

The Abyss of Time:

The Chronology of Shakespeare's Plays

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The ... use of transcribing these things, is to shew what absurdities men for ever run into, when they lay down an hypothesis, and afterward seek for arguments in the support of it. Richard Farmer, *An Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare* (London, 1767, 1821), 30.

In 1930 Sir Edmund Chambers published the third and final version of his dating scheme for Shakespeare's plays in Volume I of his *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, his two earlier versions being found in his article on Shakespeare in the 1911 edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* and in Volume III of his 1923 *The Elizabethan Stage*. In 1980 Ernest Honigmann, in *Shakespeare's Impact on His Contemporaries*, examined Chambers' chronology, noted that nobody had attempted to replicate the process, pointed out several flaws in it, and said that Chambers' start date was too late, that the plays really began earlier.

Honigmann's views on Chambers' lateness are supported by many other scholars; in fact virtually every post-1930 student of the dating issue agrees that Chambers' dates are too late. These dissenters include Peter Alexander,¹ Andrew Cairncross,² F.P. Wilson,³ John Crow, T. W. Baldwin,⁴ William Matchett,⁵ Oscar James Campbell and Edward Quinn,⁶ and Russell Fraser,⁷ — a list that could be expanded considerably. In fact, it is now completely orthodox to say that Chambers' chronology is too late, and to grant that his scholarship is a bit dated.

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In this article I will support Honigmann and the others, and it may be asked what I have to offer, given that I seem to be singing in a chorus of near unanimity. To begin with, I will add some new points to Honigmann's, both about the chronology as a whole and about some individual plays. Otherwise I wish to examine an astonishing fact — nearly every authority who discusses the subject agrees that Chambers' dates are too late, and yet those dates still stand.

Chambers spreads Shakespeare's plays fairly evenly across the period 1590 to 1613. John Crow revised Chambers' Shakespeare article in the *Britannica* around 1960, noting that recent "scholarship has found a tendency to push back the dates of the earlier plays [from the dates given by Chambers] ... As, however, Chambers' [*William Shakespeare*] remains the standard scholarly life of Shakespeare, it is convenient to retain his order and chronology."⁸ In the 1974 *Riverside Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans moves *1 Henry VI* back to 1589-90 and *Merry Wives* back three years to 1597, but his dates for the other plays stay within one year of Chambers'. The *Britannica's* Shakespeare article was completely rewritten in the early 1980s by John Russell Brown and T. J. B. Spencer who move the start of the *Henry VI* trilogy back one year to 1589, shift *Twelfth Night* forward one year, and otherwise leave Chambers' scheme intact. The 1986 Oxford *William Shakespeare, The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, does not provide the usual chronological table of the plays, but estimates that Shakespeare's works begin in the late 1580s or early 1590s. However the prefaces to the individual plays simply rearrange Chambers' sequence slightly, moving *Titus Andronicus*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Merry Wives* around a bit; otherwise Wells and Taylor stick with Chambers.

Moreover, as Honigmann notes (55), no one has attempted to reconstruct the entire dating scheme as Chambers did. Anyone today who wants to see the dating evidence for one of Shakespeare's plays looks in an up-to-date work, such as a recent edition of the play in question, rather than at Chambers. But anyone who wants to see the standard dating scheme built up from scratch must still consult Chambers. This point is critically important because so many plays are dated with respect to one another. For example, most editors say that the date of *Hamlet* can be established partly by the fact that it is later than *Julius Caesar*. But when was *Julius Caesar* written? Attempts to date individual plays inevitably rest on assumptions about the solidity of the dating scheme for all of the plays, which carries us right back to Chambers.

In short, Chambers dead is stronger than his successors alive. And now we will look at Chambers' methods and at the flaws in those methods. We will then consider whether Shakespeare's plays may have begun in the 1580s and whether they continue until 1613. Finally

we will examine the dating evidence for a number of specific plays.

Chambers' "Given"

Chambers explains in his *Britannica* article that his chronology:

is certainly not a demonstration, but in the logical sense an hypothesis which serves to colligate the facts and is consistent with itself and with the known events of Shakespeare's external life.

