

Towards Oxfordian Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays

By Kevin Gilvary

This essay is a development from the consideration of each play in *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*, (DSP) published in 2010 by the De Vere Society. The contributors to DSP examined the criteria for dating each of the 36 plays in the *First Folio* and four other plays. Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, (1550-1604) is thought by an increasing number of scholars to have written the works of Shakespeare. I would like to suggest the following outline of his career as a dramatist:

< 1575	romances and pastorals	aged up to 25
1576-83	comedies	aged 26-33
1583-89	histories	aged 33-39
1589-1604	tragedies	aged 39-54
1592-1604	revision	aged 42-54

It is not suggested that Oxford favoured one genre exclusively over others, but that the periods can be characterised by his chief output. According to this scheme, Oxford began writing plays at an early age and favoured romances, which in the contemporary meaning of the term involved love, separation and travel. In 1576, he returned from his trip to Italy and wrote sparkling comedies influenced both by the 'commedia erudita', scripted plays performed by and for aristocrats in the great houses, as well as the 'commedia dell'arte', plays based on scenarios and stock characters which were performed in the streets with clever improvisations. This period comes to a halt in 1583 when his best players are taken away and used to form the Queen's Men. During the next period up to and including the Spanish Armada, he was mainly

writing patriotic plays about English monarchs, good and bad. I suspect he was based at Cecil House where the *Chronicles* of Holinshed were being expanded. For these patriotic history plays, he receives his £1000 annual stipend. In the late 1580s, his propaganda is no longer needed, and he lapses into melancholy, writing a series of bitter tragedies. Eventually, he settles down to re-write his best plays, this time in a more literary fashion, for a reading audience. He is involved with this endeavour when death overtakes him in June 1604.

Establishing a Chronology

In *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*, (DSP), every effort was made to consult the arguments used by traditional scholars in the major editions. Most importantly, key source material such as Belleforest for *Hamlet* or Holinshed for the histories was always found to pre-date Oxford's death. In the case of *The Tempest*. It is surprising how different scholars' views on the dates of the plays and on the sources can be.

The starting point was the great series of studies by E. K. Chambers: *The Elizabethan Stage* (1923, 4v) and *William Shakespeare: a Study of Facts and Problems* (1930, 2v). From these works, it was possible to go back to the original documents and reconsider his dates and sequence. Chambers confirmed and established the "orthodox" date assigned to composition of the play. His arguments were restated and generally accepted by Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor in *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (1987). Greater differences were expressed by the editors of different plays in the following series: *The Arden Shakespeare* Second Series (1953 – 1982), *The Arden Shakespeare* Third Series (1995 – present), *The Oxford Shakespeare* (1982 – present), *The New Shakespeare* (CUP, 1921-1969) and the New Cambridge Shakespeare series (1990 – present). In some cases, the latest edition in the Arden3 series or in *The New Cambridge Shakespeare* has not yet been published. More recently, the information

in Chambers elsewhere has been gathered and augmented by Martin Wiggins et al. in *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue* (2011-18); the first four volumes cover up to 1602, the fifth from 1603-1608. Although it seems folly to assign each play precisely to one particular year, there is a huge amount to garner from these volumes.

In *DSP*, we argued that in the absence of firm evidence such as a signed manuscript, a contemporary letter or a journal entry, each play can only be dated within a range of years e.g. *Othello* 1584 – 1602. So we must proceed cautiously in assuming that because an Oxfordian dating of *Othello* favours 1584 that no other date is possible. Thus if and when an Oxfordian chronology is established, we use it as a working hypothesis – not as established fact.

In general, Oxfordians are keen to see various plays as the working out of the author's profound experiences. *Hamlet* especially, but also *Much ado about Nothing* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, deal with Oxford's ambivalent attitude towards his first wife Anne Cecil. An Oxfordian dating for *Othello* might well place it in 1584 when, filled with remorse, he was reconciled with her and acknowledged the Lady Elizabeth as his daughter. We should note however that these plays might well have been composed at a later stage in Oxford's life, when the author was able to reflect on key events in his life with a certain amount of detachment.

