

From the Tower

*Sir Henry Neville's prison letters, 1601–1603,
read beside Shakespeare's Sonnets*

In February 1601 Sir Henry Neville, lately the Queen's ambassador in France, was drawn into the Essex conspiracy, imprisoned in the Tower, and fined five thousand pounds. For two years he wrote to Robert Cecil about his disgrace, his worth, the eyes that judged him, the bonds his friends had entered for him, and his hope of liberty. Twenty-six of those letters survive. What follows sets eleven sonnets beside them.

Neville's words are quoted from the letters as transcribed in the project corpus, with the letter identifier and date given for each. The sonnets are quoted whole or in the lines that bear on the comparison. Nothing is argued here. The two bodies of writing are simply placed side by side.

The situation

On 8 February 1601 the Earl of Essex marched into the City and failed. Neville had been approached months earlier through Henry Cuffe and had gone to Drury House, where, as he later put it, he “found my l. of Southhampton with Sr. Charles Davers.” He had not spoken with Southampton, he said, since Southampton was a child in Burghley’s house.

He was examined, made a long declaration on 2 March 1601, lost his office, was fined five thousand pounds, and was put in the Tower. He stayed there for two years. Elizabeth died on 24 March 1603. On 10 April, John Chamberlain wrote to Dudley Carleton:

The tenth of this moneth the earle of Southampton and Sir Henry Nevill were delivered out of the Towre.

McClure, *Letters of John Chamberlain*, vol. 1, p. 192.

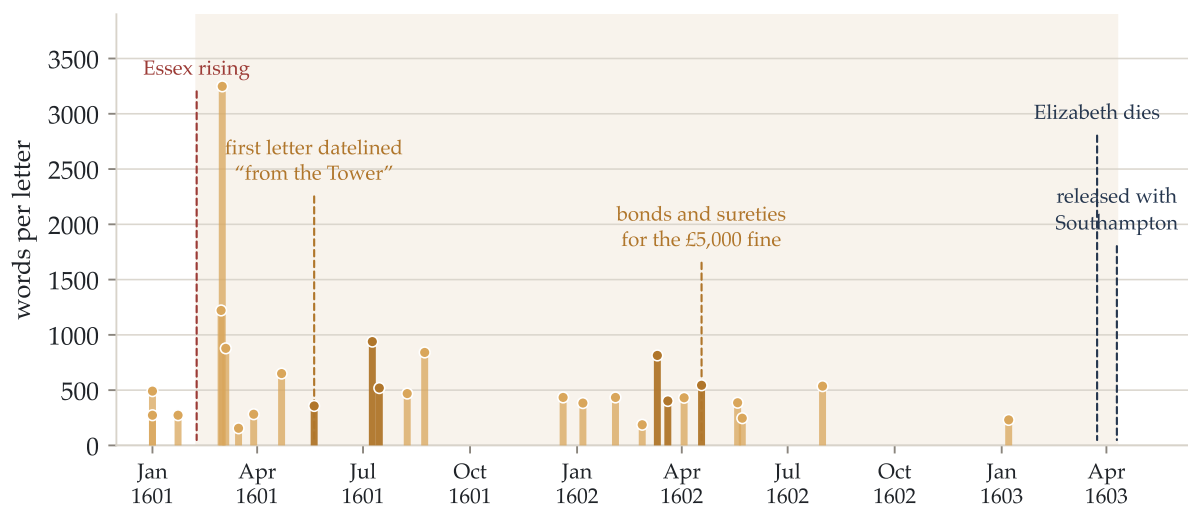


Figure 1. Neville’s surviving letters, December 1600 to June 1603. Darker bars are letters datelined from the Tower. The tallest is the declaration of 2 March 1601.

The letters that follow are almost all to Robert Cecil. They are the letters of a man asking a more powerful man to intercede for him, and they return again and again to the same handful of things: how he is seen, what he is worth, what he has been made to seem, the friends who stood bound for him, and when he might be free.