In *Elizabethan Stage* Chambers offers the "conjecture" that:

Shakespeare's first dramatic job, which earned him the ill will of [Robert] Greene [in the 1592 *Greene's Groatsworth*], was the writing or re-writing of *I Henry VI*... in the early spring of 1592. (III.130)

In *William Shakespeare* Chambers again affirms his belief that Shakespeare's dramatic debut was recorded in *Greene's Groatsworth* (I.58-9), but research performed in the 1920s by Peter Alexander on 2 & 3 *Henry VI* forced Chambers to move back his start date. That Chambers was willing to change his widely publicized opinion is to his credit as a scholar,⁹ but he changed his start date as little as the new evidence allowed. He first moved the start to 1591, "the earliest year to which there is ground for ascribing any dramatic work by Shakespeare that we know of" (I.59). But then, in his table of dates, he puts the two *Henry VI* plays at 1590-1.¹⁰ In the same work, Chambers spoke of:

fitting this order [of the plays] into the time allowed by the span of Shakespeare's dramatic career (I.253).

He also writes of fitting pieces of evidence:

into the facts of Shakespeare's dramatic career as given in chapter iii. There is much of conjecture, even as regards the order [of the plays], and still more as regards the ascriptions to particular years. These are partly arranged to provide a fairly even flow of production (I.269).

In short, the bedrock of Chambers' chronology, the "given" to which all that follows must conform — as in a proof in geometry — is that the sequence of Shakespeare's plays must be spread across the years 1590 to 1613.¹¹ The unhappy result is the method of Procrustes,

described by Ben Jonson to William Drummond as, "that tyrant's bed, where some who were too short were racked, others too long cut short". This is what Chambers' dating scheme amounts to: an attempt to force the plays, in their proper sequence¹² — early, middle, late — into the span of 1590-1613.

I will argue that Chambers' dates for Shakespeare's plays are several years too late from start to finish. In other words, the plays started well back in the 1580s, and, as far as the evidence shows, ended well before 1613. Moreover, I will argue that only one play can be dated with reasonable firmness to a period as narrow as eighteen months, namely *Comedy of Errors* to mid 1587 to December 1588. Any table of dates that assigns each play to a particular year, no matter how environed with cautions and qualifications about the uncertainty of it all, is mere wishful thinking.

Chambers' Errors

Chambers committed four general errors in his construction of Shakespeare's chronology, all of which are neatly summarized by Honigmann (70-8). What is most notable about these four errors is that Chambers knew that he was in the wrong on three of them. Here are the four items: relying on Francis Meres' 1598 list; interpreting Philip Henslowe's "ne" as "new"; treating flimsy earliest possible dates as firm evidence; and assuming that Shakespeare improved other men's plays.

Francis Meres lists six comedies and six tragedies of Shakespeare's in his 1598 *Palladis Tamia*, and Chambers follows Edmond Malone in supposing that 1598 is the earliest possible date for plays not named by Meres. Consequently Chambers writes "No mention by Meres" against eight plays in his table of boundary dates (I.246-50), despite the fact that he knew or believed that the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Taming of the Shrew*, both omitted by Meres, were earlier than 1598. Moreover, as Chambers could hardly help but know, the symmetrically minded Meres devised his lengthy list of comparisons by balancing exactly so many works of one sort against exactly so many of another, e.g., six comedies against six tragedies. Now Meres maintains the balance of his entry on Shakespeare by lumping the two parts of *Henry IV* together as one tragedy, and so he could easily have listed *Henry VI* as another tragedy and *Shrew* as another comedy — unless he was unaware of these (and other) plays, or unless he was not pretending to be exhaustive.

Philip Henslowe, businessman and theater owner, kept a sort of account book from 1592 to 1603 in which are found hundreds of entries relating to the stage. Several score plays listed by Henslowe have beside