A different category of plays concern those with a distinct element of satire: Oxfordians also see various other plays as court satire, especially plays such as *Twelfth Night*, perceived as an attack on Philip Sidney and Christopher Hatton, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would appear to refer to Alençon's marriage proposals. Both plays can be dated to 1579-80, in the second category. The satire consists of a major portion of the play and applies to a situation and not just a casual, one-line allusion.

Early works: romances and pastorals (1562-1575)

I suggest that the young Edward de Vere began writing short pastorals and romance drama. In 1562, at the age of 12, his father died and he was removed from the rural environment of East Anglia and thrust into the centre of political power and intrigue as a royal ward in Cecil House. During this period, plays were much shorter than they were to become by the end of the century. To this period, we can assign the following plays *Troilus & Cressida* (a short form of the play involving the lovers and Pandarus), another play that was almost certainly separate when composed, *Agamemnon and Ulysses*, which was “Presented and Enacted before Her Majesty by the Earl of Oxenford his Boys on St. Johns Day [27 December 1584] at night in Greenwich.” The two plays were probably spliced together after Oxford’s death in 1604. We might also assign *The Most Wonderful and Pleasaunt History of Titus and Gisippus whereby is fully declared the figure of ‘perfect frendshyp,’ drawen into English metre* attributed to the otherwise unknown Edwarde Lewicke in 1562. “Lewicke” would thus appear to be a very early pseudonym for Oxford. The play was later adapted as *Two Gentlemen of Verona* probably during the next phase of creativity.

Return from the Continent: Italian Comedies (1576-1583)

In 1575-76, Edward de Vere travelled in Europe and stayed mainly in Venice. While returning to England, he was shipwrecked and captured by pirates. After his return, he refused to acknowledge his wife as it was rumoured that she had been unfaithful and that her daughter Elizabeth was not his. During this period, Oxford was a prominent member of court, gaining a reputation as a poet and as a dramatist, and challenging the ascendancy of the Leicester-Sidney clique. In 1580, he acquired an adult company of players, and a children’s company as well as musicians and acrobats. Oxford won the prize at a tournament at Westminster on

22 January 1581. His page's speech at the tournament, describing Oxford's appearance as the Knight of the Tree of the Sun, was published in 1592 in a pamphlet entitled *Plato, Axiochus*. In 1581, Oxford had an affair with Anne Vavasour, one of the Queen's Maids of Honour, who gave birth to a son. Both Oxford and Vavasour were imprisoned in the Tower, which was commuted to house arrest for a while. Oxford took part at an Accession Day tournament at Whitehall in November 1581 and the following month, after a five-year separation, he reconciled with his wife, Anne, through the ruse of a bed-trick, and he acknowledged the Lady Elizabeth as his daughter.

To this period, we can assign the following plays: *Titus and Gisippus* was "shoven at Whitehall on Shrovetmysdaie [19 February 1577] at night, enacted by the children of Pawles." The play involves elements of comedy (happy ending), romance (separation of lovers), and pastoral (escape to the forest). It was drawn ultimately from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (Day 10, novel 8) probably via translations into English in 1531. For the pastoral elements, the author also drew on Montemayor's *Diana* (published in Spanish in 1560 but not translated into French until 1578 or into English until 1598). The play is very similar to *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which was mentioned by Meres in 1598 but was not registered or published until 1623.

