

An Evening at the Cockpit

Further Evidence of an Early Date for Henry V

by Ramon Jiménez

Aside from the identity of the author of the Shakespeare canon, the most important question facing revisionist scholars, those who reject the Stratfordian theory, is an accurate dating of the plays. An accurate date for the composition of almost any play in the canon would be a valuable starting point for dating a good percentage of those remaining. For many decades now, orthodox scholars have almost unanimously asserted that a passage in the fifth act Chorus of *Henry V* fixes the composition date of that play to the spring of 1599, when Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, departed London with a substantial army to put down a major rebellion in Ireland.

In this passage, just preceding the fifth act, the Chorus describes the crowds coming out to meet King Henry in London on his return from his signal victory at Agincourt. The Chorus compares the crowds to those who must have turned out to greet Julius Caesar when he returned in triumph from Spain:

But now behold,
In the quick forge and working-house of thought,
How London doth pour out her citizens!
The Mayor and all his brethren in best sort,
Like to the senators of th'antique Rome,
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conqu'ring Caesar in;
(5. Chorus. 22-28)¹

The Chorus then introduces another comparison, one that might be similar, but that has not yet taken place:

As by a lower but by loving likelihood,
Were now the general of our gracious Empress,
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,
How many would the peaceful city quit,
To welcome him!
(5. Chorus. 29-34)

“Nearly everyone agrees that in these lines ‘the General’ is Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex,” whom Queen Elizabeth had sent to Ireland in March 1599 to put down a protracted revolt (Craik 1-2). Another scholar writes that “The likening of Essex to Henry V by Shakespeare himself in the chorus of the Folio version is indisputable” (Albright 729). Even the maverick scholar Eric Sams agrees that the line refers to Essex, and adds that he was “the only living person to whom Shakespeare ever alluded anywhere in his work” (112). He overlooks the woman in the same line – Queen Elizabeth.

The outcome of the Earl’s expedition is well known. He failed at his mission entirely and returned in disrepute to London in September. Orthodox scholars therefore claim that the fifth act Chorus, and the entire play itself, were written, and the play performed in the spring of 1599, before this outcome became known.

The play was registered in August 1600, then published three times in Quarto form (1600, 1602, and 1619) and then in the Folio in 1623. The title page of Q1 bore the phrase “As it hath bene sundry times playd by the Right honorable the Lord Chamberlaine his servants.” But the three Quartos contained less than half the lines of the Folio text. The entire Prologue, Chorus, and Epilogue apparatus, several entire scenes, hundreds of lines, and eleven small speaking parts were cut from the play text that ultimately appeared in the Folio.

Orthodox scholars are divided about the process that resulted in the foreshortened Quartos, some favoring memorial reconstruction, and others deliberate cutting for performance. But they cannot explain the odd, if not improbable, scenario in which the Folio text was written and performed in 1599, then literally cut in half, performed, and the truncated text then printed three times before the complete text reappeared in the First Folio more than two decades after it was allegedly written. The claimed reference in the Folio text to the Earl of Essex in 1599 does not make sense in the light of the subsequent performance and printing of the play. It cannot be claimed that the Earl’s loss of face (he was beheaded for treason only a year-and-a-half later) required that the play be cut in half. A deletion or replacement of four lines in the fifth act Chorus would have excised the reference to him sufficiently.

A better explanation of the performance and printing history of *Henry V* is that the

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passage does not refer to Essex at all, and was not written in 1599, but at least fifteen years earlier, when the Folio version of *Henry V* was first seen by an Elizabethan audience. The *harye the v* that Philip Henslowe mounted at his Rose theater more than a dozen times in 1595-6 was most likely the severely abridged version that appeared in the Quartos. For printing in the Folio, the publishers obtained the author's original text.

