

Reflections on ‘The Annotated *Amleth*: Belleforest in the British Library’: The Identity of the Annotator

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In this note I revisit my article of 2016¹ in which I argued that the British Library copy of the Lyon 1576 edition of François de Belleforest’s *Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques* (C.8.a.5) bears various manuscript annotations which reveal an early reader’s approach to Belleforest’s text, and that one possible author of these annotations is Shakespeare himself.

Given the importance of the Belleforest text as the source of *Hamlet* it is appropriate now to review what may be inferred about the possible identity of the annotator. From the style of the annotations we can reasonably conclude that all the annotations are apparently in the same hand. Furthermore, because all except one of the annotations are about men, with just one referring the reader to a section on ‘The incestuous marriage of Fenegon with his sister-in-law’ it seems probable that the annotator was a man.

I propose that there are four possible identities for this annotator:

- 1) **An Unknown Annotator:** this anonymous man is not entirely unknowable though we may never be certain of his identity. There are several factors which point to his knowledge, motivation and experience. Firstly he could read French, suggesting that he was either French or well educated. He may have been to France and bought the book there. Secondly he may well have owned the book as he annotated it and so we can infer that he was wealthy enough to buy books. There is evidence that he was interested in politics and the succession to the throne as one annotation refers to this issue. In the historical context, this would have been motivation enough for the annotator to be discreet about his identity: in 1571 Elizabeth I had introduced a statute that outlawed any public discussion of the succession. If he was wealthy, educated and politically aware it is possible that he would have had some involvement at court or in politics. The annotator does not refer to the play *Hamlet* which could imply that the notes were made before the play was written or staged. The link with *Hamlet* may be coincidental. If so, then the annotations show that this text had contemporary political significance.
- 2) **Shakespeare** (the playwright): It has been suggested that the Bard based *Hamlet* on the 1576 edition of Belleforest’s *Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques*. The main focus of the annotations being on Amleth makes plausible a direct link to *Hamlet*’s author, who could have been the annotator. I laid out evidence for this in 2016. We can reasonably conclude therefore that Shakespeare could read French. He had a clear interest in the succession to the throne as is evident in his history plays.
- 3) **William Shakspeare** from Stratford-upon-Avon: the Stratford man’s authorship of the canon is being increasingly questioned. We know that the earliest version of a *Hamlet* play must have been written in the mid- to late 1580s because, in 1589, Thomas Nashe

Erratum: In the original paper I had stated that some marginal annotations were a capital ‘Y’ against text that interested the original reader. John Silk, from Canada, on examining the photographs accompanying the paper, pointed out that it was a lower case ‘y’.

¹ John Casson, ‘The Annotated *Amleth*: Belleforest in the British Library’, *Electronic British Library Journal* (2016), art. 7, pp. 1-15 <<http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2016articles/pdf/ebljarticle72016.pdf>>.

referred to a *Hamlet* as being on stage. The first references to William from Stratford being in London are from 1592. There is no evidence that he knew French and or that he ever travelled abroad. He did lodge in Silver Street with the Huguenot Mountjoys in 1603-5 but this was after the play had been written and there is no evidence that he spoke or learned French then. There is also no evidence that he was interested in politics and he held no political office either locally or nationally. No books have been found that were annotated by him. (The annotations in Halle’s *Chronicle* have not been accepted as by William from Stratford despite the strained, indeed convoluted, case set out by Keen and Lubbock.)² Only if we follow tradition by equating William of Stratford with the Bard do the odds of him being connected with these annotations rise. An alternative explanation would be that the annotator was a hypothetical co-author who could read French (so approximating to the above ‘unknown annotator’).

