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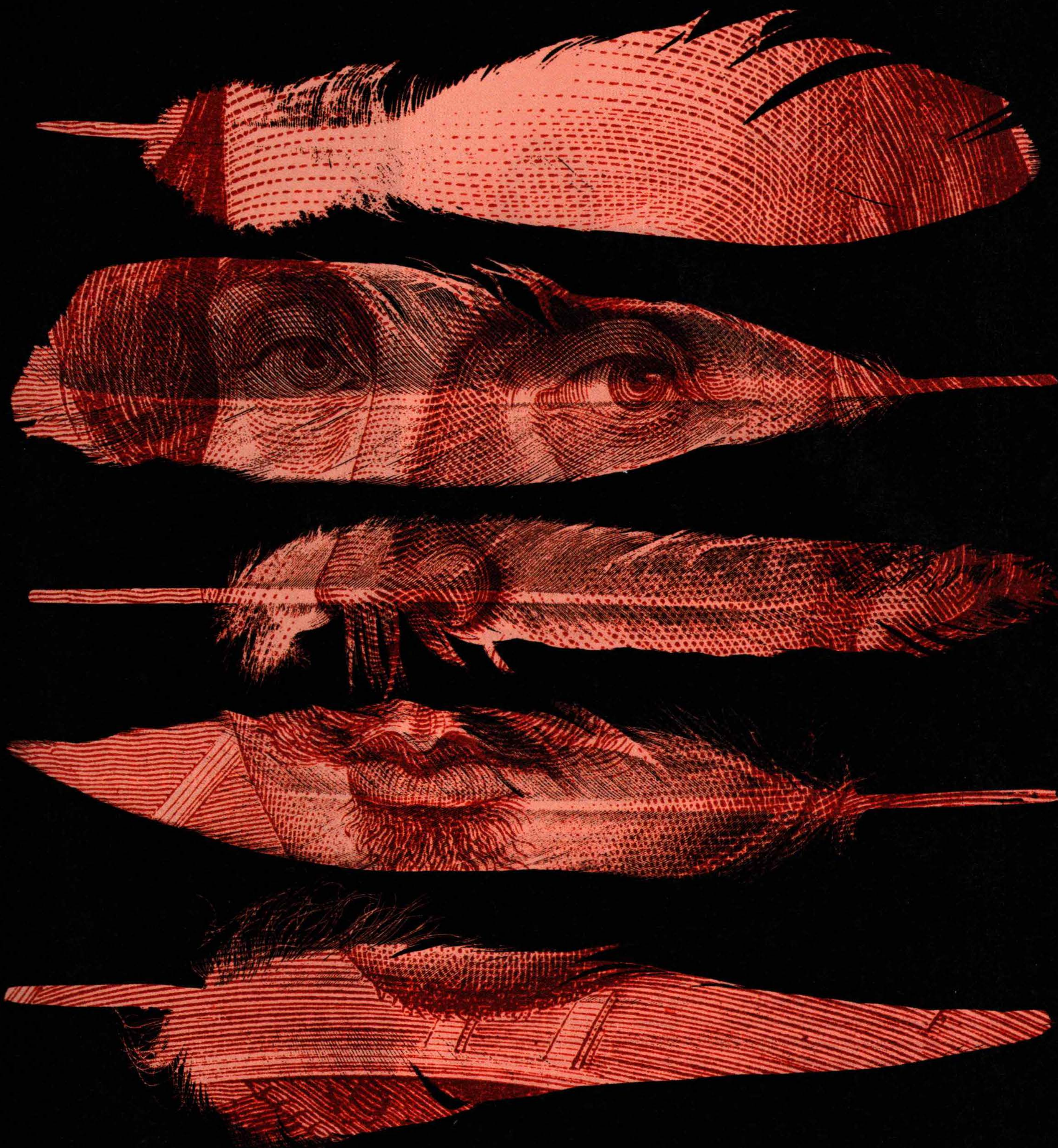
DID SHAKESPEARE HAVE A SECRET SOURCE?