The Comedy of Errors is clearly based on Plautus' *Menaechmi* and Italian Comedy. On 1 January 1577, *The Historie of Error* was performed at Hampton Court by the Children of Paul's. There was another performance of a play called *The Night of Errors* in Grays Inn soon after Christmas 1594, and a play called *Errors* was performed at Court in 1604-

5. It was mentioned by Meres in 1598 but was not registered or published until 1623.

Another play with a similar outline plot to a Shakespeare play, *Cymbeline*, was performed by Sussex's Men at Richmond Palace on

Sunday 28 December 1578. No details about the plot of *The Cruelty of a Step-Mother* have survived, but it makes a fitting sub-title to *Cymbeline* in which Oxford's early life is mirrored: the protagonist sets off to Italy where he is persuaded by an apparent friend that his wife has been unfaithful. The innocent Imogen leaves court and settles in a remote part of Wales, steadfast to her distant husband. Thus, the play combines elements of pastoral and romance. *Cymbeline* was not registered or published until 1623.

The Taming of the Shrew may well have been performed before the court at Richmond on 1 January 1579 as *A Morrall of the Marriage of Mynde and Measure*. Both of Oxford's sisters were known to be difficult. His older half-sister, the Lady Katherine Vere (1538-1600) married Edward Lord Windsor. In 1563, Katherine attempted to gain Vere family lands by demanding that the ecclesiastical courts declare Edward illegitimate on the grounds that the sixteenth earl had entered into a bigamous marriage with Edward's mother. Her suit was not successful. In early 1578, his younger sister, the Lady Mary married Peregrine Bertie, later Lord Willoughby d'Eresby, and the early stages of the marriage were fraught with quarrels. The main action of *The Shrew* is set in Italy, and the plot is based on both Roman and Italian comedy, drawing on works by Plautus and Ariosto. *The Taming of a Shrew* was published in quarto in 1594 in a shorter version probably prepared for the public stage. A longer version appeared in the First Folio, 1623.

The situation of *Love's Labour's Lost* fits the political situation in Navarre (where the play is set) and Paris in the late 1570s. The French princess, Marguerite of Valois, accompanied by members of "l'esquadron volant" travelled to Nerac in Navarre amid great pageantry to reconcile herself with her husband Henri (later to become Henri IV of France). The author depicts this visit and also relied on material in La Primaudaye's *L'Academie Française* published in French in 1577. Oxford



had visited the French Court in 1575 and 1576 and knew both Charles II and Henri Prince of Navarre. *Love's Labour's Lost* was mentioned by Meres in 1598 when it appeared in quarto.

It seems very likely that *Twelfth Night* was presented at court at this time, satirising Sir Christopher Hatton in the character of Malvolio, who has pretensions towards his noble lady's hand in marriage. Oxford presents himself as Feste, the allowed fool, while Olivia's love affair with Viola/Cesario more than recalls Queen Elizabeth's fixation with the Duc de Simier, the ambassador for Alençon.

A Midsummer Night's Dream would also appear to satirise events from this time. Titania is obviously the Queen who falls in love with a fool, Bottom. Now Bottom is frequently called "Monsieur" by the attendant fairies for no apparent reason, except that Alençon's form of address, as heir to the French throne, was Monsieur.

It is likely that *All's Well that Ends Well* dates to this period, in which a young noble is forced to accept the hand of a common person at the command of the monarch. The young nobleman acquiesces at first but soon leaves for a trip to Italy, while his young wife remains faithful to him. Eventually, they are reconciled by means of a bed trick. The parallels between the plot of the play and the early married life of Oxford are very close. *All's Well* was not registered or published until 1623.

Much Ado about Nothing was probably first written about this time, in which a husband falsely accuses his wife of infidelity – an event which caused Oxford great remorse. In addition, the sub-plot involves Benedict, as a confirmed woman-avoider, who falls in love against his will with the witty Beatrice. This fits well with Oxford's infatuation with Anne Vavasour in 1580.

