

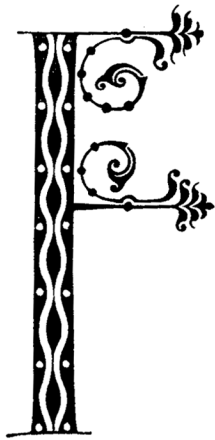
ON THE CHRONOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE VENUE OF *A Midsummer Night's Dreame*

Roger Stritmatter



Four nights will quickly dream away the time;
And then the moon, like to a silver bow
New bent in heaven, shall behold the night
Of our solemnities.

Hippolyta (1.1.7-11)



FAILURE to acknowledge variant premises and methodologies employed to ascertain the most probable dates of first performance or composition has handicapped study of the chronology of the Shakespearean plays. Rarely have scholars, whether orthodox or anti-Stratfordian in their premises, carefully compared the viability of competing conclusions or weighed the methods used to establish them. Consequently, scholarship on the chronology of the canon more often resembles Dante's *selva oscura* than it does a conversation among thoughtful and well-informed scholars.

Such inconsistencies are particularly apparent in the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Dream's terminus ad quem* (date before which) is supplied by Frances Meres's 1598 reference to it as one of a dozen Shakespeare plays in his *Palladis Tamia* (*Wit's Treasury*). But how long before that the play was written remains controversial: the play has been dated as early as 1580 by critics of the Oxfordian school such as Eva Turner Clark (writing in 1931), but is placed by most scholars—in opinions surveyed by Horace Howard Furness in 1895, E.K. Chambers in 1935, and Harold F. Brooks in 1983—to the early or mid-1590s. The present article will summarize the history of speculations about the play's date and performance venue, and consider how the various theories make use of both internal and external evidence. My purpose is not to take a dogmatic position on the question of the play's chronology, but to provide readers with a coherent historical account of some of the outstanding trends in scholarship on the play's date and on the concept of the play's "occasionalist" character, as well as to explore the interdependence of premises about performance venue and interpretation.

Clark's early date is based on a topical reading: the play seems to parody the well-known international courtship of Queen Elizabeth I by the youngest son of Catherine De' Medici, Hercule de Valois, the Duc d'Alençon (d.1584), which reached its zenith in 1581, shortly before Alençon's death. According to Clark, the play originated in a masque (1581) or a comedy (1584) dating from the early 1580s: "there can be...no question of its having been first presented in more or less its present form before the Queen during the Christmas season of 1584" under the title "A Pastorall of Phillyda and Choryn" (613).

Many of Clark's arguments are derived from Act II Scene 1, in which Titania courts Bottom in his ass's head. A speech in which Bottom repeatedly refers to the fairies by the name "Monsieur" plays an especially important role in her theory:

Bottom: Monsieur Cobweb, good mon-sieur, get your weapons in your hand and kill me a red-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good mon sieur, bring me the honey-bag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, monsieur; and, good monsieur, have a care the honey-bag break not; I would be loathe to have you overflown with a honey-bag, signior—where's Monsieur Mustardseed? (4.1.10-17)

The fivefold repetition of "monsieur" in this passage, she suggests, can only be designed for comic effect: "Not only does the frequent use of 'Monsieur' indicate a French original for the character of Bottom, but the request for a 'honey bag' suggests Alençon's demand for money (a large 'money bag' or bag of gold) of which Elizabeth gave him large sums at different times" (618).

Clark's speculation has elicited impressive corroboration in several subsequent studies. Marion Taylor, for example, observes that "Monsieur"—the "honorific bestowed upon the brother of a king of France when his brother became heir to the throne"—was an apt epithet for Alençon, who after the 1574 death of Charles IX became heir after his second brother Henri III (40). D. Heywood Brock even reminds us that Alençon "came to be known in England by the nickname 'Monsieur,' from the Queen's habit of calling him that" (6). Thus, the repetition of the name in the play appears to be a comic, pointed reference to Alençon, in which a title that should be applied in the singular to Bottom is instead applied satirically in the plural to his minions.

