

**AN ESSAY ON THE DATE, PLOT
AND SOURCES OF SHAKESPERE'S
"A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S
DREAM". PART I. ON THE DATE**

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An essay on the date, plot and sources of Shakespere's "A midsummer night's Dream". Part I. On the date by G. Finkenbrink

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Shakspeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Part I. On the Date.

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By

DR. FINKENBRINK.

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Madd...

"A Midsummer Night's Dream" has always been considered one of the brightest flowers which adorn the brow of the immortal "Sweet Swan of Avon." It is, indeed, the most lovely creation that was ever produced by the genius of a youthful poet, and neither before, nor after him, neither in his own country, nor on this side the ocean, has a member of the numerous brotherhood of poets called so imaginative a work into existence. Neither has the great dramatist himself conceived any other play where the wonderful world of fairies appears so delightful and brilliant to our charmed eyes. It is true Shakspeare has written many other dramas in which elves, fairies, and other supernatural beings play an important part, as in Hamlet, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor etc. "The Tempest" especially displays a rich web of the actions of spirits, but they are subordinate to human interest, whereas we here find the purest, the most complete, and comprehensive image of the fairy world, the most charming description of their delicate figures, their airy vesture, and favourite nourishment, the objects of their love and hate, and all their kindly and roguish ways. Even this may be the chief reason why "A. M. N. Dream" is most performed on German stages (in the year 1881/82 a hundred times), and why it has always exercised so great an attraction upon literary Germany; and, in fact, our nation ought to be thankful to the great English bard for having vivified anew the memory of this part of our mythology, and saved many touches from everlasting oblivion.

This very peculiarity of the play, however, has piqued the sagacity of the learned on both sides of the German ocean, and the more this was the case, the less it was compared with other comedies. For it is a poetical work of free and unfettered fancy, and the poet himself wishes it to be regarded as such, giving it the name "A Dream"; and as a dream is quite different in different brains, so the dreamlike imageries of the play will ever give occasion for different critical inquiries. In examining into the date, plot, and sources of this interesting comedy, we shall, at least partly, touch on the most debated questions.

At all periods when the study of Shakspeare was in vogue, there were keen and diligent scholars who endeavoured to ascertain the time at which "A. M. N. Dream" was composed. Towards the close of the eighteenth, and the beginning of our present century, when the philological and critical study of Shakspeare's works was flourishing, it was Malone, Chalmers, Drake; at the time when, in Germany, the Romantic school opened their countrymen the literary treasures of foreign nations, Schlegel and Tieck; when the English Shakspeare Society was founded, Halliwell, Gervinus, Kreyssig, Schoell, Ulrici; some twenty years after, principally incited by the German Shakspeare Society, Elza, Schmidt, Kurtz (Massey), and by the New Sh. Society (1874), Furnivall, Fleay, Ingram (Spedding, Wright) etc. But notwithstanding the most diligent inquiries, and ingenious conjectures, this question has not conclusively

been answered, but remains up to the present day to a great extent a matter of controversy among Shaksperian scholars. So much, however, has been attained, that now by the great majority of critics the year 1594 is considered the most probable of all. To strengthen this probability, for want of truly historical evidence, is the object of this discussion. We shall first take a negative way, trying to refute contradictory opinions, and then a positive one, advancing some arguments additional to those given by other scholars.

I. Both the Conjectures about 1590 and 1598 (1597)

Rejected.

It is known that the opinions about the date fluctuate between 1590 and 1598. These extreme dates are, for the most part, assumed by such critics as contend "the M. N. Dream" to be a mask, an occasional poem for the marriage of a princely personage, one of the poet's greatest favourites, either of Lord Southampton, or Lord Essex.