It is possible that *Pericles* dates to this period. Acts III-V, which are ascribed to Shakespeare, deal with the hero's shipwreck and his subsequent search for his lost daughter. The play draws on John

Gower's late fourteenth century romance *Confessio Amantis* and a prose version called *The Pattern of Painful Adventures* by Thomas Twine (c. 1576). In 1572, Twine had dedicated his *Breviary of Britain* to Oxford, noting that "your Honour taketh singular delight" in "books of geography, histories and other good learning". Acts I-II, according to this view, form a prequel, probably written by George Wilkins in 1606-8, so as to bring the play up to full length. The play was published in quarto in 1609 and many times subsequently. It was not published in the First or Second Folios.

A play with a similar outline plot to *Timon of Athens*, called *The Historie Solitarie Knight*, "was shown at whitehall on Shrovesundae [17 February 1577] at night, enacted by the Lord Howard's servants."

Queen's Men: English history plays (1583-89)

Oxford's acting company were robbed of their key figures in 1583, when Francis Walsingham, apparently at the command of the queen, established the Queen's Men. Walsingham also took the best players from the companies run by Leicester and Sussex. While Leicester's and Oxford's company continued to play to public houses, the Queen's Men were the main company to perform at court in the 1580s; they also played under the Queen's warrant in public theatres, often touring in different sub-groups. The main reason for their formation was to instil patriotic, protestant fervour among the aristocracy as well as the ordinary people. Oxfordians believe that de Vere now became a Tudor apologist, writing history plays as instruments of Tudor Orthodoxy, at a time when the Spanish threat was at its highest. The history plays graphically represent the futility of dissension and disloyalty. Oxford had connections with the authors of both the main sources used for the history plays. Edward Hall, author of *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke* (1548-50) attended Grays Inn, as did



Oxford at a later date. An original edition of Hall's History was extensively annotated in an Elizabethan hand. Oxford had even closer connections with Raphael Holinshed. The first edition of *The Chronicles* had been dedicated to Oxford's father-in-law, William Cecil, Lord Burghley in 1577. Holinshed seems to have been a member of the Cecil household, as he had sat as a juror to the enquiry that found Oxford not guilty of manslaughter in 1567. Holinshed had also issued a pamphlet in 1573 attacking a man called Brown as the perpetrator of a murder in Shooters Hill, thereby deflecting blame from Oxford. The incident is very reminiscent of Hal's antics in *Famous Victories* and in *1 Henry IV*. It is likely that Oxford was consulting the same sources at the same time and in the same place (Cecil House) as Holinshed and the team preparing his *Chronicles*. Thus, Oxford had the opportunity to consult the same sources as Holinshed before the expanded 1587 edition of the *Chronicles*.

There is no scholarly consensus for the sequence of composition of the history plays. Most commentators accept that each set of plays were planned and composed as a coherent sequence to work through a grand scheme of history, in line with Edward Hall, whose scheme of history started with the weaknesses of the reign of Richard II which were not resolved until the accession of Henry Tudor as Henry VII. Commentators also believe that the Lancastrian tetralogy (*Richard II – Henry V*) was composed in sequence, but that in the case of the Yorkist plays, *1 Henry VI* was composed a while later. Further complications arise for those who believe that at least one of the plays (*1 Henry VI*) was co-authored with the help of another writer, perhaps to bridge the gap between the marriage of Henry V in 1420 and the marriage of his son Henry VI in 1446.

To this period when Oxford was writing mainly, but not exclusively, for the Queen's Men, we can assign the English history plays: The



chorus of *Henry V* is most instructive as it tells the audience how to watch a play on stage. Without mentioning Aristotle or any Roman or Italian plays, it advises that the performance will not observe the unities of time and place, but will change scene and compress time in a new and unusual way:

Suppose within the girdle of these walls
 Are now confined two mighty monarchies,
 Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
 The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
 Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
 Into a thousand parts divide on man,
 And make imaginary puissance;
 Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
 For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
 Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
 Turning the accomplishment of many years
 Into an hour-glass.