Background

In 2001 and 2002 I published three papers in the *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* describing the seventeenth Earl of Oxford's transformation of his early prose play *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* into the three Prince Hal plays, *1 and 2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In "Rebellion broached on his sword: New Evidence of an Early Date for *Henry V*" (v. 37:3 Fall 2001), I presented evidence that the orthodox date of spring 1599 for the composition of *Henry V* is incorrect on several counts, and that Oxford wrote the fifth act Chorus of the play during the six-month period after November 1583.

To begin with, Oxford's profound dislike for the Earl of Essex by the late 1590s would have precluded the favorable reference to him in the fifth act Chorus in 1599. In his October 1595 letter to Robert Cecil, Oxford rejected a suggestion that he approach the Earl for a favor, writing that it was "a thing I cannot do in honour, sith I have already received diverse injuries and wrongs from him, which bar me from all such base courses" (Chiljan 53). Oxford may have been referring to the rumors circulating as early as May 1595 that his newly-married daughter, Elizabeth, Countess of Derby, was having an affair with Essex.² But regardless of the particular reason, Oxford's statement makes it most improbable that less than four years later he would refer to the "loving likelihood" that Robert Devereaux "the general of our gracious Empress" may soon be coming from Ireland, "Bringing rebellion broached on his sword." Other reasons for rejecting a 1599 date include the political climate at the time, the Queen's own suspicions of Essex, and the Earl's actual failure to accomplish his mission in Ireland (Jiménez 8-10).

The passage in the fifth act Chorus is much more appropriate to events earlier in Elizabeth's reign – before the Irish revolt of the 1590s – when there were two serious uprisings in Ireland known as the First and the Second Desmond Rebellions. The first took place in the 1560s, and the second developed in the late 1570s under the brothers James, John, and Gerald Fitzgerald, the leaders of the House of Desmond, an ancient Irish earldom in the southern province of Munster. The Second Desmond Rebellion, also called the Munster Rebellion, was a major conflict that threatened the crown's authority and possessions in Ireland, and required a substantial mobilization of England's military apparatus. It attracted foreign intervention in the summer of 1579 and again a year later, when small armies of continental troops,

described as primarily “Italian swordsmen,” landed on the southwestern Irish coast, having been dispatched by Pope Gregory XIII in support of the rebellion against Elizabeth (Lennon 222-24).

In November 1579, after several years of fighting and unsuccessful attempts at negotiation, the English administrators of colonial Ireland finally lost patience with the leader of the rebellion, the forty-six-year-old Gerald Fitzgerald, fourteenth Earl of Desmond, and declared him a traitor (Bagwell 3:30-1). In her attempts to settle her Irish wars with as little expense as possible, Queen Elizabeth routinely offered pardons to even the most persistent rebels if they would lay down their arms and pledge their loyalty. But the Earl of Desmond had deceived and betrayed her too often. She had pardoned him once before, and had sent him to the Tower and then released him twice. Finally conceding that he was an unreclaimable rebel, she declared him ineligible for a pardon and offered “head money,” £1000 for his head.

Over the next three years, several different English commanders led armies into Munster with varying degrees of success, gradually killing or capturing hundreds of the Desmond rebels. In the summer of 1580, James Fitzgerald was captured, hanged, drawn and quartered (Bagwell 3:55). By May 1581, the English army in Ireland numbered more than 6400 men, and in early January 1582 the youngest brother, Sir John of Desmond, was ambushed and killed. His turquoise and gold ring was sent to Elizabeth, and his head to the Governor of Ireland, Lord Grey of Wilton, as “a New Year’s gift.” Grey displayed it on a pole on a wall of Dublin castle (Bagwell 3:94).

Nevertheless, the rebellion dragged on and in December 1582, on the advice of Sir Walter Raleigh, Elizabeth appointed Sir Thomas Butler, tenth Earl of Ormond, her commanding general in Ireland. Known as “Black Tom” because of his dark hair and complexion, Butler was the scion of one of the oldest and most prominent families in Ireland and a major figure in Anglo-Irish relations throughout Elizabeth’s reign. Butler was a distant cousin of Elizabeth Tudor on the Boleyn side – the eighth Earl of Ormond, Thomas Boleyn, was Anne Boleyn’s father. They had been raised in close proximity at the court of Henry VIII; Butler, being born in 1531, was two years older.