A COLLEGE DROPOUT IN NEW HAMPSHIRE IS CHALLENGING THE ACADEMIC WORLD WITH HIS THEORY ON THE TRUE ORIGINS OF THE BARD'S GREATEST PLAYS.

BY MICHAEL BLANDING



Neither a Borrower Nor a Lender…

How a college dropout working from his New Hampshire dining table found that Shakespeare may well have lifted some of his greatest work from a secret source.

BY MICHAEL BLANDING

DENNIS MCCARTHY'S EYES were swimming in his computer screen. What had he gotten himself into? Nothing he read was making any sense. "English Seneca read by candlelight." "Blood is a beggar." Every line seemed to hold references he didn't understand, like the code of a secret club to which he didn't belong. Which, he supposed, is exactly what it was.

His idea had been a simple one, if a bit naive. In late fall of 2005, he had been working on some papers about the geography of evolution—how changes to animals and plants move across the world. One day, he wondered if he could apply similar principles to ideas, tracing how a story moved from country to country, changing subtly along the way. As an example, why not use the greatest masterpiece in the English language: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* So what if McCarthy didn't have any background in literature? He didn't have any training in evolutionary biology, either. In fact, he barely graduated from high school and dropped out of college, working as a freelance writer for most of his life. But if there was one thing he was good at, it was teaching himself a subject that interested him. He'd wormed his way into the field of biology and written papers embraced by its practitioners. He was confident he could crack the code of Shakespeare studies as well.

Now, staring at his screen, he wasn't so sure. He'd put aside two weeks for this side project, and barely scratched the surface. Papers and books lay strewn around his dining room table in New Hampshire,

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT CHASE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE // PHOTOGRAPHS BY CODY O'LAUGHLIN

along with used mugs and piles of loose change. *Empty desk, empty mind,* he thought.

McCarthy, then 42, liked challenging himself. *Hamlet* is a complicated masterpiece—a play in which the main character's defining action for the majority of the drama is deciding whether to act at all. "To be, or not to be?" He drives his girlfriend to suicide while deciding whether to avenge his father's death at the hands of his uncle, who has since married his mother. When the play finally turns bloody in the last act, it does so with a vengeance, with almost everyone lying dead onstage by the curtain call. For sheer poetry, depth of feeling, and meditation on very existence, however, nothing in literature can rival it. For actors, Hamlet is the ultimate role, forcing them to dig deep into their craft as they alternately portray a coward, a genius, and a madman—or sometimes all three at once.

Where does such a story come from? The action, at least, takes place in Elsinore Castle in Denmark, and is based on an old Norse legend, but it seems to have made its way to England through a French version. Shakespeare's play first appears in print in 1603, in an edition known as the First Quarto, but that was clearly not the first English version of the tale. Scholars have identified another *Hamlet* before Shakespeare's, referenced as early as 1589. This so-called *Ur-Hamlet* no longer exists in any extant copies, but most Shakespearean scholars believe that it was once performed in England and inspired William Shakespeare to write his masterpiece. The question is: Who wrote it? That's what McCarthy was now trying to answer from his New Hampshire dining room table. It didn't daunt him that more conventionally trained scholars had been asking that question for centuries. If there was one thing he'd learned from his forays into the history of science, it's that generations of people tend to look in the same place for answers. It takes a Darwin in the Galápagos to really change what we think we know—and make a new truth seem as though it had been obvious all along.

