A Midsummer Night’s Dream

A Midsummer Night’s Dream can be dated between the mid-1580s, when all the major sources were available and 1598, when it was named by Meres.

Publication Date

This play was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 8 October 1600 by Thomas Fisher:


It was published by Fisher shortly afterwards.

[Q1, 1600] A midsommer nights dreame. As it hath beene sundry times publickely acted, by the Right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants. Written by William Shakespeare.

Imprinted at London,: [By Richard Bradock] for Thomas Fisher, and are to be soulde at his shoppe, at the Signe of the White Hart, in Fleetestreete, 1600.

A Second Quarto, with minor errors but substantially the same, is dated 1600 on the title page but is usually taken to be 1619 as it uses the same printer’s device that Jagger was using in that year:

[Q2, 1619] A midsommer nights dreame. As it hath beene sundry times publickely acted, by the Right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants. Written by William Shakespeare.

[London]; Printed by James Roberts [i.e. William Jaggard for T. Pavier], 1600 [i.e. 1619].

Q2 is the basis of the First Folio version of 1623, where it occupies the eighth position, after Love’s Labour’s Lost and before The Merchant of Venice.

Performance Date

The 1600 title-page claims that the play “hath been sundry times publickely acted” by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and Meres mentions the play in 1598. The only recorded early performance was at Court on 1 January 1604/05: “On New yeares night we had a play of Robin goodefellow”, as recorded by Dudley Carleton a fortnight later. However, most scholars believe that the first performance took place at one of two aristocratic weddings attended by Queen Elizabeth – a view reliant on indications in the text rather than on proof. David Wiles has added another wedding as a possible occasion for the play:

(a) Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland to Dorothy Devereux, Widow of Sir Thomas Perrot and sister of the Earl of Essex, in late 1594;
(b) William Stanley, 6th Earl of Derby, to Elizabeth Vere, daughter of the 17th Earl of Oxford and granddaughter of Lord Burghley on 26 January 1595;
(c) Lord Berkeley’s son, Thomas, to Elizabeth Carey, granddaughter of the Queen’s Lord Chamberlain, Henry Carey (who was her cousin) on 19 February 1596.

All the brides were goddaughters of the Queen. Chambers thinks both (b) and (c) are possible and leans towards the Stanley–Vere wedding in January 1595. Wiles considers the Percy–
Devereux wedding (no actual date is known, but it was probably mid-November, 1594) as there are references to astrological phases and Percy was known to be interested in such matters. Foakes inclines towards the Berkeley–Carey wedding because of the connection with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (named on the title page). Other weddings which have been considered include the Countess of Southampton’s with Sir Thomas Heneage on 2 May 1594 and Lady Frances Sidney’s with the Earl of Essex in 1590.

Not all editors accept the play as an epithalium. Peter Holland (1995: 112) was very dismissive of this hypothesis:

The wedding occasion theory appeals to critics who like the concept of a site-specific play with fairies running through the noble house to bless the real wedding of members of the audience, and to those who wish to rescue the play from the clutches of the popular theatre audience. I fail to see the need to want either.

Holland’s view remains a minority opinion.

Sources

Bullough notes that, as with Love’s Labour’s Lost, there are no major literary sources for this play. The dramatist has used his own imaginative skills to draw together a variety of elements linked by the theme of love fulfilled in marriage, including several strands of folklore. Among the identified literary texts which undoubtedly contributed to the play are Chaucer’s The Knight’s Tale, The Tale of Sir Topas and The Merchant’s Tale (from The
Dating Shakespeare’s Plays: A Midsummer Night’s Dream

Chambers dated the play between 1594–96, tending towards a first performance at the Stanley–Vere wedding on 26 January 1595. Most commentators have concurred in placing the writing of the play in the middle years of the 1590s. Enid Welsford sees masque-like elements, supporting the idea of a play for an occasion such as a wedding. Cairncross proposes 1594 (before the month of May); Muir & Schoenbaum, Wells & Taylor and Peter Holland put the play in 1595, Halliday in 1596. Brooks is persuaded by the hypothesis that it was written in the winter of 1595–6 for the Berkeley/Carey wedding; Foakes agrees with Brooks but, like Wells & Taylor, is more cautious about the occasional nature of the play. Wiles is fully convinced that A Midsummer Night’s Dream was intended as an occasional play and prefers February 1596. Wiggins assigns this play to 1595.

Chambers (followed by most commentators) argues for an earliest date of 1594, due to the mechanics’ discussion (3.1. 27–42) of the advisability of bringing a lion on stage for fear of frightening the ladies. It is “highly probable”, claims Brooks, that this passage is based on an incident which occurred at the feast for the baptism of Prince Henry of Scotland on 30 August 1594. As King James dined, a chariot was drawn in by a blackamoor; he was a substitute for the real lion which had been intended, “because [the lion’s] presence might have brought some feare to the nearest”. There was an account of this episode in A True Reportarie, registered at the Stationers’ Office two months later on 24 October.