The chorus is almost bullying the audience with a series of imperatives: “Suppose . . .” “Piece out . . .” “Think . . .” “Carry them . . .” This speech is therefore programmatic: announcing a new kind of play in which one or two actors, costumed as soldiers would represent an army. This speech would seem to be far more appropriate at the beginning of a series of history plays (with the Oxfordian dating c. 1583) rather than at the end.

The Famous Victories of Henry V was known to have been performed by the Queen’s Men. It was registered in 1594 and published without attribution in 1598. *Famous Victories* would appear to be a shortened version of the Lancastrian tetralogy, for public performance at a venue when only one session was available, probably during the 1580s when the Queen’s men were on tour.



Other short versions of plays likely to have been in the repertoire of the Queen's Men and used for public performance include *The First Part of the Contention* (anon, 1594); *The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York* (anon 1595), and *The True Tragedy of Richard III* (anon, 1594). There were longer, more literary versions of these plays (known as *2 Henry VI*, *3 Henry VI*, *Richard III*), which were published in the First Folio. The anonymous publications of these shorter versions were in line with concealing the author as a member of the nobility with close links to the Queen's Secretary, Lord Burghley. They might well have been put out for publication, when the longer versions were being revised, thus gaining two publications for each play.

The Lancastrian tetralogy shows the greatest level of artistry and may have been revised at a late stage prior to publication (including the change from Oldcastle to Falstaff): *Richard II* Q1 1597; Q2, 1598; *1 Henry IV*, Q1, 1598; Q2, 1599; *2 Henry IV*, Q1, 1600. The first quarto of *Henry V* (1600) is quite different, being very short (1620 lines compared to the F1 version of about 3,200 lines). It is lacking the speeches by the Chorus, now superfluous, as the audience is well accustomed to imagining the rapid changes of place and time in a play. The Folio text might therefore represent the original, longer version, in an unrevised state.

Two other history plays date to the time of the Queen's Men: *The Troublesome Reign of King John* was probably the original acting version showing in the fictional Falconbridge how the aristocracy were supposed to give unflinching support to the monarch. In addition, *Henry VIII* was probably also written for the Queen's Men so that Cranmer's speech prophesying the future greatness of the baby princess Elizabeth can be inferred to have come true. When prepared for the Folio, a short passage was added to anticipate the accession of King James. Thus in 1613, it was a revival of a very old play which the company claimed was new.

The Queen's Men were known to have performed a version of *King Lear*, probably that which was published in an anonymous quarto in 1605 with a happy ending. The old king divides up his property among his three daughters. The story is found in Holinshed, but was also mirrored Oxford's situation from 1588, when he was left widowed with three surviving daughters. It was also mirrored in a contemporary court case involving William Allen, Lord Mayor of London in 1571-72, who was not respected by his daughters after he divided up his property between them. Allen died in poverty in 1586 but the case was the subject of litigation and scandal in 1589. The *Lear* version, which ends in tragedy, was probably a complete revision during the 1590s when Oxford felt himself to be at his lowest fortune.

Hamlet was also composed towards the end of this period, although it is not known if it was performed by the Queen's Men. At this time, Oxford had alienated most of his inherited estates and realised that it was unlikely he would ever be able to reclaim them. Thomas Nashe in his preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) refers to whole handfuls of tragical speeches from *Hamlet*, which he had probably seen at a public theatre in the short Q1 version. A longer version (either Q2 or F1) may well have existed at about this time. Oxford may well have been revising the play when the versions known as Q1 and Q2 were published in 1603 and 1604.

Julius Caesar might also date to this period. As with the deposing of Richard II, Caesar is presented as a weak and over-bearing ruler, but whose murder proves to be disastrous. It was relevant to the 1580s when various nobles were suspected of plotting to overthrow the Queen, and when the assassination of William of Orange in 1584 had terrible repercussions.