McCarthy started searching online for evidence of the *Ur-Hamlet.* He found the reference easily enough in the 1589 romance *Menaphon* by Robert Greene, a sort of ringleader to a rowdy bunch of Elizabethan playwrights known as the University Wits who competed for attention on the English stage. In the late 1580s, their antagonism broke out into a brawl fought with pens instead of swords. They used veiled allusions that would have been obvious within their circle, but opaque to outsiders—and are nearly incomprehensible today. One of the literary combatants, the playwright Thomas Nashe, wrote a preface to Greene's work, stating, "English Seneca read by candlelight yields many good sentences, as 'Blood is a beggar,' and so forth, and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole *Hamlets*"—*there it was!* McCarthy thought —"I should say, handfuls, of tragical speeches. But O grief! *Tempus edax rerum,* what's that will last always? ... Seneca, let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage." What on earth did any of that mean?

McCarthy began searching. Seneca, he found, was a Roman playwright known for writing bloodthirsty tragedies of revenge. Senecan tragedy had had a revival in England starting in the 1560s, just as Elizabeth I was taking the throne, so the English Seneca Nashe referenced must have been a master of that genre.

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In fact, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has also been seen as a late Senecan tragedy—or at least one inspired by the form. McCarthy couldn't find anything online to decipher "Blood is a beggar," but "tempus edax rerum" was easy enough: it meant "time, devourer of all things" in Latin. So Nashe was taking jabs at the *Ur-Hamlet,* saying it was referencing an antiquated form, Senecan tragedy, that had outlived its usefulness on the stage, and so "must needs die." But who was this "English Seneca" he was calling out? And could he be the author of the original *Hamlet?*

As McCarthy began wading his way through the dense set of allusions that begin the text, he came across a reference to other writers who vaunt "Plutarch's plumes as their own." The Greek philosopher Plutarch, he learned, had written a set of biographies, *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans,* or simply, Plutarch's *Lives.* The most famous translator of the work into English was an Elizabethan writer by the name of Sir Thomas North. Another phrase in Nashe's passage refers to catching "Boreas"—the Greek name for the north wind—"by the beard."

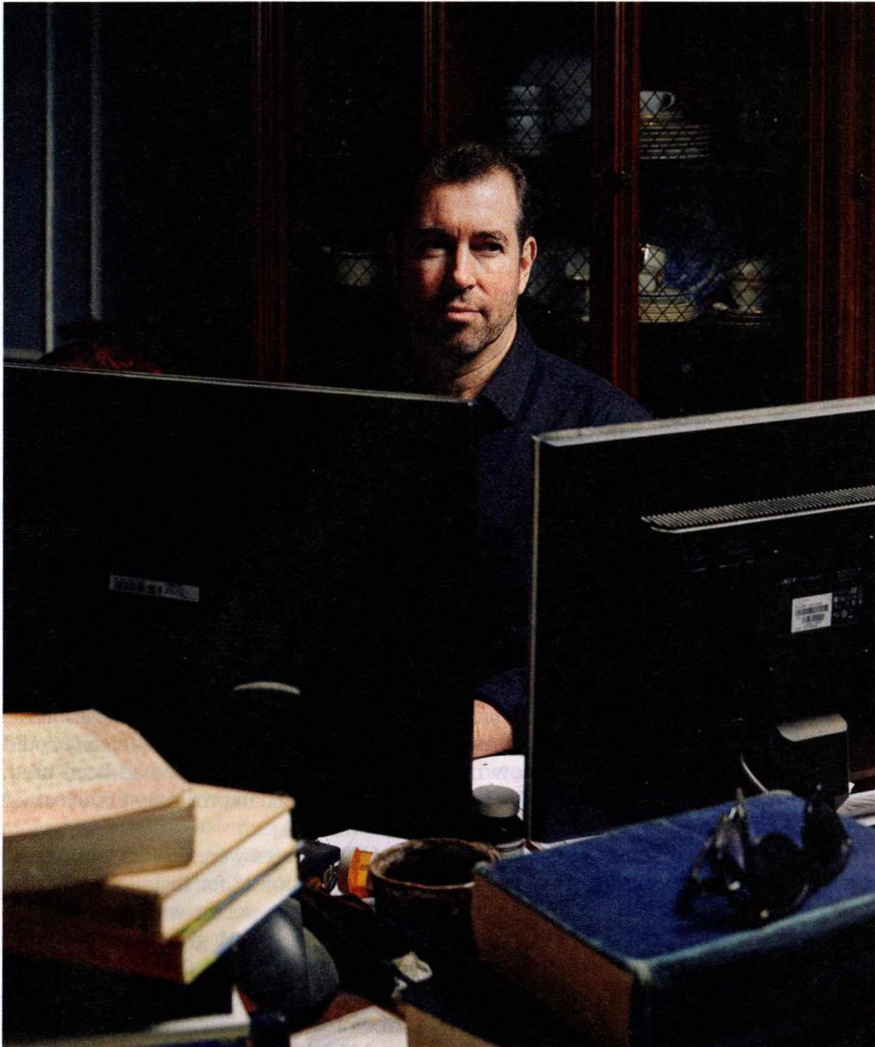
Could Thomas North be "English Seneca"?