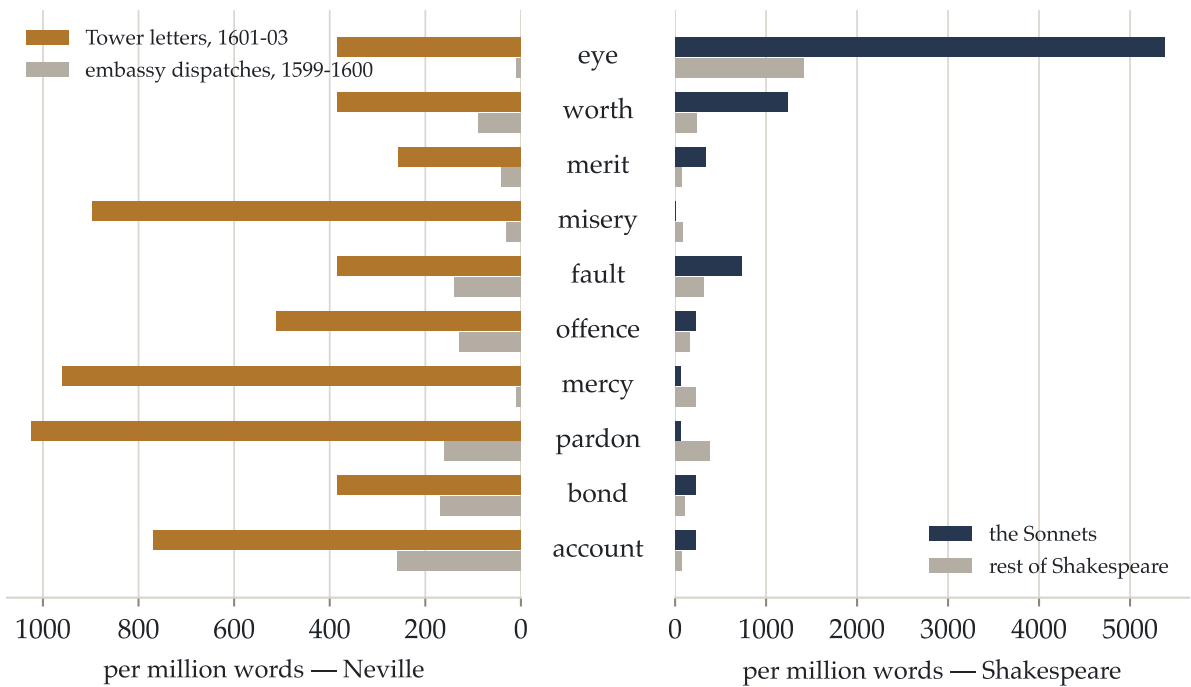


Figure 2. The same words on both sides. Left: Neville’s Tower letters against his own embassy dispatches of 1599–1600. Right: the Sonnets against the rest of Shakespeare. *Eye* occurs once in 100,609 words of diplomatic correspondence and six times in the 15,393 words written from prison.

I. Sonnet 66

Sonnet 66

*Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
 As to behold desert a beggar born,
 And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,
 And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
 And gilded honour shamefully misplac'd,
 And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
 And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd,
 And strength by limping sway disabled
 And art made tongue-tied by authority,
 And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
 And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
 And captive good attending captain ill:
 Tir'd with all these, from these would I be gone,
 Save that, to die, I leave my love alone.*

The poem is not general pessimism. It is an itemised complaint about how punishment and honour are distributed: the deserving beggared, the gilded honoured, the good held captive under the ill. Neville makes the same complaint, and names the mechanism.

Neville to Cecil, 11 March 1601/2 (letter_106, from the Tower)

...because she hath been pleased to give better conditions to some other of greater state then mine, who were in the eye of law as great offenders as my self, from whom she toke nothing els but their bare fine.

Neville to Cecil, 3 February 1602 (letter_105)

I may account my self a man in some sort dead to this world.

Neville to Cecil, 15 July 1601 (letter_146, from the Tower)

As a man plunged in misery and destitute of all comfort and counsel...

Neville to Cecil, 6 January 1602 (letter_150)

...if my imprisonment continue I can not but expect the uttermost of misery.

II. Sonnet 121

Sonnet 121

*'Tis better to be vile than vile esteem'd,
 When not to be receives reproach of being;
 And the just pleasure lost, which is so deem'd
 Not by our feeling, but by others' seeing:
 For why should others' false adulterate eyes
 Give salutation to my sportive blood?
 Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
 Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
 No, I am that I am, and they that **level**
 At my abuses reckon up their own:
 I may be straight though they themselves be **bevel**;
 By their rank thoughts, my deeds must not be shown;
 Unless this general **evil** they maintain,
 All men are bad and in their badness reign.*

The distinction the poem turns on — being vile, and being *esteemed* vile — is the distinction Neville presses in letter after letter.