If Bottom is intended as a comic travesty of Alençon then the scene in which Titania falls in love with Bottom becomes a Saturday Night Live satire on the famous 1578-81 marriage negotiations, while Bottom's ass-headed soliloquy parodies Alençon's refusal to leave England without Elizabeth's promise of marriage:

Bottom: I see their knavery; this is to make an ass of me; to fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this place, do what they can: I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, and they shall hear I am not afraid. (3.1.65-67)

As Martin Hume describes the episode, Alençon "put his back to the wall and plainly told the Queen that not only would he refuse to leave England, but he would not even vacate the rooms in her palace until she had given him a definite answer as to whether she would marry him or not" (268). This circumstance seems to be reflected with curious specificity in Bottom's line, "I will not stir from this place."

Most orthodox scholars have ignored this evidence for an early topical substratum in the play, but a few have considered the play's topicality and reached conclusions similar to Clarke's.

None, however, has accepted her theory of an early 1580s composition date. Marion Taylor, for instance, not only concurs with Clark regarding the significance of “monsieur,” but cites additional wordplay that seems to confirm the text’s topical relevance to the d’Alençon match-making of 1581. An example is the “French connection” in the following passage (138-39):

- Bottom: What beard were I best to play it [Pyramus] in?
- Quince: Why, what you will.
- Bottom: I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-coloured beard, your perfect yellow.
- Quince: Some of your French crowns have no hair at all, and when you will play barefaced. . . . (1.2.83-89)

On its surface, the “French crown” means *Ecu*, a French gold coin, but the reference to a “French crown” with “no hair at all” is “a standard Elizabethan joke alluding to the loss of hair from *morbus Gallicus*” i.e. syphilis (Taylor 181). If the scene is a parody of Alençon, then the passage takes on new comic significance, “a double, if not a triple meaning”:

First it is a pun about French money that could also refer to a French crowned head or royalty such as Alençon, heir to the throne. Second, it is a pun about a head bald from the French pox (a French crowned head?). Third, it is a jest about a French crowned head-to-be who was outwitted by an Elizabeth who left him ‘barefaced.’ (139)

Taylor goes on to argue that, compared to James of Scotland—Rickert’s favored candidate for the prototype of Bottom—“a much better high born candidate . . . was Francois [Alençon] de Valois” (135), whom Spenser allegorized as Braggadochio in *The Fairie Queene*, a lustful knight who failed in his attempts to seduce the fair Belpheobe.

THIS brief survey is sufficient to illustrate that a substantial tradition, including both orthodox and Oxfordian scholarship, has identified a pervasive topical undercurrent in the play relating to the French marriage negotiations of 1578-81. However, Taylor’s analysis of the Alençon connection also demonstrates the weakness of Clark’s assumption of a direct connection between topical incident and composition date: topical reference can prove only the *terminus a quo*, a date that, by definition, is earlier than a text’s actual composition date. The implication is that the oft-repeated contention that the presence of early topicalities disproves a later composition date because their significance would be lost on a later audience may be a fallacy. Indeed, the Elizabethan historical memory was more plastic than is sometimes acknowledged. As



The duc d'Alençon on his entry into Antwerp (1572) as figurehead ruler of Flanders.

Taylor observes, Spencer parodied the Alençon marriage negotiations in *The Fairie Queene* (1591), a text not published until more than ten years after the height of scandal: "Alençon and his envoys were so well known in London that even in 1594-95, when Alençon had been dead for over a decade, they were remembered in the English capitol" (207).

In other words, the Alençon references in *Dream* might support one of two very different conclusions. Perhaps the play was composed, as Clarke argues, in the early 1580's. Alternatively, like Spenser's epic, it might include retrospective reference to topical events that occurred as much as fifteen years prior to its composition. A third possibility is that the text as we have it reflects a substantial rewriting of a play originally conceived c.1581-83, preserving the memory of its origin

in the Alençon references but also reflecting awareness of a much later strata of topical significance derived from the 1590's. For these reasons, conceding the play's reference to the Alençon affair does not in itself disprove the orthodox dating of the play to the mid-1590's. As we shall see, moreover, credible patterns of topical allusion link the extant play to the later period and therefore support a 1594-95 composition date for the text as it survives in Q1 and F.