McCarthy doubted it, but surprisingly, as soon as he searched for "Thomas North" and "Seneca," he found an immediate hit. This reference came from an even older work, a preface to Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes,* printed by Jasper Heywood in 1560. Heywood makes an appeal to a group of writers at the Inns of Court— the early Tudor law schools—urging them to take up Senecan tragedy as a playwriting form. As the first name on his list of contenders, Heywood writes, "There shalt thou see the selfsame North, whose work his wit displays, and Dial doth of Princes paint, and preach abroad his praise."

That, McCarthy discovered, was a reference to *The Dial of Princes,* a kind of self-help manual for rulers that Thomas North had translated and published in 1557. After weeks of painstakingly searching, McCarthy now had several arrows pointing in Thomas North's direction.

When he searched for biographies of Thomas North, however, McCarthy found little information. One biographer called him, encouragingly, "the first great master of English prose." Apart from that, almost every reference to North noted that Shakespeare used North's translation of Plutarch to write his Roman tragedies, including *Julius Caesar, Coriolanus,* and *Antony and Cleopatra*—where whole passages of North's prose are taken almost verbatim by Shakespeare and turned into poetry. In fact, North's Plutarch was one of the playwright's greatest sources, called by another writer "Shakespeare's storehouse of classical learning." While North is lauded as a translator, however, McCarthy found no indication that North was a poet or playwright, much less a gifted dramatist capable of writing something as profound as *Hamlet* (or even the *Ur-Hamlet*). If McCarthy was going to make such an audacious claim, he'd need more evidence.

DENNIS MCCARTHY HAD ALWAYS BEEN good at figuring things out. He grew up in the 1960s in Amherst, New York, a few minutes outside of Buffalo, where he lived in an apartment complex in a working-class neighborhood. His Irish American father, a Korean War vet, worked in real estate, renting and flipping houses; his mother, who came from Irish and



Dennis McCarthy at his workspace in his New Hampshire dining room.

German descent, taught at the local elementary school. McCarthy was clearly a bright child. According to his mother, he was reading at a third-grade level by kindergarten. By fourth grade, she remembers one of his teachers saying, "He's smarter than me, I can't answer his questions." But when it came to schoolwork, he was hopeless. "I didn't want to study anything that they gave me," McCarthy says. By middle school, he found himself virtually unable to concentrate in class. "My eyes would start at the top of a page, and I would get to the bottom and nothing would have gone through," he says. "I was formally ineducable."

Eventually, he flunked out of the Nichols School, an exclusive private high school, and almost failed to graduate from high school at all. During college at the University of Buffalo, he spent most of his time drinking, playing Ultimate Frisbee, and dating. He got one of his girlfriends pregnant, and after they broke up, she gave birth to a daughter, Nicole, whom McCarthy agreed to help support. After four years at college, he was a few credits shy of graduating when he decided to drop out and become a writer full time, following a friend from high school, Michael Kizilbash—and another girl—to Boston, where they moved in together on Beacon Hill. "Fortunately for me, she was doing well, and she supported my writing habit," McCarthy says sardonically. He never felt like his work was good enough to send out anywhere, however, and his manuscripts went unpublished.