Neville to Cecil, 9 July 1601 (letter_145, from the Tower)

*...your honor doth not in your private judgment condemn me to have been so wicked and disloyal as my folly and misfortune together have **made me to seem**.*

Neville to Cecil, 7 January 1603 (letter_155)

*...nor the **evil** suggestions of malignant spirits, apt and ready to make the worst interpretation of them, have been able to alter your honours constant favorable disposition towards me.*

Neville to Cecil, 9 July 1601 (letter_145)

...whatsoever other opinion I have deserved to lose, that you will vouchsafe still to hold me an honest man, for that is the highest title that I aspire unto.

Neville to Cecil, 22 April 1601 (letter_143)

...it would ... lay me open to the censure of every common person ... so the world may know the best of me as well as the worst.

The name

The Neville family motto is *ne vile velis* — wish nothing base. In 1603 John Davies of Hereford printed a sonnet addressed “To the Noble, discrete, and wellbeloved Knight Sir Henry Nevill,” closing on the pun and glossing it in the margin:

*All which presume thou art not guilt by guile
Because thy noble name denies the vile*

John Davies of Hereford, *Microcosmos* (1603), with the printed marginal gloss **Ne-vile**. Leaf inspected at original resolution.

The rhyme that carries the argument of Sonnet 121 is **level** — **bevel** — **evil**.

III. Sonnet 107

Sonnet 107

*Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confin'd doom.
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endur'd,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assur'd,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time,
My love looks fresh, and Death to me subscribes,
Since, spite of him, I'll live in this poor rime,
While he insults o'er dull and speechless tribes:
And thou in this shalt find thy monument,
When tyrants' crests and tombs of brass are spent.*

Elizabeth died on 24 March 1603. Southampton and Neville walked out of the Tower together on 10 April. Three months earlier Neville had written:

Neville to Cecil, 7 January 1603 (letter_155)

*I have understood both by mine uncle Killigrew and by mr lieutenant how honorably and affectionately you have dealt with her majesty **for my liberty**.*

Neville to Cecil, 20 December 1601 (letter_149)

*...beseeching you to make an end at length of these my unfortunate troubles, and to **free me from this captivity**.*

Neville to Cecil, 19 May 1602 (letter_153)

...my state is wholly decayed, my health of late much impaired ... I crave that it would please you to deliver me, free me.

IV. Sonnet 29

Sonnet 29

*When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes
I all alone beweep my **outcast state**,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more **rich in hope**,
Featur'd like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least...*

Neville to Cecil, 20 May 1601 (letter_144, from the Tower)

*...humbly beseeching you not to look upon my offences only with the **severe eye of a councillor of State**, but sometimes also with the **affectionate eye of an honorable friend**, and to think of my poor wife and children, whose good or ruin is now in your hands.*

Neville to Cecil, 3 April 1602 (letter_152)

*...all men know that **my state is utterly overthrown both in act and in hope**.*

Neville to Cecil, 22 April 1601 (letter_143)

*...that I may not by any **public disgrace** be made unable or unworthy to be commanded by her majesty.*

The word *eye* occurs once in Neville's hundred thousand words of embassy dispatches. It occurs six times in the fifteen thousand he wrote from prison, and it is always the eye that judges — the severe eye of a councillor, the rigorous eye of the law, the eye in which he has been made ugly.

V. Sonnet 58

Sonnet 58

*That god forbid, that made me first your slave,
I should in thought control your times of pleasure,
Or at your hand the account of hours to crave,
Being your vassal, bound to stay your leisure!
O! let me suffer, being at your beck,
The imprison'd absence of your liberty;
And **patience**, tame to sufferance, bide each check,
Without accusing you of injury...
I am to wait, though waiting so be hell,
Not blame your pleasure be it ill or well.*

Neville to Cecil, 11 March 1601/2 (letter_106, from the Tower)

*I am not so unreasonable to press any more, but will rather resolve to subject my self with **pa-tience** to any misery that god hath appointed for me.*

Neville to Cecil, January 1601 (letter_107)

*I must prepare my self to endure with **patience** the misery that...*

Neville to Cecil, 20 May 1601 (letter_144, from the Tower)

...your poor creature, who hath bowed his self wholly unto you, to honour and serve you with as much faith and affection as any man living.

