallas Athena. Then follows a list of various works by Francis Bacon, beginning with the speeches made by the Hermit, Soldier, Secretary and Squire in the Philautia Device:-

Mr. ffrancis Bacon

Of Tribute or giving what is dew

* * *

The praise of the worthiest virtue

The praise of the worthiest affection

The praise of the worthiest power

The praise of the worthiest person

Philipp against monsieur
Earle of Arundells letter to the Queen
speaches for my Lord of Essex at the tylt
speach for my Lord of Sussex tilt
Leycesters Common Wealth ... Incerto autore ('author uncertain')
Orations at Graies Inne revells
Earle of Arundles
letter to the Queene By Mr ffrauncis Bacon
Essaies by the same author

Then follows the Shakespeare sequence, culminating with the *Isle of Dogs* by Thomas Nashe. The Shakespeare sequence is headed with the name "William Shakespeare" but with "by Mr ffrauncis" running into it from the left. The name "frauncis" is repeated written upside-down over the right-way-up "ffrauncis", so that the last four letters of the upside-down "ffrauncis" are written over the last four letters of the right-way-up "ffrauncis", effectively drawing attention to Bacon's name and directly linking it to that of Shakespeare, the effect being that it can be read as "By Mr ffrauncis William Shakespeare". Alternatively the name "William Shakespeare" followed by the two Shakespeare plays, "Rychard the second" and "Rychard the third", can be read as being "By Mr ffrauncis Bacon", which is written to their left and must refer to them. Moreover, written upside down over the first four letters of "Shakespeare" is the phrase "in heleing",⁷ meaning "in concealment", which is an indication that the scribe knew (and noted) that Francis Bacon was concealed in (i.e. masked by) "Shakespeare".

By Mr ffrauncis William Shakespeare
Bacon *Rychard the second*
 Rychard the third
 Asmund and Cornelia
 Isle of Dogs
 by Thomas Nashe

Beneath all this the Shakespeare name is written again, as if practicing:-

William Shakespeare
Sh Sh Shak Shakespeare
William your Shakespeare

The rest of the contents page contains an assortment of names, words and phrases, plus some incomplete words, half syllables, repeated single letters and what would appear to be meaningless strokes. Some words are written diagonally, whilst some others are written upside down. These are all notes and scribbles that are not part of the list of contents, but which clearly denote that the manuscript collection originates from Bacon's scribbling.

Written upside down, sandwiching the "By Mr Frauncis" next to Shakespeare's name, are the words "your sovereign/Frauncis", which may be a reference to Francis Bacon's supreme talent as a poet, which was recognized and recorded by his contemporaries, or possibly to the State secret, known to his inner group of friends, that he was actually the Queen's son and potential heir. This ascription fits with a sonnet, "To the royall, ingenious, and all-learned Knight, Sir Francis Bacon," penned by John Davis of Hereford and published in *The Scourge of*

Folly c.1610, which describes Bacon as both a lawyer and poet, who used the company of his Muse (Pallas Athena) “for sport twixt grave affairs”.

Alternatively, “your sovereign,” taken on its own, could refer to “Rychard the second” which is written close by. The play’s character, Richard II, was regarded by some, including Queen Elizabeth I, as a treasonous portrait of herself.

Near to “The praise of the worthiest person”, the phrase “Anthony Comfort and consort” is written. This refers to Francis Bacon’s older brother, who was a dear friend and devoted partner in Francis’ project, a poet in his own right, and to whom Francis dedicated the first edition of his *Essays* with the words “Loving and beloved Brother”.

The name of “Nevill” is also written, twice, high up on the cover page, with the Neville family motto, “Ne vile velis”, written lower down the page. This almost certainly refers to Bacon’s cousin, Sir Henry Neville (1564-1615), who was a close friend of Anthony and Francis and the Earl of Essex, and closely associated with the Essex-Southampton-Pembroke-Bacon “Shakespeare Circle” that used to meet at Essex House during the 1590s.

Also written on the upper part of the page is a verse in Latin that was known to Anthony Bacon:-

Multis annis iam transactis
Nulla fides est in pactis
Mell in ore Verba lactis
ffel in Corde ffraus in factis.

This can be found in a letter dated 2 April 1597, written to Anthony Bacon from Rodolphe Bradley:-

“Your gracious speeches concerninge the gettinge of a prebendshippe for me... be the words of a faithful friende and not of a courtier, who hath Mel in ore et verba lactis, sed fel in corde et fraus in factis.”⁸

Written in the middle of the contents page is the famous long word used in the Shakespeare play, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, slightly shortened as “Honorificabilitunine”. (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* was acted at Christmas 1597 and printed in a quarto edition dated 1598. The play derived some of its story and the names of its characters from people known to Anthony Bacon.)

Then, nearer the foot of the page, appears the sentence, “Revealing day through every crany peepes,” which is a line⁹ from *The Rape of Lucrece*, but using “peepes” instead of the word “spies” that was printed in the quarto of 1594. The quarto displays:-

Revealing day through every cranny spies
And seems to point her out where she sits weeping;
To whom she sobbing speaks, 'O eye of eyes,
Why pry'st thou through my window? Leave thy peeping...'¹⁰

Not only does “Revealing day” reference Bacon’s essay, *Of Truth*, wherein truth is likened to the “day-light”, but also the sentence, “Revealing day through every crany peepes,” is followed by the words, “and see Shak”:-

Revealing
 day through
 every crany
 peepes and
 see
 Shak

The “and” begins the next line of the poem, but by adding “see Shak” beneath this would seem to be playing with the idea of the daylight of truth shining through a cranny and revealing who ‘Shakespeare’ really is.¹¹

That “Shak” refers to ‘Shakespeare’ is further emphasised by means of the word “your” (written at an angle) connecting with the name “William Shakespeare” and other abbreviations of ‘Shakespeare’ (such as “Sh” and “Shak”) written several times beneath “Thomas Nashe” in the right-hand index column.