He still read voraciously, plowing through five newspapers a day and going to the library to read books on popular science, physics, and astronomy. "I'd meet him at a bar, and he'd be with a group of girls, and say, 'Ask me absolutely any question about anything, and I'll answer it correctly,' " Kizilbash recalls. "And sure as hell, that's what he would do."

After McCarthy and his girlfriend broke up, he fathered another child, Meagan, with a flight attendant he met while attending an Ultimate Frisbee tournament in Florida. "I had a bit of a wild period in my twenties," McCarthy admits. Just as his Ultimate Frisbee team won the national championships—making it one of the best teams in the world—he lost interest in the party scene. "I was like, that's it, that phase is done," he says. He moved to the North Shore of Massachusetts to get serious about writing, living in a procession of seaside towns —Beverly Farms, Magnolia, Manchester-by-the-Sea. In addition to short stories, he began earning some money writing arts reviews for local newspapers, eventually graduating to features, such as one about how e-mail had brought the love letter back.

One day in the mid-1990s, McCarthy received a phone call from his daughter Nicole, whom he'd seen when she was younger, but stopped after relations with her mother and new stepfather had become strained. Now 7 years old, she called to ask him to come see her again. He drove the eight hours back to Buffalo the next day. After that, McCarthy began seeing his daughter every few months, easing into something like fatherhood.

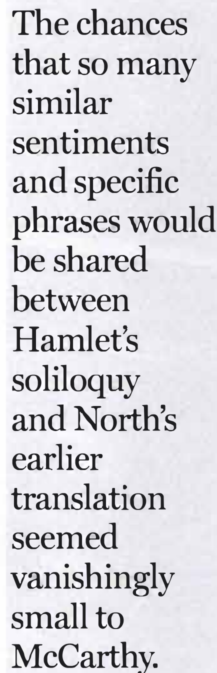
In October 1997, McCarthy found himself at age 34 back in Buffalo. He had blown out his knee playing Ultimate Frisbee and was staying with his parents while seeing a doctor they'd recommended. Limping into a local TGI Friday's on crutches, he began chatting up a 29-year-old woman from Kalamazoo, Michigan, Lori Seidl, who was sitting at the bar with her roommate. "I have a blown knee, no real job, no car, I'm living with my parents, and have two illegitimate children," McCarthy ticks off, amazed that she was willing to speak to him. Meanwhile, Seidl was on an upward career trajectory as a regional account manager for a pharmaceutical company. She was immediately attracted to his intelligence and sense of humor, as the two talked about everything from Mark Twain to obscure horror movies. "He was just laughing all the time," she says. "I think I fell in love with him for his laugh." By June, they'd moved back to Massachusetts together; and by December, they were engaged to be married. After Lori McCarthy got a job working for Biogen in New Hampshire, they moved to their current Colonial overlooking the woods and marsh on the seacoast outside Portsmouth. They had two children: Kennedy in 2000, and Griffin in 2004. Rather than McCarthy working at a newspaper and the couple paying for day care, they decided he'd stay home and take care of the kids and continue writing freelance while Lori drove her territory around New Hampshire and Maine.

McCARTHY MAY NOT HAVE succeeded in school, but he believed he could do anything if he devoted enough time and energy to it. He became particularly interested in the science of biogeography—a hybrid field that explores how and why particular species of plants and animals exist where they do. "It's like the secret subject of geniuses," he says now, listing off its luminaries—Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, co-fathers of evolution; taxonomist Carl Linnaeus; Alfred Wegener, who discovered continental drift; and Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel.* McCarthy observed that similar plants and animals were found on opposite sides of the Pacific, but not on any island in between. He wasn't the first to notice this, but he thought he could show this phenomenon along the entire Pacific Rim, with matching species pairs in Japan-Canada, China-Mexico, Australia-Peru, and New Zealand-Patagonia, something he likened to a "zipper effect." He would eventually publish papers on the topic in academic journals, and a book called *Here Be Dragons,* released in 2009 to enthusiastic reviews.