Many have urged that the play's copious description of unseasonably wet and stormy weather (2.1.81-117) mirrors the disruptive weather patterns of the mid-1590s. As in the play, this bad weather was widely regarded among the English populace as an ominous portent of political mischief in high places. Spring 1594 is the most often cited temporal correspondence to the play's description of foul weather, as in Chambers: "The bad weather described in 2.1.81-117 is probably that which began in March 1594, prevailed during the greater part of that year, and ushered in a long period of corn shortage" (1.360). Whether this extended passage about climate refers to the rain of March 1594, or to some other period of unstable conditions during the same decade, its symbolic significance should not be overlooked: "the abnormal weather of the time, which was causing alarm, is used [by the dramatist] as a veiled warning to the Queen that her obstinacy in the matter of the succession has angered the supernatural powers" (Rickert 65).

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A SUBSTANTIAL body of criticism supports the premise that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is an *Epithalamium*, a play composed for an aristocratic wedding in the mid-1590s, at which Queen Elizabeth may have been present. This theory dates as far back as the early nineteenth century. It had been endorsed in some form by most of the authorities surveyed in 1895 by Henry Howard Furness, who observed that “with our knowledge of the purposes for which Masques and dramatic entertainments were written, it is not improbable, from the final scene of the play, that this *Dream* was composed for the festivities of some marriage in high life” (259). Furness (247-267) notes three specific marriages proposed as venues for *Dream*, all during the 1590's: the 1590 marriage of the Earl of Essex to Frances Sidney, the 1595 marriage of Elizabeth Vere to William Stanley, and the 1598 marriage of the Earl of Southampton to Elizabeth Vernon.

The aristocratic marriage theory also forms the linchpin of E.K. Chambers' influential 1935 study of the play's chronology: “The hymeneal character of the theme has led to the reasonable conjecture that the play was given at a noble wedding” (1.358). To Furness's list of marriages which satisfy the criteria for the play's performance debut, Chambers adds three more possible venues: the May 2, 1594 marriage of Sir Thomas Heneage and the dowager Countess of Southampton, the February 19, 1596 marriage of Thomas Berkeley to Elizabeth Carey at Blackfriars, and the June 16, 1600 marriage of Henry Lord Herbert to Anne Russell at Blackfriars.

Such “occasionalist” premises came under fire during the post-WW II period from critics like Stanley Wells, whose 1967 New Penguin edition asserted that “those who hold this theory patronize the play as an ‘occasional’ piece, commissioned for an audience of special taste” (12). More recently, under the influence of new historicist and postmodernist perspectives, interest in occasionalist readings has revived, as David Wiles observes: To today's critics the idea that one can isolate text from context “seems to have become steadily less tenable” (x).

If *Dream* is an occasionalist play written for performance at an aristocratic marriage, it should, in theory, be possible to determine the specific wedding in question, and scholars have not been shy about proposing various candidates. Citing Chambers as authority, proponents of the Oxfordian school have sometimes argued that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written for performance at the January 26, 1595 wedding of Elizabeth Vere and William Stanley, who shortly became the sixth Earl of Derby. According to the Ogburn seniors, although the play was originally written much earlier, “it was adapted for this gala event, for the wedding festivities of a new Hippolyta and Theseus” (981). Ogburn Jr. is more circumspect, noting only that “one tradition has it that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed for the occasion” (731), and Anderson most recently suggests that the play “was probably performed” (287) at the Stanley-Vere wedding.

Two obvious objections might be cited against the theory that the play was composed for this occasion. In the first place, the play clearly celebrates the rites of spring and so seems poorly suited to a January wedding. A second objection concerns the age of the play's wedding celebrants. The senior Ogburns refer to the Vere-Stanley wedding couple as “a new Hippolyta and Theseus”—yet these two characters, quite unlike Vere (b. 1576) and Stanley (b. 1561), are age-mates of Egeus, a man with a sexually mature daughter who, even by Elizabethan standards, must have seemed at least 35 years of age, and more likely much older.