them the word "ne", including 1 *Henry VI* for 3 March 1592 and *Titus Andronicus* for 24 January 1594. Chambers and his contemporaries took Henslowe's "ne" to mean "new" in some sense or other, even though they were aware that the mysterious term sometimes appears next to plays that were not new, though they might conceivably have been newly revised. And so Chambers gained questionable earliest possible dates for two more of Shakespeare's plays, as well as for the non-Shakespearean plays so marked, thereby locking dozens of dramas into the period after 1591. But a more complete edition of Henslowe's account book than the version relied upon by Chambers was published in 1961, edited by R. A. Foakes and R. T. Rickert, which includes lengthy extracts from Henslowe's pawnbroking business. Henslowe frequently describes the condition of the pledges left with him by borrowers, often describing clothes and suchlike as "new" or "newe", but never as "ne". And so the plausible, if questionable, old assumption that "ne" meant "new" shifts into the category of implausible, particularly given that "ne" was still a current word in English, meaning approximately what it does in French, "not" or "nor". Henslowe's "ne" may mean no more than that something, probably connected with money, did not occur at the performances in question. More to the point, the enigmatic "ne" can no longer be considered to indicate an earliest possible date, and so dozens of plays, including two of Shakespeare's, lose their moorings and are free to drift backward.

It is often observed that the evidence available to scholars for dating plays from Shakespeare's period is of uneven quality. In particular, latest possible dates tend to be hard evidence, such as a record of performance, entry in the Stationers' Register, or a play's actual appearance in print with the year on the title page. Earliest possible dates, on the other hand, tend to be weak stuff, such as absence from Francis Meres' list, the presence of Philip Henslowe's "ne", dubious topical allusions (on which more later), possible echoes of one writer's words by another author when it is not at all clear who wrote first, and the like. Honigsmann (78) tactfully states that Chambers "failed to recognise" this very obvious fact, but Chambers did indeed know it:

As a rule the initial dates are much less certain than the terminal ones. (I.245)

Chambers goes on to provide examples of what he means, but he gives earliest possible dates to nineteen plays in his table of boundary dates. Ten are from Meres and Henslowe, and most of the others are no better. The exceptions to this rule are *Henry V* (on which see below), *Henry VIII*, and *Two Noble Kinsmen*. The last two plays are generally agreed to have

been begun by Shakespeare but finished by John Fletcher, and Chambers' earliest possible dates for the two refer to their completion by Fletcher. Unfortunately we have no evidence that the two men collaborated side by side, and so knowing when Fletcher worked on these plays is of no help in deciding when Shakespeare wrote his parts.

Scholars assumed from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth that Shakespeare routinely rewrote plays by other authors, that is, that he was something of a plagiarist during the first half of his career. In particular, *2 & 3 Henry VI*, as we find them in the First Folio of 1623, were believed to be Shakespeare's upgrades of *The First part of the Contention*, published in 1594, and *The true Tragedie of Richard Duke of Yorke*, published in 1595; that Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, published in 1604, was a revision of what came to be called the *Ur-Hamlet*, a play written no later than 1589 and published in 1603; that Shakespeare's *King John* was based on *The Troublesome Raigne of John, King of England*, published in 1591; and that Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* was a new version of *Taming of A Shrew*, published in 1594. In these matters, Chambers was a man of his era, but scholarship moves on. *The First part of the Contention* and *The true Tragedie* were shown to be inferior versions of *2 & 3 Henry VI*; the 1603 edition of *Hamlet* was proven to be a piracy of Shakespeare's play, not of the mythical *Ur-Hamlet* (see below); Shakespeare's *Shrew* is overwhelmingly viewed by modern scholars as the source for the other *Shrew*; and though the debate still rages on the two plays of *King John*, the balance of opinion is swinging in favor of Shakespeare's play as the original (see below). In short, Shakespeare is now seen as the victim of imitators, and hence another support for Chambers' late dates crumbles.

We have been looking at the earliest possible dates that Chambers used to backstop his late dates, and we have seen that his props collapse one after another. But we gain further insight into his chronology by looking at the generally solid latest possible dates for thirty-three of Shakespeare's dramas (I.246-50).¹³ In order to cram Shakespeare's plays into the chosen bracket of 1590-1613, Chambers uses his flimsy earliest possible dates to force the great majority of the plays to within one or two years of their respective latest possible dates. More specifically, he assigns the composition of twenty-seven of those thirty-three plays to within two years of their latest possible dates. As the fragile props shatter, common sense tells us that most of those plays must have been written earlier than the dates given by Chambers.

Did Shakespeare's Plays Begin in the 1580s?

We will now turn to the 1580s. Chambers would not place any of Shakespeare's plays earlier than 1590, and the boldest post-Chambers