- 4) **Henry Neville** (1562/4-1615): Neville emerged as a Shakespeare authorship candidate in 2005.³ He travelled through France in 1578 and 1582, returning there in 1599. The earlier visits would have put him in a position to buy the 1576 edition of Belleforest. Neville bought books during his travels including some which are recognized Shakespeare sources. These are preserved in the library at Audley End House. Many of them are annotated. Neville wrote letters in French⁴ and was asked by Robert Cecil to tutor a young man in French.⁵ There are French books in the Neville library at Audley End including two that were possible sources for *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and *Cymbeline*. These are annotated. Neville sometimes annotated just part of a book that was relevant to a Shakespeare play: for example the annotations in François de la Noue’s, *Discours Politiques et Militaires* (1587) that may be a source for *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, are only found in the section about young men’s education. These refer to ‘l’institution d[es] Academies’ which finds an echo in the King of Navarre’s plans to establish ‘a little academe’ in the play (1.1.14).⁶ Neville also highlighted items that interested him by underlining passages and putting letters and marks in the margin of other books, including the single Greek letter ‘γ’ (which recalls the Belleforest annotator’s use of a single ‘y’). He used Greek and Latin when annotating books in those languages and French when annotating the *Discours Politiques et Militaires*. Other books in Neville’s library were annotated with notes relevant to Shakespeare’s plays including *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of The Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Julius Caesar*, *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Pericles*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *Hamlet*. Neville made specific notes on Claudius in his copies of Tacitus and Appian (both possible sources for Shakespeare’s play).⁷ Shakespeare changed the king’s name from Fenegon to Claudius. These are the same books in which he used the single Greek letter ‘γ’ in the margin. He also noted a passage in Horace’s Odes (3.30) which is echoed in *Hamlet* by Horatio, whose name links him to that Latin poet.⁸ Neville’s letters and his trial deposition of 1601 contain rare vocabulary found in the play and many examples of hendiadys.⁹ Neville was a courtier and a politician and had an interest in the succession to the throne. He accompanied Walsingham on a diplomatic visit to James, King of Scotland,

² A. Keen and R. Lubbock, *The Annotator : the pursuit of an Elizabethan reader of Halle’s ‘Chronicle’ involving some surmises about the early life of William Shakespeare* (London, 1954).

³ B. James and W. D. Rubinstein, *The Truth Will Out: Unmasking The Real Shakespeare* (Harlow, 2005).

⁴ E. Sawyer, *Memorials of State in the Reigns of Q. Elizabeth and K. James I Collected from the Original Papers of the Right Honourable Sir Ralph Winwood*, 3 vols (London, 1725), vol. i, pp. 37, 43, 98, 99, 165, 170.

⁵ M. Bradbeer and J. Casson, *Sir Henry Neville, Alias William Shakespeare: Authorship Evidence in the History Plays* (Jefferson, NC, 2015).

⁶ J. Casson and W. D. Rubinstein, *Sir Henry Neville Was Shakespeare: The Evidence* (Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2016), p. 68.

⁷ M. Spevack (ed.), *Julius Caesar, The New Cambridge Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 12.

⁸ Casson and Rubinstein, *Sir Henry Neville*, pp. 131-2.

⁹ Bradbeer and Casson, *Sir Henry Neville*, chapter 10.

in 1583. He copied out the banned political pamphlet *Leicester’s Commonwealth* which speculated about the succession (Lincoln Archives, Worsley MSS 47: Casson, 2010).¹⁰ Neville was known for his discretion and kept his authorship of a political dissertation on the relationship between the Monarch and Parliament secret until forced to identify himself as the author.¹¹ He had reasons to keep his authorship secret. Finally we may wonder how/when this Belleforest volume arrived in the King’s Library. Neville and his descendants were courtiers and in contact with the royal family: James I and Charles II both visited the Neville family home at Billingbear. It is therefore possible that the book entered a royal library through these contacts. Nothing is known of its provenance before George III.

Other Shakespeare authorship candidates such as Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere 17th Earl of Oxford and William Stanley 6th Earl of Derby visited France but have not left books annotated specifically with notes and underlinings relevant to the Shakespeare plays. We may never know the identity of the annotator of the British Library Belleforest but there is some evidence that points towards Henry Neville and this is reinforced by other evidence in support of him having been Shakespeare.

¹⁰ J. Casson, *Much Ado About Noting, Henry Neville and Shakespeare’s Secret Source* (Tatcham, 2010).

¹¹ B. James, *Understanding the Invisible Shakespeare* (Bognor Regis, 2011).