VI. Sonnet 111

Sonnet 111

*O! for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means which public manners breeds.
Thence comes it that **my name receives a brand**,
And almost thence my nature is subdu'd
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand:
Pity me, then, and wish I were renew'd;
Whilst, like a willing patient, I will drink,
Potions of eisel 'gainst my strong infection...*

Both men reach for the same remedy: a washing that takes the mark off.

Neville to Cecil, 31 July 1602 (letter_110)

*...yet it is possible that if I were at liberty I might shed so much of my blood in some place where she hath occasion to use men, as might serve for a **laver for the crime which hath made me so ugly in her eye**.*

Neville to Cecil, 23 August 1601 (letter_148)

*...if it had not been **my evil fortune** to fall into this offence, her majesty in her princely honour would have repaired the decay of my estate.*

Neville to Cecil, 22 April 1601 (letter_143)

*I desire to **cancel** by some faithful service the fault...*

VII. Sonnet 112

Sonnet 112

Your love and pity doth the impression fill,
 Which **vulgar scandal stamp'd upon my brow**;
 For what care I who calls me well or ill,
 So you o'er-green my bad, my good allow?
You are my all-the-world, and I must strive
 To know my shames and praises from your tongue;
 None else to me, nor I to none alive,
 That my steel'd sense or changes right or wrong.
 In so profound abysm I throw all care
 Of others' voices...

Neville to Cecil, 23 May 1602 (letter_154)

...you have already made me so much your servant ... confessing that **I owe more unto you then to all the world besides**, and will be ready to testify it in all occasions, even to the spending of my blood if need so require.

Neville to Cecil, 22 April 1601 (letter_143)

...lay me open to the **censure of every common person**.

Neville to Cecil, 20 May 1601 (letter_144, from the Tower)

...my chief and only confidence, after god, in your good favour and compassion towards me.

VIII. Sonnet 133

Sonnet 133 is the prison sonnet of the sequence. It carries *prison*, *ward*, *bail*, *jail*, *guard*, *pent*, *slave* and *slavery* in fourteen lines. *Jail* and *slavery* occur nowhere else in the 154; *bail*, *prison* and *pent* occur in only one other sonnet each. Two men are confined, and the speaker asks that his own imprisonment stand as security for his friend's release.

Sonnet 133

Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan
 For that **deep wound** it gives my friend and me!
Is't not enough to torture me alone,
But slave to slavery my sweet'st friend must be?
 Me from myself thy cruel eye hath taken,
 And my next self thou harder hast engross'd:
 Of him, myself, and thee I am forsaken;
 A torment thrice three-fold thus to be cross'd:
Prison my heart in thy steel bosom's **ward**,

*But then my friend's heart let my poor heart **bail**;
 Whoe'er keeps me, let my heart be his **guard**;
 Thou canst not then use rigour in my **jail**:
 And yet thou wilt; for I, being **pent** in thee,
 Perforce am thine, and all that is in me.*

Neville was in the Tower with Southampton. They were delivered out of it on the same day. And the complaint of the sonnet's third and fourth lines — that it would be bearable if the punishment fell on him alone — is the complaint Neville makes repeatedly.

Neville to Cecil, 6 January 1602 (letter_150)

*...Which if it might only extend to my self, though it were as great as the most rigorous censor would think me worthy of, I would bear it with silence. But I confess that the calamity of those innocents that are made miserable by my occasion doth greatly **wound me deeply**.*

Neville to Cecil, 8 August 1601 (letter_147)

*...and so **lay the punishment upon my self, which hath only deserved it, and not upon my poor children, which are innocent.***

Neville to Cecil, 15 July 1601 (letter_146, from the Tower)

I only have deserved it, and they are innocent.

Sonnet 134 takes up the same sentence and turns it into the language of the bond.

IX. Sonnet 134

Sonnet 134

*So, now I have confess'd that he is thine,
 And I my self am **mortgag'd** to thy will,
 Myself I'll **forfeit**, so that other mine
 Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:
 But thou wilt not, nor he will not be **free**,
 For thou art covetous, and he is kind;
He learn'd but surety-like to write for me,
Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
 The **statute** of thy beauty thou wilt take,
 Thou **usurer**, that putt'st forth all to use,
 And sue a friend came **debtor** for my sake...
 Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me:
He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.*

This is the exact position Neville is in while he writes: a friend bound as surety for his debt, and himself still not free.