In his recent detailed study (1993), Wiles examines several possible performance venues before setting forth a detailed argument, based on a close reading of the play's astronomical imagery, that it was written for the February 19, 1596 Carey-Berkeley wedding, for which, Wiles argues convincingly, the astronomical conditions precisely fit the prevailing circumstances of the play. More specifically, the three nights immediately preceding the wedding were a time of the "dark of the moon," intervening between the old and new lunar phases, to which the play makes reference. According to Wiles, on the night of the Carey-Berkeley wedding (February 29 in the Julian calendar) the new moon, "like to a silver bow," in conjunction with Venus, rose in the western sky for a few brief moments just at dusk before following the sun in its descent below the horizon.

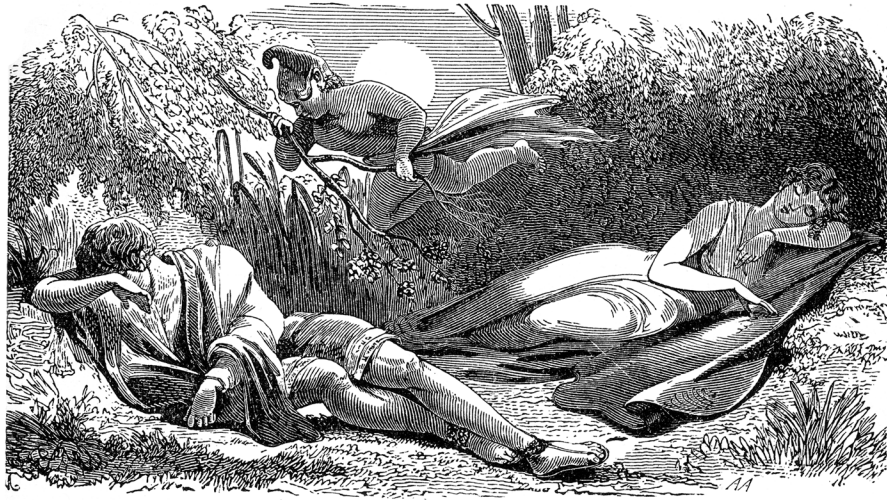
ALTHOUGH Wiles's analysis is impressive to anyone seeking a congruence between the play's astronomical imagery and a specific performance date, internal evidence of another kind supports a different elite marriage venue. An allegorical fit between text and context requires a wedding that took place during the spring and involved a mature couple with children of their own old enough to form conceivable prototypes for play's youthful cohort. Although neither of these circumstances applies to the Carey-Berkeley wedding of February 1596, they both fit another wedding identified as a possible venue by both Chambers and Furness.

On May 2, 1594 Sir Thomas Heneage, then Vice Chamberlain of her Majesty's Household (Ward 37) and approximately sixty-two years of age—like the play's Duke Theseus, a man no longer in his prime—married the dowager widow of the second Earl of Southampton, Mary Browne (1552-1607). Like Theseus and Hippolyta in the play, this was a mature couple, each with grown children of their own (Heneage would live for only a year-and-a-half following the wedding).

Several orthodox scholars concur with this line of reasoning. A.L. Rowse compares Theseus, "a grave and reverend personage, [and] a governmental figure" to Heneage (87). To Charlotte Stopes, in her biography of the third Earl of Southampton, this marriage is the most likely occasion for the play's performance: "The stately central figures of Theseus and Hippolyta harmonized with the representation of the Bridegroom and the Bride . . ." (75). Anderson, in a recent consideration of the play's performance venue, agrees that "several references in the play suggest that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had its world premiere on the night before the marriage of Sir Thomas Heneage and Mary Browne Wriothesley" (276).

One conspicuous advantage of this theory, recognized by Anderson (276, 287-88), is that if the characters of Theseus and Hippolyta form an allegorical pattern representing Heneage and Brown, then the Greenworld lovers correspond to a younger cohort whose marriage arrangements were a subject of great public speculation and controversy during the mid-1590's and hence a fit topic for dramatization. These included Brown's son, the third Earl of Southampton (1573-1625), the playwright William Stanley (1561-1642), Elizabeth Vere (1575-1627), and ultimately Elizabeth Vernon, who in 1598 married the young Southampton. This cast of characters forms an intriguing fit with the four young lovers of the play. In the early 1590s an engagement between Southampton and Vere was widely bruited about the Court, but in 1595 Vere instead married Stanley.