C. C. Stopes and A. L. Rowse, however, (among others) ignored the lion episode and argued that the play was written for the wedding of the Lord Treasurer, Sir Thomas Heneage, to the Dowager Countess of Southampton on 2 May 1594, then aged 60 and 41 respectively. There is some evidence to support the theory: Theseus and Hippolyta are a couple whose maturity contrasts with the younger lovers and is also emphasised by the image of the “dowager”, a term which appears twice in the first scene of the play:

**Theseus**  
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,  
Like to a step-dame or a dowager  
Long withering out a young man’s revenue. (1.1.4–6);

Later in the scene Lysander recalls that he has “a widow aunt, a dowager / Of great revenue” (157–8). ‘Dowager’ is a rare word in Shakespeare, occurring only five times in the entire canon (the other three are in Henry VIII). Although Cairncross reaches his proposed date (before May, 1594) by a very different path, it neatly coincides with the play’s production at this wedding. David Wiles has investigated various astrological references in the play, including the phases of the moon and the conjunction of the planets. He too agrees with a date of 1594–5 for one of the three aristocratic weddings at that time, inclining towards the Berkeley–Carey event on 19 February 1596.

Chambers and Brooks consider that the play
shares with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* a distinctive combination of lyricism and rhetoric, in strongly patterned language, which, for him, both characterises Shakespeare’s style in the mid-1590s and is “the decisive test”. Although Brooks also involves himself in lengthy discussion of the publication dates of several supposedly relevant texts, of foul weather between 1594 and 1596 (2.2.81–124), and of suggested references to the dead Robert Greene and Christopher Marlowe (who died in 1592 and 1593, respectively), he decides, in the end, that none of these possible parallels or apparently topical references provides specific, decisive evidence which can help to date the play. It is worth noting this further comment: “To recognise the *Dream* as substantially of one date does not involve denying all revision.”

**External Evidence**

Meres provides a completion date in his reference to the play in *Palladis Tamia* (1598) listing six comedies (to balance six histories) composed by Shakespeare:

> for Comedy, witness his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Loue labours lost, his Loue labours wonne, his midsummer night dream, & his Merchant of Venice.

**Oxfordian Date**

Most Oxfordians consider that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was composed by the mid 1580s. Clark suggests that its origins lie in a court masque of 1581, followed by a comedy of 1584, with later revision for performance in January 1595; Ogburn Srs propose 1583, identifying *A Pastorall of Phyllida and Choryn*, presented at Court in December 1584, as an early version; Hess et al., on stylistic grounds, place the writing of the play in 1584. The play, according to Oxfordian theory, was revised in the mid-1590s, with contributions from Lyly and Munday, who both worked for Oxford.

**Internal Oxfordian Evidence**

Clark argues that the play originated in a masque, first produced in 1581, or in a comedy first produced three years later:

> 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 Philynda and Choryn*.

Clark makes the connection with Titania’s words to Bottom (2.1.64–8):

> Then I must be thy lady; but I know When thou hast stol’n away from fairy land And in the shape of Corin, sat all day Playing on the pipes of corn, And versing love To amorous Phyllida.

Clark was also the first Shakespearean critic to contend that the play includes a parody of the well-known international courtship between Queen Elizabeth and the youngest son of Catherine de Medici, François (formerly Hercules), Duc d’Alençon. Sir Thomas Smith had first recommended the seventeen-year-old Valois prince as a husband for the Queen, in December 1571, and the courtship reached its culmination at the end of 1581. In June 1584, Alençon died of consumption.

According to this theory, Bottom the weaver is a political parody of the Duc d’Alençon, so the episode (3.1.114–193) in which Titania continues her love for Bottom despite his ass’s head is a thinly disguised satire on the infamous marriage negotiations between Elizabeth and Alençon. Bottom, in his ass’s head, soliloquizes about his situation (3.1.114–7):

> 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 [emphasis added].

This speech is very reminiscent of Alençon’s refusal to leave England at the end of 1581. Although Elizabeth’s terms were (as she intended) impossible to accept, Alençon played her at her own game, declaring that he loved her too much to leave her and that he would accept her conditions. Now Elizabeth panicked and by the beginning of February 1582 she had offered him sufficient inducements (funding for his proposed Netherlands campaign as Duke of Brabant) for him to leave England with honour – and to their
mutual relief! Clark finds an echo of Bottom’s situation in Alençon’s:

[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.¹

We find nothing in Hume about Alençon’s singing, but there is no denying the aptness of the dramatist’s words to the circumstances narrated in Hume.

A mere eighteen lines in a later scene (4.1.7–24) strongly reinforce Clark’s theory. Here Bottom uses the French honorific ‘monsieur’ eleven times, in addressing his attendant fairies; there is a six-fold iteration of the term within one speech of only eight lines. Clark suggests that this can be only 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’ (16) suggests Alençon’s demand for money … of which Elizabeth gave him large sums at different times.

Clark appears to have been unaware of the even more significant fact that ‘Monsieur’ was also the honorific bestowed upon the younger brother of a king of France, who was heir to the throne; since Alençon was exactly that, we seem to have, in the play, a very precise and pointed reference to him.² Brock reminds us that Alençon “came to be known in England by the nickname ‘Monsieur’, from the Queen’s habit of calling him that.” It was, of course, a title rather than a nickname; his well-known nickname was ‘Frog’.