Chalmers, too, although he was far from this conjecture, placed the composition of the comedy very late, in the early part of 1597¹. But his evidence is founded on matters too trifling, or on such as prove nothing at all.²

Also Ulrici³ was by internal evidence induced to regard the year 1597 as the birthyear of the play, as it, on the whole, evidently agreed with the works of the third, or with the last of the second period. We must here desist from refuting him, because, in the course of our discussion we intend to give the play quite a different place, principally for internal reasons.

The former opinion that "the M. N. Dream" was written for Lord Southampton's nuptials, first presumed by Tieck, and afterwards adopted by Kreyssig, and Massey was justly refuted as too late by Schmidt, Wright, Dowden, Genée, and others. For that nobleman's marriage took place in 1598, in the same year when Francis Meres, in his "Paladis Tamia", enumerates A. M. N. Dream already among the wellknown comedies of the poet.

Gervinus, too, is brought together with Tieck⁴, but he leaves it doubtful when, and for whose marriage, the play was composed⁵. As to its nature, he expresses himself more strongly, calling it a mask, a sort of occasional drama, especially relying on the allegorical elements which he thinks he finds in it.

But where, we ask, are these allegorical things? For aught we know, there is only the pretended allegory in the speech of Oberon (Act II, sc. 2) forced-in by Halpin's ingenious, but too subtle interpretation⁶ which Gervinus praises beyond measure, and "in spite of the dry critique" attributes almost the same importance that it acquired with the partisans of the Essex hypothesis.

Kreyssig⁷ became the strongest believer in Tieck's conjecture. In his opinion we are by Puck's nice congratulation (Act V sc. 1, end) expressly told that we have before us one of such dramatic plays as were, at the time, necessary at the feasts of noble houses. In the same year (1598) Southampton, Shakspeare's intimate friend, and princely patron, had celebrated his nuptials, and there were, therefore, reasons enough of probability for Tieck's supposition that the play was destined to grace that festival.

¹) Supplemental Apology, p. 359—370.

²) Wright, Shakspeare's A. M. N. Dream, Oxford, 1880, Preface VIII.

³) Ulrici, Shakspeare's dram. Kunst, 1847, p. 537—38.

⁴) Shakspeare's dram. Werke, Berlin 1868, Bd. IV. Ein Sommernachtstraum, eingeleitet von A. Schmidt, p. 329.

⁵) Gervinus, Shakspeare, 3. Aufl. Leipzig 1862, p. 236—37.

⁶) Halpin, Oberon's Vision, London 1843, p. 240—45.

⁷) Vorlesungen über Shakspeare, s. Zeit und s. Werke. Berlin, 1860, Bd. 3, p. 81 ff.

The majority of English critics, he continues, had indeed put its composition about three or four years before, but, however that might be, its early composition, and the occasion for which it had been written, was above doubt. But what is to be made of his deduction? To all appearance, there is a contradiction. For if the play was written for Southampton's marriage, its composition is not early; if it was made three or four years before, it could not be for that festival. Or does Kreyssig, in spite of Fr. Meres's clear statement, intend to make it probable that it was written in 1594 or 95, and laid aside till 1598? On the other hand, embracing¹ Halpin's conjecture Kreyssig seems to side with the defenders of the Essex hypothesis, and thus, at the same time, incline to believe that it was written for this Lord's marriage.

The last who broke a lance for the Southampton hypothesis was G. Massey². He begins, "And I believe that to the jealousy of Elis. Vernon, as portrayed in the Sonnets, we owe one of the loveliest conceptions that ever sprang on wings of splendour from the brain of man, the "Midsummer Night's Dream." Then he asserts Helena and Hermia to be the representatives of Elis. Vernon and Lady Rich, and one of the two lovers (which, we are not told) that of Southampton; that as in the Sonnets two ladies woo one man, so in the play, two men were induced to love one lady; that this was brought about by the juice of the "little western flower", by the virtue of which the two men who at first had loved Hermia, suddenly doted on Helena. Massey endeavours to prove his assertion in the following manner. Helena chided in the same language as the lady of the Sonnets,

"Fie Demestrius!

Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex;
We cannot fight for love as men may do;
We should be wooed, and were not made to woo."

In the sonnets, Lady Rich was called the "gentle thief"; here it was quite the same, the part being only reversed,

"O me! You juggler! you canker-worm!
You thief of love! What! have you come by night,
And stolen my Love's heart from him."

Then "many touches" tended to show that Hermia was Lady Rich, and Helena, Elis. Vernon. The complexion was hinted at by the words "raven," and "tawny Tartar." The eyes of "Stella" (Lady Rich) were distinguishable in the "sphery eyne". In these lines, too,

"Happy is Hermia, wheresoever she lies;
For she has blessed and attractive eyes;
How come her eyes so bright? Not with salt tears:
If so, my eyes are oftener washed than hers."

Then, in the "brow of Egypt."

Also the difference in character and height of person agreed, Helena being the taller, but more timid, Hermia "fierce for her size." Moreover, there was another similar allusion to the eyes; in the 38th sonnet Elis. Vernon was addressed,

"I tell the Day, to please him thou art bright,
And dost him grace when clouds do blot the heaven;
So flatter I the swart-complexioned Night;
When sparkling stars tire not, thou gild'st the even."

In the drama,

"Fair Helena, who more engilds the Night,
Than all the fiery oes and eyes of light;"

¹) Kreyssig, l. c. p. 91—93.

²) Shakspeare's Sonnets, London 1866, p. 473 ff.

Again, there was a resemblance in the words, sonnet 109,
 "As easy night I from myself depart,
 As from my soul, which in thy breast does lie:
 That is my home of love: If I have ranged
 Like him that travels, I return again."

And in those of Demetrius in the drama,
 "Lysander keep thy Hermia. I will none:
 If e'er I loved her, all that love is gone.
 My heart to her but as guest-wise sojourned,
 And now to Helen it is home returned,
 There to remain."

Lastly the beautiful passage,
 "O, is it all forgot?"

All school-days' friendship, childhood innocence?" etc.
 exhibited a perfect portrait of their early and intimate acquaintance.

With respect to Massey's first assumption that Shakspeare intended to show how two men were prompted to woo one lady, we start the question, "Why then does he take pains to introduce Oberon, Titania, and all the figures of the fairy-world in order to bring about what the first scene already offered him, where Hermia is courted at once by Lysander and Demetrius?" Nor does the poet stand in need of the juice "on the lovers eyes," since Hermia had exercised her charms so well as to allure both the young men.

Again, we ask, "Where is the person in life that represents the second lover?" Where there all suits so exactly, there must be no void! And, "Which of the two lovers is Southampton, Lysander or Demetrius?" In the play, the latter is the perfidious lover, and we should believe that he suits the part of Southampton best; it is also affirmed,¹ "The juice of "love-in-idleness" has been dropped into Southampton's eyes, and in the play its enchantment has to be counteracted." But the charm is not dispelled from Demetrius' eyes, and he remains in love with Helena. The juice of the little flower, "love-in-idleness", therefore, is useful to him instead of hurting him. The undoing of the charm has place with Lysander, that is, the bad effect of that juice is taken from his eyes. Now, Massey says, "The mother of Lady Rich is typified as the flower called "Love-in-idleness". And the daughter was like the mother. She, too, was a genuine "light-o'-love", and possessed the qualities attributed to the "little western flower" — the vicious virtue of its juice," etc. And yet Lysander becomes the husband of this second "little flower", whereas we are to expect that he should get rid of her.

Moreover the "touches" are neither numerous, nor very striking. With respect to those invectives we are of opinion that, at all times, forsaken maids have almost in the same expressions abused their perfidious lovers as well as youths that rival each other; that repentant lovers have always with similar promises and oaths returned to their ladies; that the lovely description of intimate friendship suits for any pair of friends you please, and not only for Elia, Vernon and Lady Rich.