While neither the Vere-Stanley nor the Carey-Berkeley weddings fit these circumstances so



well as the Brown-Heneage wedding does, for reasons of chronology the theory has received scant attention since its first articulation in 1935. Harold F. Brooks, developing the argument of E.K. Chambers and Peter Alexander, argues for a *terminus a quo* based on the motif in the mechanical's scene, in which discussion ensues over the advisability of bringing a lion on stage for fear of frightening the ladies. This passage, argues Brooks, parodies an event that took place at the August 30, 1594 baptism of Henry Stuart, at which a plan to bring in the prince in a chariot drawn by a lion was rejected because "his presence might have brought some fear to the nearest" (cited in Brooks xxxiv). Concludes Brooks, "It is highly probable that when he wrote the *Dream* Shakespeare knew of [this episode]. . . . The Scottish lion-incident may reasonably be reckoned among Shakespeare's sources of inspiration for this artisan-plot" (xxxiv-xxxv). If so, the Heneage-Brown wedding, which happened in the spring before the baptism of the Scottish Prince, is "just too early" (Brooks lv) by almost four months.

This "highly probable" conclusion is, however, contradicted by comparative evidence, available to Furness in 1895 but unaccountably passed over in silence by Brooks and the tradition on which his conviction is based: Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), a well-acknowledged source for the play, includes prominent reference to the lion motif:

It is a common saeing: a Lion feareth no bugs. But in our childhood our mothers maids have so terrified us with an ouglie divell having hornes on his head....and a voice roaring like a lion, whereby we start and are afraid when we heare one crie 'Bough'" (in Furness 289).

This evidence casts serious doubt on the notion that the Prince Charles baptism incident has any utility for establishing the play's *terminus a quo*.

A BALANCED consideration of the relevant evidence suggests the great likelihood that the extant text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a revised palimpsest containing at least two strata of composition, one from the early 1580s as Eva Turner Clark argues, and another from the mid-1590s as argued by orthodox authorities. The rewriting of materials originally contrived to parody the international courtship of Elizabeth I by the duc d'Alençon produced a play suitable for an aristocratic wedding of the 1590s, and the prominence of the play's particularized lunar symbolism suggests that the author may well have had a particular wedding in mind. Although Wiles makes a strong case for the Berkeley-Carey wedding, the present writer urges that the Heneage-Brown wedding deserves further scrutiny.

Whatever the final word on the play's first performance venue—and there is, I believe, much more to be said on this subject—the total effect of the evidence definitely suggests a play that assumed its final form only in the mid-1590s. In no way need this observation contradict the author's allegedly intimate awareness of events long past and already settled as matters of public policy. If the d'Alençon subtext is in itself insufficient to overturn the orthodox chronology, it still warrants serious consideration by students of the text's history and historical significations; if topical evidence suggests a final date of the composition in the 1590s, the same evidence also reveals an author whose chronological frame of reference stretches back to 1581 or earlier, and whose topical preoccupations included a closely-veiled comic commentary on the one of the more explosive issues of the reign: the intersection of the private life and courtships of Elizabeth I and matters of public policy and authority. So often do the Queen, her courtship, and the matter of the succession appear in the critical literature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that it is difficult to avoid concluding that the play constitutes, on one level, a sly commentary on the sexual politics of the Elizabethan era. Consideration of the most probable venue of the play's first performance as a mature work during the 1590s strengthens this impression.

While such a temporal context and symbolic focus do not in themselves disprove orthodox views of authorship, they should cause apologists for the Stratfordian view to pause before determining that the chronology of the plays disproves Oxford's alleged authorship. _____ 🍷

End notes

1 A tradition recorded by Furness (247) of a lost 1595 quarto of “A moste pleasaunte comedie, called A Midsummer Night’s Dream, with the freakes of the fairies,” is no longer given much credence.

2 See also Richard Levin’s influential 1972 polemic against any “occasionalist” interpretations of Shakespearean plays, a work which Wiles describes as “mounting a vigorous rearguard action on behalf of the idea that common sense is timeless and the artistic text autonomous” (x).

3 Surprisingly, this contradiction has not to my knowledge been previously considered by students of the play’s chronology.



1936 poster for a Netherlands
production of *Dreame*

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