Disillusion: tragedies (1590-1604)

The Queen's Men lost their most important function towards the end of the 1580s when the Spanish threat had diminished. While they only performed at court once in 1589, twice in 1590, and thereafter sporadically, they continued to play in public venues. Their patron, Francis Walsingham, died in April 1590. From this point onwards, Oxford withdrew from public life. He married Elizabeth Trentham in December 1591 and the couple moved to Hackney, just beyond the Curtain Theatre in Shoreditch. Oxfordians believe that Oxford used this retirement to revise and enhance his plays. Some of these plays, especially the shorter versions for acting, appeared in quarto, while these and others were performed on the public stage by a variety of companies.

During the 1590s, Henslowe cites seven or eight plays with Shakespearean titles; they were performed by different companies and it is likely that as players left the Queen's Men they brought with them some of their plays. Henslowe's Diary records performances of *Henry VI* by Lord Strange's men in 1592-3 (taken to be Shakespeare's *Henry VI* Part 1); *Titus Andronicus* by Sussex's Men (1593-94) and *The Taming of a Shrew* by the Admiral's Men and Chamberlain's Men (1594) Other plays which had Shakespearean titles mentioned by Henslowe include: *King Lear* by Sussex's Men and the Queen's Men (1594) usually taken to be the anonymous play *King Leir* (later published in 1605) and not Shakespeare's play (published in 1608); *The Mawe* (1594-5) probably Shakespeare's play *Othello*. Similarly, Henslowe recorded performances of *Hamlet* by the Admiral's and Chamberlain's Men (1594), *Henry V* (1595- 6), and *Troilus & Cressida* (1598). In the early 1590s, Strange's Men and Pembroke's Men were the companies which were most favoured at court. From late 1594, the Chamberlain's Men and the Admiral's Men shared the duties of providing dramatic entertainment before the Queen.



The Chamberlain's Men seemed to enjoy the exclusive rights to the works of Shakespeare.

To this very late period, we can assign the following *new* plays: *Othello*, in which Oxford's remorse at his mis-treatment of his wife Anne is explored; the notions of fidelity and honour in the combined parts that became *Troilus & Cressida* of the First Folio, and the despair of *King Lear*, with its tragic ending as Oxford fears for his future with three apparently undutiful daughters.

Coriolanus is not mentioned at all before its publication in 1623. However, William Barlow, Bishop of London, preached a sermon at St Paul's, shortly after Essex' execution in February 1601. Barlow specifically compared the Earl of Essex to Coriolanus, who might 'make a fit parallel for the late Earle, if you read his life.' This appears to be the only contemporary allusion to the Roman soldier. Oxford had been one of the peers who tried Essex and convicted him of treason.

The Scottish play is often taken to have been offered as a compliment to the new King James. Part of this appeal was said to have been the depiction of the three witches. Yet in James's *Demonologie* (1597), he strongly advocates the hunting out of witchcraft and the execution of witches, neither activity being present in the play. Furthermore, the murder of an anointed Scottish king is hardly likely to have found favour at James's court. *Macbeth* actually follows very closely the Gowrie Plot to kidnap and possibly assassinate James in August 1600.

Measure for Measure might also date to this period as King James was known in Scotland for putting on disguise so as to mingle with the common people. He was also known for not being too involved in the ordinary business of government. So perhaps this play also dates to the early 1600s to serve as a warning against the total delegation of royal authority.

Domestic calm: Revision for Publication (1592-1604)

Francis Yates, a mainstream scholar, noted that Shakespeare's so-called late dramas were seemingly 'an archaising revival, a deliberate return to the past by an old Elizabethan living in the Jacobean age' (1975, 79-80). This is exactly how Oxfordians view the revision of earlier plays and their careful preparation for eventual publication. Both *Hamlet* and *Lear* underwent a substantial revision, hence the differences between the quarto texts and the folio texts.