The reverse of the cover page has the words “put into type” written on it, clearly supporting the evidence that some manuscripts were removed from the collection so as to print and publish them. After they were published, there would be no more need for them or any further manuscript copies, the production of which was an arduous task as well as open to errors. The manuscripts that were removed include the two Shakespeare plays, *Richard II* and *Richard III*, and Bacon’s *Essays* and *Oration at Gray’s Inn Revels*. Also removed were *Asmund and Cornelia*, *Nashe’s Isle of Dogs*, the Earl of Arundel’s letter to the Queen, the letter to the Queen by Francis Bacon, and a portion of *Leicester’s Commonwealth*.

The evidence suggests strongly that the last addition to the manuscript collection was made no later than January 1597, since the first edition of Bacon’s *Essays* appeared early in 1597, with Bacon’s “Epistle Dedicatorie” dated January 30, 1597. The Shakespeare plays *Richard II* and *Richard III* were also printed that same year, 1597, but without any author being named. The second quartos of both plays were published in 1598 with the name “William Shakespeare” ascribed to them as author. Also in 1598 the first quarto of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* appeared, with the author given as “W. Shakespere”. These were the first plays to be identified on their title pages as by Shakespeare. The cover page of the Northumberland Manuscript refers both directly and indirectly to all three plays, thus associating the name “William Shakespeare” with plays several years before the name appeared in print on any play and whilst the Shakespeare plays were still being printed anonymously.

Postscript

The Northumberland Manuscript was found in 1867 in Northumberland House, the most westerly of the great London mansions that fronted the Strand and backed onto the River Thames. Known first as Northampton House, it was built c.1605 close to Charing Cross in the early years of King James I’s reign by Henry Howard, 1st Earl of Northampton, next door to York House, where Francis Bacon grew up and where he subsequently lived as Lord Keeper of the Great Seal and Lord High Chancellor, 1617-1621. Some time prior to his death in 1614, Northampton bequeathed the house to his relatives, the Earls of Suffolk. In the 1640s the house was sold to the Earl of Northumberland, in whose family (the Percies) it remained until 1866 when, after a fire, it was sold to the City to be demolished so as to make way for the

streets leading into Trafalgar Square. This is when the manuscript was discovered. It has remained with the Percy family ever since, in the archives at Alnwick Castle.

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Endnotes

¹ The Northumberland MS is now kept at Alnwick Castle in the possession of the Duke of Northumberland.

² See Collotype Facsimile and Type Transcript of an Elizabethan Manuscript preserved at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland, transcribed and edited with notes by Frank J. Burgoyne (Longmans, Green and Co, 1904).

³ The collection as it has survived is missing some items that are listed and contains others that are not listed. The unlisted items are 'Of Magnanimity', 'Advertisement touching private censure', 'Advertisement touching the controversies of the Church', and 'Letter to a French gentleman touching Ecclesiastical causes in England'.

⁴ From *Northumberland MS: Collotype Facsimile & Type Transcript of an Elizabethan Manuscript preserved at Alnwick Castle, Northumberland*, transcribed and edited by Frank J. Burgoyne (Longmans, Green, and Co., London, 1904).

⁵ *Leicester's Commonwealth* was printed secretly on the Continent in 1584. Because it was banned in England and printed copies were difficult to obtain, manuscript copies were therefore necessary, circulated privately.

⁶ The first performance of *The Comedy of Errors* took place on the first Grand Night, as an integral part of the Gray's Inn Revels.

⁷ Simon Miles, an Australian, was the first to decipher these words. See Walter Saunders, *The Northumberland Manuscript and a Remarkable discovery by Simon Miles* (2007).

⁸ Tenison MSS, Lambeth Palace Library, vol. 15, folio 110. The Latin words could be translated: "sweetness in talk and words of milk, but bitter in heart and deceitful in deed".

⁹ Shakespeare, *Lucrece*, line 1,086.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Lucrece*, lines 1086-9.

¹¹ See Bacon's essay, *Of Truth*:-

... truth is a naked and open day-light, that doth not show the masks and mummeries and triumphs of the world, half so stately and daintily as candle-lights. Truth may perhaps come to the price of a pearl, that showeth best by day; but it will not rise to the price of a diamond or carbuncle, that showeth best in varied lights. A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure. Doth any man doubt, that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?

One of the fathers, in great severity, called poesie *vinum dæmonum* [devils'-wine], because it filleth the imagination; and yet it is but with the shadow of a lie. But it is not the lie that passeth through the mind, but the lie that sinketh in and setteth in it, that doth the hurt; such as we spake of before. But howsoever these things are thus in men's depraved judgments and affections, yet truth, which only doth judge itself, teacheth that the inquiry of truth, which is the love-making or wooing of it, the knowledge of truth, which is the presence of it, and the belief of truth, which is the enjoying of it, is the sovereign good of human nature. ...