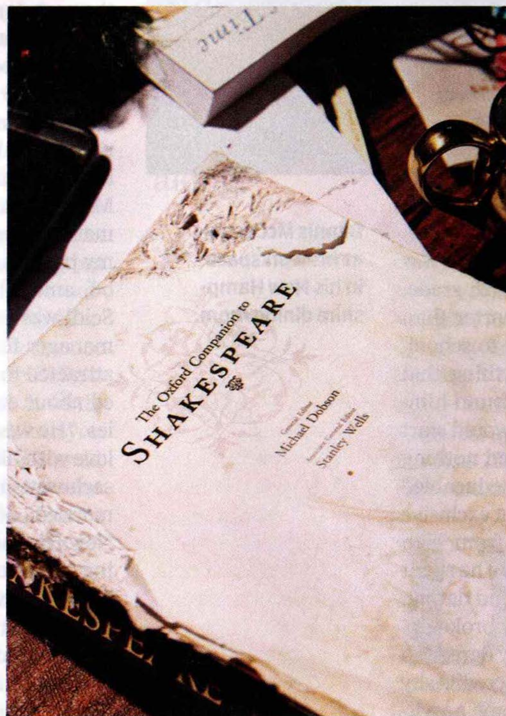
By the time it appeared, however, McCarthy had long moved on. His two-week project to trace the origins of *Hamlet* had become an all-consuming passion. Once McCarthy had identified "English Seneca" as Thomas North in 2005, he began looking for any other references that might suggest North had written the *Ur-Hamlet,* or been further connected to Shakespeare.

In the same way that dinosaur fossils or evolutionary ancestors left behind traces pointing to long-lost connections between continents, McCarthy figured that vestiges of North's prose must have found their way into Shakespeare's great tragedy. He had read almost all the way through the online text of North's first translation, *The Dial of Princes,* when he found himself drawn up short in Chapter 48 of the third book. North quotes a meditation on death by the Roman philosopher Secundus, who calls it a "kind of sleeping" and "a pilgrimage uncertain." In the very next paragraph, North quotes Seneca, who says, "For all those which are dead, none returned." McCarthy couldn't help but see an echo there of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy—and some of the most famous lines in the English language.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question," Hamlet says to himself, struggling with the pain of seeing his mother and usurping uncle together. He continues his meditation, asking "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take up arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them." Later, he, too, compares death to sleeping, saying, "To die, to sleep; to sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come." Then, in words that further resemble North's prose, he asks whether any of us would bear life's misfortunes if not for "the dread of something after death—the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveler returns."



The chances that so many similar sentiments and specific phrases would be shared between Hamlet's soliloquy and North's earlier translation seemed vanishingly small to McCarthy.



The description of death as "a pilgrimage uncertain" by North and "an undiscovered country" by Shakespeare seemed uncannily similar to McCarthy—and they weren't the only resemblances he found between Hamlet's speech and North's book. Elsewhere, North writes, "What other thing is the grave, but a strong fort, wherein we shut ourselves from the assaults of life, and broils of fortune?"—a passage much like Shakespeare's "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." North also refers to a "sea of troubles." And McCarthy even found a passage combining forms of "perchance," "sleep," and "dream" into a single phrase, when North writes, "If perchance thou doest ask it, because sleeping has dreamed it."