The following plays were published in quarto during the 1590s: *The Troublesome Raigne of King John* (1591); *The Taming of a Shrew* (1594); and *True Tragedie of Richard III* (1594), *The Most Lamentable Romaine Tragedie of Titus Andronicus* (1594), *True Tragedie of Richard Duke of York* (1595), and *Famous Victories of Henry V* (1598). The majority view remains that the shorter plays were by other playwrights and that Shakespeare revised them. However, Oxfordians argue that the author had been responsible for both versions. It may be that the plays found their way into print when it was realised that a longer, more literary version was being prepared.

In the late 1590s and early 1600s, the Queen's health deteriorated and there was heightened interest in her successor. Oxford as Shakespeare was interested in the question of due and fair succession almost to the point of obsession: it had been a dominant theme in the History plays and features in many other plays. In his younger days he had been a friend of Edward Seymour (1548-74), brother to Lord Hertford and uncle to the Edward Seymour (b. 1561) who was closest in blood to the Queen. Furthermore, Oxford's daughter, Lady Elizabeth Vere, married the Henry Stanley, sixth earl of Derby who also had a strong claim to the throne. Both Henry Stanley and Edward Seymour were descended from Henry VIII's sister, Mary, Duchess of Suffolk. There was also James VI of Scotland, who was preferred by Oxford's brother-in-law, Sir Robert



Cecil, who was Secretary of State. It was probably to this period that we can date plays with some Scottish interest.

Untimely death

Edward de Vere, earl of Oxford, died intestate in June 1604. His ten-year-old son and heir, Henry, became the eighteenth earl. Oxford's seventeen-year-old daughter, Susan, married Philip Herbert, Duke of Montgomery, in 1604. Her husband was one of the dedicatees of the First Folio and it is thought that Susan and her husband acted in some kind of editorial role in preparing the works for publication in the First Folio in 1623.

A Note on the date of *The Tempest*

Oxfordians are divided as to the date of *The Tempest*. Some see it as a late play, *c.* 1603 but others as an early play from the phase of Italian comedy, *c.* 1582-3, when Oxford felt dispossessed, with only one daughter (and before he was reconciled with his wife) and liked to imagine his revenge and regaining his ancestral lands. Certainly, the play draws upon many elements of Italian popular comedy. In addition, the play might be seen as early because it is only one of two plays to observe the unities (as does *Comedy of Errors*). Furthermore, the second scene, involving long exposition by Prospero to Miranda, Ariel and Caliban in turn is not very dramatic.

On the other hand, mainstream scholars see *The Tempest* as a late play, with Prospero's abjuration of magic taken to be Shakespeare's farewell to the stage. They cite the Bermuda shipwreck as inspiration for the play. Of the four pamphlets describing the shipwreck, Strachey's letter is the only one now thought to have had any influence on *The Tempest*: both Orgel (Oxford, 209) and Vaughan & Vaughan (Arden3, 287) limit their appendix on sources to this letter. Vaughan (*SQ*) summarises Strachey's account:

the Sea Venture's journey toward Virginia; a dreadful storm; the seemingly miraculous crash on Bermuda; the eventful months there, including the construction of two pinnaces; the final leg to Jamestown; the Virginia Colony's deplorable condition; and Virginia's history from late May to mid-July 1610—most notably, Lord De la Warre's arrival, barely in time, to prevent the abandonment of the Colony.

Clearly the plot of *The Tempest* only corresponds only to the first few items (storm, shipwreck) but not to the later parts of the letter (eventful months, construction of new ships, journey to Jamestown and the conditions there). Furthermore, there is no correspondence between the leaders described in the letter and the situation of the play's protagonist (an exiled and embittered nobleman, with magical powers, who plots his revenge on those who wronged him).

Strachey's letter, dated 1610 but not published until 1625, was 'evidently in circulation' before (the evidence being no more than apparent references in the play). Bullough, in line with a majority of commentators from Malone onwards, believes that Shakespeare 'must have read Strachey's letter' and probably the other accounts as well. While some commentators have noted apparent borrowings by Shakespeare, yet each is paralleled elsewhere in the works, e.g. Strachey uses 'ague' once in his letter and Stephano mentions Caliban's 'ague' three times (in 2.2), yet Shakespeare uses 'ague' fifteen times elsewhere, including in the name of the fictitious character of Sir Andrew Aguecheek in *Twelfth Night*.