Finally what poetic lover has not compared his sweet-heart's eyes with the stars that gild the dark night? This pretty comparison has long ago become a common place in erotic poems.

Again, all the corporal resemblance consists in the black eyes and brow, and in the dark complexion common to Hermia and Lady Rich, and the taller stature common to Helena and Elia, Vernon. Massey did not attempt to show that the lady in the Sonnets was, like Hermia, of very small stature, and yet, in the play, this is one of the most important points. She is called so again and again

¹) Massey, l. c. p. 479.

(Act III, sc. 2) "pupped", "so dwarfish and low" — "a something lower than myself", "little again! nothing but low and little!" "dwarf", "you bead, you acorn!" and so on.

Then, it is known that Penelope Rich was of a wonderful, seducing beauty effected by the strange and very rare incident of being fair-haired and black-eyed. Sidney, her unhappy lover, describes her as having "black eyes," and "golden hair", and Spenser in his *Astrophel* sings,

"Her yellow hair that shone so bright and long,
As sunny beams in fairest summer's day."

Why, then, did the poet totally forget this peculiarity of hers, whereby he could have identified the two ladies with one single word?

The whole likeness of character is confined to the "tawny Tartar", and "fierce for her size," attributes of *Hermia*, and the timidity of *Helena*, by which qualities they are deemed to resemble those rival ladies in life. Yet, doubtless, the poet could not make both of them quite congenial; but by the parts they perform directly in the beginning, he was forced to give them a certain difference of character. And what was more natural than to shape their outward appearance according to it, to bestow an Anglo-Saxon stature, form, and hair upon the meek, humble, and retiring lady, and the French features, eyes, brow etc. upon the fierce and courageous one? Thus, however, he described two ladies either of whom, as being the archetype of a whole race, equalled, no doubt, many English ladies, and not the sole *Elis. Vernon* and *Lady Rich*. Moreover, adopting *Halpin's* interpretation, *Massey* pretends that he had "conclusively shown the "little western flower" to be the representative of *Lettice Knollys*,¹ and, then, explains how important it was that the poet introduced this flower, but at length parts company with him, because "*Dian's bud*" represented *Elis. Vernon*, and not *Queen Elisabeth*. But what does he not demand by *Halpin's*, and his own comment of our imagination! Who firstly will attach credit to his words,² "Shakespeare is treating *Puck* for the moment, as a personification of his own boyhood etc.; so that he was then present, and saw the sights and all the outer realities of the pageant (at *Kenilworth*). But the boy of eleven could not see what *Oberon* saw, the matrimonial mysteries of *Leicester*," etc. And further to the interpretation itself; first the "little western flower" means *L. Knollys*; immediately after, the allegory ceases; it is a real flower again, that is fetched by *Puck*, and the juice of which is dropped on *Lysander's*, *Demetrius'*, and *Titania's* eyes; soon after, there is anew a bit of allegory; for its juice depicts the bad character which *Hermia* (*Lady Rich*) possesses by inheritance from her mother. And, at last, allegory is in full vigour: "*Dian's bud*, the other herb" represents *Elis. Vernon*, and is to counteract the enchantment by her virtue, purity, and true love. But was, then, this fair lady such a paragon of virtue and chastity? Most probably we must answer in the negative, for on the 10th of February 1598, he (*Southampton*) left "behind him a most desolate gentlewoman, that almost wept out her fairest eyes." — This love-affair had begun in 1595.

Finally the passage³, "I do not doubt that this dainty drama was written with the view of celebrating the marriage of *Southampton* and *Elis. Vernon*", obviously clashes with the note,⁴ "Perhaps it was one of the Plays presented before *Mr. Secretary Cecil* and *Lord Southampton*, when they were leaving *London* for *Paris* in *January 1590*, at which time as *Rowland White* relates, the *Earl's* marriage was secretly talked of." For, in the former passage, he is sure that the play was written for the marriage, whereas, almost in the same breath, he supposes that it had already been performed on another occasion. We will not take into account that the comedy, when repeated at the nuptials, had lost all the charm of novelty. The reason, too, for laying it aside, viz. to avoid the *Queen's* displeasure, existed

¹) *Massey*, l. c. p. 477—80.