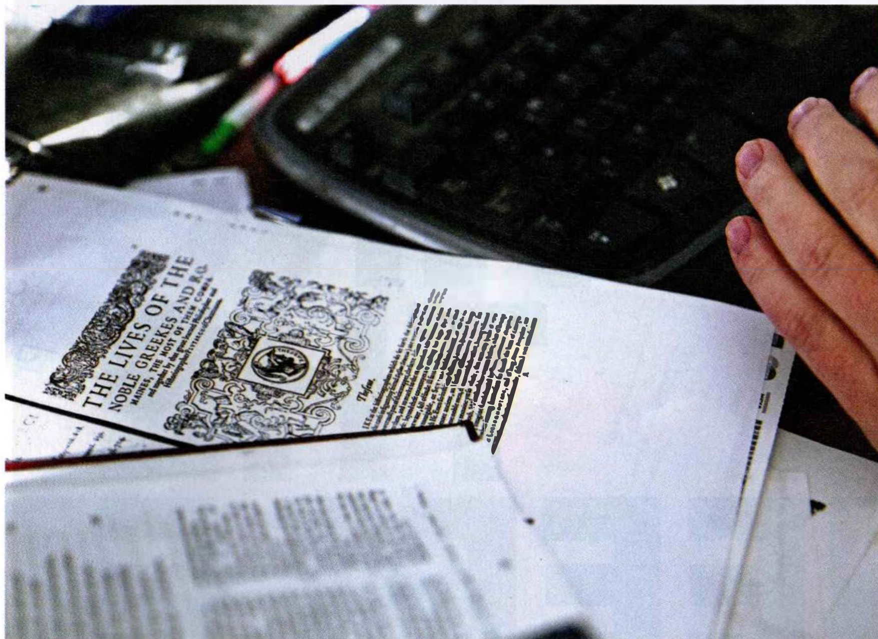
The chances that so many similar sentiments and specific phrases would be shared between Hamlet's soliloquy and North's earlier translation seemed vanishingly small to McCarthy. Even so, he knew from his work in biogeography that similar plants and animals appeared in different parts of the world sometimes because they shared a common evolutionary ancestor, other times because they shared a similar environment. Perhaps Shakespeare and North were both borrowing phrases from another writer; or maybe they were echoing common beliefs about death in the 16th century.

McCarthy started plugging in phrases to an online database called Early English Books Online, which then contained the full text of some 26,500 printed texts written between 1475 and 1640, identified by scholars as the most important works of early English prose. By searching in the database, someone could find out how many times a particular phrase had been used, and compare instances of words used in proximity to each other across volumes.

Some of the phrases were, in fact, quite common. "A sea of troubles," for instance, appeared 15 times in the data set in works written before *Hamlet.* Other word groupings, however, were more unique. When McCarthy searched for the words "sleep," "perchance," and "dream" all within 10 words of one another, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and North's *The Dial of Princes* were the only works that appeared. By themselves, none of these similarities proved that Thomas North wrote the *Ur-Hamlet*—after all, Shakespeare or another writer could have borrowed the phrases from *The Dial of Princes* directly. But they added additional evidence to the case. McCarthy started publishing his ideas in a scholarly literary journal, elated that he'd broken through with published scholarship in a new academic discipline.

As he read through more satires by Elizabethan playwrights, McCarthy began noticing other references to North, seeming to relate to other Shakespeare plays beyond just *Hamlet,* implying North was important for more plays in the Shakespeare canon.

"Everything just kept pointing to Thomas North," McCarthy says. In the same preface in which Thomas Nashe mocks "English Seneca," for example, he also refers to the "King of the



Fairies," calling to mind Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* In another work, Nashe seems to refer to the witches from *Macbeth* before complaining of a "dull, Northern clime."

As he continued pursuing the connections between Shakespeare and Thomas North, McCarthy often woke up at 5 in the morning, chasing a new find until dinner. "He almost had another place at the table," Lori McCarthy tells me. "Shakespeare?" I ask. "No," she replies, "Thomas North."

Despite his growing obsession, McCarthy still found time to play with the kids in the yard after they got home from school, throwing the Frisbee with them and inventing a game called "poison ball" that became a hit with the neighborhood children. "He never makes us feel like we're not important," Lori says.

