Brenda James made the discovery that Henry Neville was the hidden author of the works of Shakespeare. When I visited her I asked whether she knew of any reason why the young Neville should be preoccupied with rape: *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* were works which focussed on the abuse of women by powerful men. Other early works also contain traces of this preoccupation. In *Edward III* the Countess of Salisbury successfully resists the King’s lust. When at last he gives up his attempt, he refers to Lucrece:

> Arise, true English Lady, whom our Isle
> May better boast of than ever Roman might
> Of her, whose ransacked treasury hath taskt
> The vain endeavor of so many pens:
> Arise, and be my fault thy honor’s fame,
> Which after ages shall enrich thee with.            (2.2.194)

This passage clearly refers to Shakespeare’s own writing of *The Rape of Lucrece*. In *The Troublesome Raigne of John* (TR), Lady Fauconbridge says of her seduction by young Richard the Lionheart:

> Upbraid me rather with the Roman Dame
> That shed her blood to wash away her shame. (1.1.405)

When he later revised *TR* as *King John* Shakespeare cut this reference but simultaneously revealed the political significance of the Lucrece story by having the King of France accuse King John of committing “a rape upon the maiden virtue of the crown” (2.1.97). This political significance is implicit in the introductory Argument to *The Rape of Lucrece* when Shakespeare concluded that the consequence of the rape was “the Tarquins were all exiled and the state government changed from kings to consuls”. From these references we can conclude that if this preoccupation was based on a real life event, the rapist was a king, his victim a noble lady and that the rape had major political consequences.

James has now found the back story that explains Neville’s linkage of rape and politics. In her latest book she reveals that Edward IV attempted to rape a young female Neville: this event would have been just over 100 years before the *Henry VI* trilogy (James, 2012, 85). Clearly the bard had read about this in either Halle or Holinshed who both mention it. In *Henry VI* part 3 Richard Neville, the Earl of Warwick, confronts Edward IV with his offences including, “th’abuse done my niece” (3.3.8). Halle reported that: “whether he would have deflowred his daughter or his nece, the certainty was not for both their honors openly known” (for full text see appendix 1). Shakespeare used the word ‘deflowre’ in *The Rape of Lucrece* and in *Titus Andronicus* (published the same year, 1594). Marcus says, “some Tereus¹ hath deflowred thee” (2.3.26 First Quarto spelling).

---
¹ The Tereus/Philomel story from Ovid is also referenced in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Cymbeline*.  
James first found reference to Edward IV’s sexual abuse in Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *The Last of the Barons*. He had researched that reign exhaustively and was able to show that the most likely victim of the King’s rapacity was Warwick’s daughter Anne as no niece was present at the time and so reference to her was an attempt to screen the identity of the actual victim. Anne was a teenager at the time of the attack. Shakespeare later shows us Anne being further seduced by Richard III: he was Edward’s brother and certainly regarded as guilty both by association and his own nature, by the bard. The major political consequence of this rape was that Richard Neville revolted against Edward IV and dethroned him (albeit temporarily and at the eventual cost of his own life). Shakespeare followed Holinshed who suggested the cause of the break between the King-Maker and the King was Warwick’s offence at Edward’s marriage to Elizabeth Woodville when he was in France negotiating a marriage to the Lady Bona. Holinshed (1808, Vol III, 284) stated:

All men for the most part agree, that this marriage was the onlie cause, why the earle of Warwick conceived a hatred against king Edward, whom he so much before fauoured. Other affirme other causes: and one speciallie, for that king Edward did attempt a thing once in the earles house, which was much against the earles honestie (whether he would have defloured his daughter or his niece, the certaintie was not for both their honours openlie revealed)…

Holinshed continues, copying his source, which is Halle (see appendix). The date of the assault is uncertain: Holinshed has the date 1465 in a marginal annotation.

Halle and Bulwer-Lytton both suggest the rape was the real cause of the break. Bulwer-Lytton (1891, xvi) stated, “Here was, indeed, a wrong never to be forgiven, and yet never to be proclaimed.” Shakespeare’s suggestion that it was the Bona marriage debacle continued the cover-up of King Edward’s shameful sexual behaviour. However in *Henry VI* part 3 Warwick does obliquely refer to Edward’s nature in his not being “contented with one wife” (4.3.37). Halle suggested that Warwick had bided his time until he was ready in order to hide the shame to himself and his daughter. Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, was a first cousin of Neville’s great grandfather (James, 2008, 352).