Neville to Cecil, 3 April 1602 (letter_152)

*...my lord requiring **bonds with sureties**. Now because it is an impossible thing for me to procure my friends to **entangle their estates for me in bonds** to the queen, considering that all men know that my state is utterly overthrown both in act and in hope...*

Neville to Cecil, 18 April 1602 (letter_109, from the Tower)

*I finding that my friends are willing to **engage their land** for me then their bonds ... And it can not be denied but land is better assurance then any mans bond.*

Neville to Cecil, 15 July 1601 (letter_146, from the Tower)

*I have been forced to sell since my trouble, to pay my debts and to **discharge my friends that stood bound for me**, as became an honest man.*

X. Sonnet 87**Sonnet 87**

*Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing,
And like enough thou know'st thy **estimate**,
The charter of thy worth gives thee releasing;
My bonds in thee are all determinate.
For how do I hold thee but by thy granting?
And for that riches where is my deserving?
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,
And so my **patent** back again is swerving.
Thyself thou gav'st, thy own worth then not knowing,
Or me to whom thou gav'st it, else mistaking;
So thy great gift, upon **misprision** growing,
Comes home again, on better judgement making...*

Neville's worth was being estimated, in pounds, by commissioners, in the weeks he wrote these letters.

Neville to Cecil, 8 August 1601 (letter_147)

*...to consider of the particulars lately delivered them of my land, and to **estimate what my estate for life may be worth**, according to the common rate used between subjects.*

Neville to Cecil, 15 July 1601 (letter_146, from the Tower)

*The fine, as it is now imposed, is double more then my estate in my whole land, which is only for life, **is worth**.*

XI. Sonnet 25

Sonnet 25

*Let those who are in favour with their stars
Of **public honour** and proud titles boast,
Whilst I, whom fortune of such triumph bars
Unlook'd for joy in that I honour most.
**Great princes' favourites their fair leaves spread
But as the marigold at the sun's eye,
And in themselves their pride lies buried,
For at a frown they in their glory die.**
The painful warrior famoused for fight,
**After a thousand victories once foil'd,
Is from the book of honour razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toil'd...***

Neville had been the Queen's ambassador in France. One frown ended it.

Neville to Cecil, 22 April 1601 (letter_143)

*...that I may not by any public disgrace be made **unable or unworthy to be commanded** by her majesty ... for god is my witness I desire to cancel by some faithful service the fault.*

Neville to Cecil, 23 August 1601 (letter_148)

*...her majesty in her princely honour would have **repaired the decay of my estate.***

Coda Sonnets 36 and 89: concealing the name

Sonnet 36

*Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one:
So shall those blots that do with me remain,
Without thy help, by me be borne alone...
**I may not evermore acknowledge thee,
Lest my bewailed guilt should do thee shame,**
Nor thou with public kindness honour me,
Unless thou take that honour from thy name.*

Sonnet 89

*Say that thou didst forsake me for some fault,
And I will comment upon that offence...
As I'll myself disgrace; knowing thy will,
I will acquaintance strangle, and look strange;*

*Be absent from thy walks; and in my tongue
Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell...*

Neville to Cecil, 29 March 1601 (letter_167)

*...I would not reveal him to any body, nor be acknowledge that he held intelligence with me, for it would be, he said, his utter ruin ... Only I humbly beseech your honor that **his name may be concealed**, because I have given him my faith to that effect.*

One more

Writing on 3 February 1602, Neville calls himself a man in some sort dead. The sentence does not stop there.

Neville to Cecil, 3 February 1602 (letter_105)

*...seeing I may account my self a man in some sort dead to this world, I have nothing left to wish or hope but that **my house and fortune may revive in him** — and therein, as in my greatest good...*

He is writing about his son. The first seventeen sonnets urge a young man to revive his house in an heir.

Neville's letters are quoted from the project corpus of 164 letters and three supplementary documents; each quotation carries its letter identifier and date, and all have been string-verified against the source transcriptions. The Chamberlain letter is quoted from McClure, *Letters of John Chamberlain*, vol. 1, p. 192. The Davies gloss is from *Microcosmos* (1603), leaf inspected at original resolution. Sonnet text follows a public numbered edition; any line carried into print should be controlled against the Folger edition.