I FIRST MET MCCARTHY in the fall of 2015—10 years after he had begun his quixotic quest into the source of Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* I had been invited to Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, to give a lecture about a book I'd written about a thief of rare maps. We were introduced later by the lecture's sponsor, English professor emerita June Schlueter, and hit it off.

Over drinks with his now grown-up daughter Nicole, McCarthy told me he had a story for me: He had found a source for Shakespeare's plays that no one else had uncovered. This unknown manuscript, he continued, was a prose treatise by a 16th-century courtier named George North, a relative of Thomas North's. The work, he claimed, influenced some of Shakespeare's greatest plays, including *Richard III, Macbeth,* and *King Lear.* But Shakespeare never even read the George North manuscript, McCarthy continued, as I struggled to follow his argument. Instead, he argued, Thomas North had used it to write his own plays.

Oh, he is one of those, I thought to myself—a conspiracy theorist who thought Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare. But McCarthy hurriedly added that in fact he believed the Bard of Avon wrote every word attributed to him during his lifetime. He also believed, however, that Shakespeare had used the earlier plays written by Thomas North for his ideas, his language, and even some of his most famous soliloquies.

McCarthy used software for finding plagiarism to look for similar words and phrases in different works.

EVENT
Join Michael Blanding in a free online discussion of his new book on March 30 at 7 p.m. Register at brooklinebooksmith.org/event

I didn't believe any of it. Where are Thomas North's plays now? I asked. "Lost," McCarthy said—but so were most manuscripts written in the Elizabethan era. Why hadn't anyone discovered this before? "Because no one had the right tools to do so," he said, arguing excitedly that his computer-assisted techniques had the potential to finally solve the mystery of how—and why—Shakespeare's plays were written.

I had vaguely known about the conspiracy theories that Shakespeare was a fraud, and the plays were really written by the Earl of Oxford or someone else. But this was something different. McCarthy's theory was more akin to saying Shakespeare adapted Thomas North's plays into his own. The theory seemed outlandish, but when I reviewed a document McCarthy sent me, I found persuasive evidence that the George North manuscript was a source for nearly a dozen of Shakespeare's plays.

I was intrigued enough to order McCarthy's self-published book about Thomas North and meet with him again—this time at a table by the water in Newburyport. I listened as he spelled out his theories in a torrent of words, as if he couldn't get them all out fast enough. Over an exceptional 50-year literary career, he claimed, Thomas North had written dozens of plays, which Shakespeare had reworked to create the greatest canon of works in English literature. Many of them, McCarthy said, were written on behalf of North's patron, the Earl of Leicester, as part of his quest to woo Queen Elizabeth.

Over the next three years, McCarthy's work began to be taken seriously—he and Schlueter published the George North manuscript with the British Library as *A Brief Discourse of Rebellion and Rebels,* showing how Shakespeare borrowed from it, and winning endorsements from two prominent scholars. I wrote about that book for *The New York Times* in February 2018 under the headline: "Plagiarism Software Unveils a New Source for 11 of Shakespeare's Plays." The director of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., Michael Witmore, even told me, "If it proves to be what they say it is, it is a once-in-a-generation—or several generations—find."

McCarthy had yet to reveal his larger theory, however, that Shakespeare relied on Thomas North as a source for nearly *all* of his works, and that he wasn't using prose works, but plays. Over the next two years, McCarthy and I traveled together through England, France, and Italy to retrace Thomas North's footsteps along the trail of McCarthy's audacious theories. As we did, I began to glimpse a new story that could answer age-old questions about Shakespeare and his works—if it could be believed. ■

Michael Blanding is a Boston-based investigative journalist. This story is adapted from his forthcoming book North by Shakespeare: A Rogue Scholar's Quest for the Truth Behind the Bard's Work. *Copyright 2021 by Michael Blanding. Available from Hachette Books, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group Inc. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.*