The incidents of royal sexual abuse by Edward III and Edward IV in the plays are parallel: both kings are called Edward, both make attempts on the Earl of Warwick’s daughter, both mix sex and politics. The parallel is stronger when we know that the original source for the Countess of Salisbury story was Jean Le Bel’s *Vrayes Chroniques* which revealed that Edward did eventually violently rape the Countess (Melchiori, 2001, 22, 186). This finally explains why Shakespeare-Neville chose to dramatise the Countess of Salisbury story in *Edward III*. The Neville family had held the titles of the Earldoms of Salisbury and Warwick.

James (2012, 88) offers a fuller account of the use of the Lucrece story as a political metaphor in Medieval times including considering Chaucer’s version. Neville was related to Chaucer. She further shows how another source was Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* and Neville’s mother owned a manuscript copy.
Why then in the 1590s was Neville writing about rape? Apart from working through the ancestral trauma of Anne Neville’s rape by Edward IV, he was using this material to reflect on the current political situation. If the history plays use history as metaphor then the theme of a woman’s chastity as a political matter points us to the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I. Whilst her decision not to marry concentrated power in her own hands, it led to the dangerous question of who would succeed when she died. During her reign there were a number of possible suitors, starting with the Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. In the 1584 political tract *Leicester’s Commonwealth* there is an implicit reference to the aftermath of the rape of Lucrece. In complaining about Leicester’s intolerable sexual appetite “upon men’s wives” the writers refer back to how in previous times: “offences…were extremely punished in princes themselves, and that not only in the person delinquent alone, but also by **extirpation of the whole family** for his sake, as appeareth in the example of the Tarquiniens among the Romans” (Peck, 87/612). I have shown how Neville’s vocabulary in his own annotated copy of *Leicester’s Commonwealth* (which predates all his subsequent writing), and his letters, matches Shakespeare’s vocabulary (Casson, 2010). This metaphor of extirpation (literally up-rooting) is to be found in opening argument of *The Rape of Lucrece*:

“They all vowed to **root out the whole hated family of the Tarquins**; and bearing the dead body to Rome, Brutus acquainted the people with the doer and manner of the vile deed, with a bitter invective against the tyranny of the king: wherewith the people were so moved, that with one consent and a general acclamation the Tarquins were all exiled, and the state government changed from kings to consuls.”

In a letter dated 19/11/1599 Neville used this metaphor when he wrote, “**cutt off the Roote** and Foundation of all true Friendship” (Winwood, 1725, Vol 1, 130). Neville, a forester, knew about tree husbandry.

**Conclusion**

The theme of threatened chastity which has political consequences can therefore be seen to concern the right succession to the throne and whether this should be by election (as in *Titus Andronicus*) or usurpation (as in *Richard III* or *Henry IV*) or some other method. Elizabeth had banned discussion of the succession. The *Lucrece* poem and history plays were an indirect method of exploring the political consequences of her chastity.

This preoccupation with chastity in marriage matches Neville’s experience of being illegitimate: his father was still married to his first wife, Winifred, when Henry was conceived by Elizabeth Gresham. Thus it is not difficult to see the connections with Neville’s own life when we consider that his own father made love to his mother before they were married and Neville had to bear the secret life-long shame of bastardy, as is evinced in Shakespeare canon (Casson, 2010, 138). This was the “birth-hour’s blot” (*Rape of Lucrece*, 537) and “bed-blotting shame” (*Edward III*, 2.1.458) that Neville had to bear and which is evidenced by the obsessive blot image cluster of which I have previously written (Casson, 2008; 2010).

---

2 The second italic number refers to the internet download, see Peck in References.
Appendix 1
Edward Halle’s *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustrate Families of Lancastre and Yorke*, also called Hall’s *Chronicle*, was first published in 1542.
The passage about Edward IV’s offence is on folio vi verso of the iiiii yere of Edward IV. I have retained the original spelling.

And farther it erreth not from the truthe that Kyng Edward did attempt a thyng once in the erles house whiche was muche against the erles honestie (whether he would have deflowred his daughter or his nece, the certaintie was not for both their honors openly knowne) for surely such a thyng was attempted by kyng Edward, which loved well both the loke and to fele feyre dammosels. But whether the injury that the erle thought he had taken at kyng Edwardes handes, or the disdayne of authoritie that the Erle had under the kyng, was the cause of dissolucion of their amitie and league, truthe it is that the privie intencions in their hartes brake into so many small peces, that England, Fraunce, and Flaunders, coulde never ioyne them again, during their naturall lyfes. THE erle of Warwyke being thus moved, inflamed, and set against the kyng, lest in his fury, his purpose might be espied and brouhte to naught, determined himself, covertly dissymulynge, so long to suffer all such wronges + injuries, as were to hym done, till he might spye a tyme convenient, + a world after his awn appetite, for the setting furth of his enterprise, and accomplishing of his purpose…

References


Halle, E. (1550) The Union of the Two Noble Families of Lancaster and York


Dr. J. Casson, 2012