Marion Taylor concurs with the view that the repetitions of ‘monsieur’ are significant and, furthermore, cites word-play such as:

**Bottom**

I will discharge it in either your straw-colour beard, your orange-tawny beard, your purple-in-grain beard, or your French-crown-colour beard, your perfect yellow.

**Quince**

Some of your French crowns have no hair at all, and then you will play bare-faced.

(1.2.86–91)

Marion Taylor suggests that, if Bottom is a parody of Alençon, who was ‘heir’ presumptive to the French throne, so he could hope to wear the ‘French crown’ and if Elizabeth was thought to have outwitted him, then he would be left ‘bare-faced’. The Alençon references and parodies strongly support the case for a first version of the play in the early 1580s, when a court audience had recently enjoyed first-hand experience of the marriage negotiations. It is true that Spenser parodied the negotiations later in the decade in The Fairie Queene (published in 1591), so they must have resonated in the court memory for a while afterwards. But it is difficult to believe that a playwright would freshly revive such topical details, with full comic effect, some fifteen years later in the mid 1590s.

The incident of the ‘Scottish lion’ by no means precludes a much earlier date of composition for the bulk of the play; this trivial episode happily offered a topical piece of comedy, ideal for later inclusion in the mechanicals’ farcical production of ‘Pyramus and Thisbe’. Fear of a lion’s roar was not new, as in 1584 it was mentioned in Scot’s The Discoverie of Witchcraft.

Brooks supports C. L. Barber’s observation that, like Love’s Labour’s Lost, this play derives its construction in part from Lyly’s plan of relating to a central subject a succession of episodes enacted by self-contained groups. Both plays reflect a response to Lyly’s court drama which it would be reasonable to describe as “aristocratic rather than popular”, he asserts. But there is an alternative explanation: as Lyly’s court dramas date from the 1580s, it is, surely, equally reasonable to attribute the similarities to a style popular at the same period of writing. Nelson (238–9) has described how John Lyly was a close associate of Oxford in the 1580s.

It has often been claimed that Oberon’s speech to Puck recalls the magnificent pageants staged at Kenilworth in 1575 by the Earl of Leicester, apparently in a last effort to woo Elizabeth:

My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou rememberest
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin’s back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath
That the rude sea grew civil at her song
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
To hear the sea-maid’s music . . . (2.1.148–164)

Although it is very unlikely that the youthful William Shakespeare could actually have witnessed this spectacle (and Oxford was abroad at the time), it is possible that the dramatist could have heard about the events either through hearsay or through the written account of Robert Laneham. If Oberon’s speech does recall the Kenilworth spectacle, it would be more likely to support an earlier date in the late 1570s or early 1580s than in the mid 1590s.

External Oxfordian Evidence

Anderson (287–8) believes that the play was written (or perhaps revised) for the Stanley–Vere wedding in January 1595. Both the father of the bride, the Earl of Oxford, and the groom, the Earl of Derby, were notable courtly playwrights.

Conclusion

A Midsummer Night’s Dream can be dated between the mid-1580s, when all the major sources were available, and 1598, when it was named by Meres. There is no direct evidence to date A Midsummer Night’s Dream and it is most likely that the play originated in the early 1580s as it seems to allude to the Duc d’Alençon. It may have been extensively revised in the mid-1590s as an epithalamium for one of the aristocratic weddings at that time.

Notes

I would like to thank Dr Roger Stritmatter of the Coppin State University, Baltimore, Maryland, for allowing me to draw extensively in his related article in The Oxfordian.


2. The Encyclopaedia Britannica reports (under Monsieur): “As an honorific title in the French royal court, it came to be used to refer to or address the eldest living brother of the king. The title Monsieur, without an adjoining proper name, was most notably first applied to Henry III’s brother, François, duc d’Alençon, who by the Peace of Chastenoy (1576), popularly called the ‘Peace of Monsieur’ became the duc d’Anjou.” The Cambridge Modern History, vol 3 ‘The Wars of Religion’ (1904: 30) also reports: “In 1576, Alençon pressured his brother King Henry III of France into signing the Edict of Beaulieu. The resulting peace became popularly known as the Peace of Monsieur.” In The Merchant of Venice, Portia describes (1.2.54–62) the “French monsieur” in very unflattering terms. See chapter 9 for the identification of Portia’s French suitor with Alençon.

3. Robert Laneham’s [also known as Langham] A letter whearin part of the entertainment vntoo the Queenz Maiesty at Killuswoorth Castl in Warwik sheer in this summerz progress (1575, reprinted 1821). There is a modern account by Ronald Binns, Elizabeth, Shakespeare and the Castle (2008), mixing history and speculation. Helen Hackett, Shakespeare and Elizabeth (2009: 119–124) believes that, while the Kenilworth pageants were recalled by Oberon, it is more likely that William Shakespeare read about them than that he actually witnessed them.

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