More recent commentators, however, are not convinced that Shakespeare must have read such an account. Vaughan and Vaughan list a mere four references to Strachey's letter. Nor was Strachey the first Englishman to visit Bermuda: James Lancaster after sailing to the East Indies put ashore in a storm there for five or six days in 1593 before returning to England in 1594. Another doubt concerns the one apparent reference to Bermuda in Ariel's allusion to the "still-vexed Bermoothes".



Another meaning of Bermuda, mentioned by Vaughan and Vaughan, was that 'Bermudas' indicated an area of London, notorious for licentious behaviour, as described by Jonson in *Bartholomew Fair* (c. 1614):

Looke into any Angle of the towne, (the Streights, or the
Bermuda's) where the quarrelling lesson is read, and how do
they entertaine the time, but with bottle-ale, and tabacco?

Horsman explains in a footnote (following William Gifford in his 1816 edition) that Jonson was referring to a nest of obscure courts, alleys and avenues between the bottom of St Martin's Lane, Half-moon and Chandos-street, "the receptacle of fraudulent dealers, thieves and prostitutes." Thus, it is possible that Ariel is not referring to the New World at all.

Frank Kermode (*Arden2*, 1954), however, accepts that Shakespeare might have composed *The Tempest* without reading Strachey's letter: "There is nothing in *The Tempest* fundamental to its structure of ideas which could not have existed had America remained undiscovered, and the Bermuda voyage never taken place." Kenneth Muir in *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (1978) expands this doubt: "The extent of the verbal echoes of [the Bermuda] pamphlets has, I think, been exaggerated. There is hardly a shipwreck in history or fiction which does not mention splitting, in which the ship is not lightened of its cargo, in which the passengers do not give themselves up for lost, in which north winds are not sharp, and in which no one gets to shore by clinging to wreckage."

(280) David Lindley, editor of the New Cambridge Shakespeare (2002), agrees: "There is virtually nothing in these texts [the Bermuda pamphlets] which manifests the kind of unambiguous close verbal affinity we have seen in other sources [Virgil, Ovid and Montaigne] so far considered."

Regarding contemporary events, Shakespeare could have drawn on other tales of expeditions and shipwrecks which were also available to



Strachey, including Sir Walter Raleigh's 1596 *Discovery of Guiana*, a widely-available report of his expedition to the West Indies, Hakluyt's *Voyages* (1592) and *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries, vol.III* (1600), which contains Henry May's account of the wreck of the *Edward Bonaventure* in the Bermudas in 1594.

More recently, Stritmatter and Kositsky (2007 & 2009) have argued that the major historical source was Peter Martyr's *De Orbe Novo* ('Concerning the New World', published in Latin in 1530). Martyr describes the earliest explorations of the Americas from Columbus's first voyage in 1492. Martyr's work was translated by Richard Eden in 1555 as *The Decades of the New Worlde Or West India*, (augmented by Willes in 1577) influenced the composition of the play. Stritmatter and Kositsky tabulate a large number of correspondences, e.g. Prospero calls Caliban "thou tortoise" (1.2.318), while Trinculo wonders whether he is "a man or a fish" (2.2.24-7), and Stephano repeatedly calls him "moon-calf" (e.g., 2.2.109, 2.2.135).

Conclusion

It is not possible to assign every play to this scheme, but it does serve to characterise the chief writing periods of Oxford's life according to genre.

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Dating Shakespeare's Plays

There is no contemporary evidence to date the composition of any of Shakespeare's plays.

Close comparison of the "scholarly consensus" about the order and dates shows some surprising discrepancies.

The **Dating Shakespeare's Plays** website reviews not only the evidence for dating every play but also every argument used in support of a preferred date.