²) *Massey*, l. c. p. 477, note.

³) *Massey*, l. c. p. 481.

⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 481, note.

in 1598 as well as in 1595. Why, then, defer the performance for so long a time?"¹ Upon the whole, all the reasons advanced to support this hypothesis prove insufficient.

We go on to the Essex hypothesis, much younger, and less strongly defended. There are only two countrymen of ours, K. Elze, and Kurtz, who stood up for it. Elze², finding the date offered by Tieck, Massey etc., too late pretended that "the M. N. Dream" was composed for Lord Essex's marriage with Lady Frances Sidney. As this had taken place in 1590, the comedy must needs have been written in 1589, or early in 1590. Elze first appeals to several commentators, but all of them, Cunningham Schlegel, Malone, Drake, affirm only that it was one of the poet's earliest comedies, none of them goes so far as to lay it in 1590, and make it his very earliest comedy. And, indeed, where is a sober critic to be found who asserts this excellent comedy to be as it were his apprentice work! There are so many excellencies³ in it that we are prevented from believing the poet had begun his career with it. Let us endeavour to reject the main arguments of Elze's.

First it is stated by nothing that Lord Essex was so intimate a friend, and patron of Shakspeare that his marriage could not but be graced by him with a particular play. Nor do we know anything about such a relation of the poet to the bride. Schmidt remarks well that Shakspeare was not of the wood from which a "poeta laureatus" like Ben Jonson might be cut.⁴ Then, some of the adversaries of this conjecture⁵ are right in advancing that Essex's like Southampton's marriage was secret, and caused the displeasure of the Maiden Queen. How, then, could it be that all the various preparations necessary for such a representation were secretly made, and kept secret by the actors, and all the persons occupied in the performance? Moreover, what enjoyment would the bride, and bride-groom, and their friends have had, while the poet, and the players would be alike fearful of losing the mighty Queen's favour? The imprudence and inconsideration of both the wedding-makers, and the poet appears almost infinite, and incredible!⁶

Again, the similar qualities offered by Elze, in order to effect a parallel between Essex and Theseus as a captain, a huntsman, a faithless lover are, indeed, so general as to suit any celebrated lord of the time. Mocking it Wright (Pref. XI.) adds well, "So there being a river at Monmouth, and a river in Macedon, the parallel is complete."

And the passage,

"But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,
Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love
To Theseus must be wedded" —

is, methinks — that parallel admitted — a little more than an exaggerated joke. Nor will anybody be persuaded that Essex on account of that flattery "in maiden meditation fancy face" etc., came off bluely, and did not incur so heavy a punishment as Southampton, and other disobedient favourites. And as to the adopting of Halpin's interpretation we confess with Schmidt, that the "western flower" was neither little (at least, if compared with Leicester) nor "milkwhite", when shot at, nor "idle in love." Besides Elze himself appears not to be quite convinced of the harmlessness of those allusions to the affairs in the Essex family. For he finds an excuse for them in the concluding lines,

"If we shadows have offended" etc.

Most excellent is Schmidt (p. 333—36) in rejecting Halpin's commentary defended by Elze, and we agree to all that he says about it, especially (p. 335) that we may with the same right follow the

¹) Wright, l. c. Preface X.

²) K. Elze, *Zun Sommernachtstraum*, Jahrbuch III, p. 150—174.

³) Drake, *Shakspeare and His Times*, Lond. 1817, II, "as to be perfectly without a rival in dramatic literature."

⁴) Schmidt, l. c. p. 330.

⁵) Schmidt, l. c. p. 332. Genée, *Sh.'s Leben und Werke*, 1874, p. 264.

⁶) Schmidt, l. c. p. 332.