As a staunch supporter of the English colonial presence in Ireland, Butler carried out a variety of diplomatic and military missions there for Queen Elizabeth during the 1560s and 1570s. According to Sidney Lee, she was so fond of him during the 1560s that “the attentions she paid him . . . gave rise to no little scandal, and induced him to linger at court for the next five years.”²³ Elizabeth is said to have called him her “black husband.”²⁴ He was active in court politics, being favored by the Cecils and aligned with the Sussex faction against the Earl of Leicester, whom he despised. In this context, he would have become acquainted with the young Edward de Vere, who came to London in 1562. Both of them were among the dozen diplomats and courtiers receiving Master of Arts degrees at Oxford University in September 1566,

and they were admitted to Gray's Inn within weeks of each other the following year (Edwards *ODNB*, Thomas Butler).

When Sir Thomas Butler arrived in Ireland in January 1583 to deal with the Desmond Rebellion, the situation in Munster had deteriorated badly. But a vigorous campaign by Butler during the spring and summer forced most of the individual rebel leaders to surrender and reduced the rebellion to a small band of men loyal to the last of the three rebel Desmond brothers, Gerald Fitzgerald. In November he was cornered, killed, and beheaded in County Kerry by Ormond's troops, effectively ending the rebellion. Desmond's head was taken to Thomas Cheston, constable of Castlemaine, "who brought it on his sword point to the Earl of Ormond in Cork" (Sheehan 108). In his letter of November 15th to Lord Burghley recounting the death, Butler wrote "So now is this traytor come to the ende I have longe looked for, appointed by God to dye by the sword to ende his rebellion . . ." The summary of Ormond's letter contains the brief sentence: "Sends Desmond's head by the bearer."⁵

According to tradition, Queen Elizabeth "would not believe the news of the earl's death until she saw his head, and when it was brought to her, she stared at it for hours" (Sheehan 108). In mid-December 1583 she had it mounted on a pole and placed on London Bridge (Holinshed 6:454). As we know, the heads of criminals on London Bridge were nothing unusual, but this rebel's head was sent from Ireland to London by a general who had been dispatched there to put down a rebellion. Oxford's striking image, "Rebellion broached on his sword" conveyed perfectly the circumstances of Desmond's death and the transportation of his head. (The *OED* cites the use of the verb "broach" in this specific passage to support the definition "To stick (something) on a spit or pointed weapon").⁶ When Ormond had not returned to London by January 1584, Elizabeth wrote him in her own hand on the 31st, congratulating him on his success and urging him to come to England to receive her thanks.⁷

The lines of the key passage:

As by a lower but by loving likelihood,
Were now the general of our gracious Empress,
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,

(5. Chorus. 29-34)

are precisely appropriate to the period November 1583 to May 1584, that is, between the date that the last Desmond rebel, Gerald Fitzgerald, was killed and the date that Butler actually returned to London. Oxford and Butler were not only long-time friends, they were distantly related by marriage, and had remained in contact during the 1570s. In a letter from Butler to Lord Burghley in May 1575, while Oxford was traveling in Europe, Butler comments on Anne's pregnancy and compliments Ox-

ford on “tokens and letters” he had sent her.⁸ What more gracious compliment could Oxford have paid to a fellow earl, whom he had known since boyhood, than to allude to his service to Queen Elizabeth in connection with Henry V’s conquest of France?

Thus, all the phrases in the famous passage are identified and associated with actual events and people. The “general of our gracious Empress” being Sir Thomas Butler, tenth Earl of Ormond, a favorite of the Queen, who appointed him general of her forces in Ireland in 1582; “As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,” referring to his mission in Ireland, and suggesting that he may yet come to London in triumph, as did Henry V from France; “Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,” referring to the transportation of the rebel earl’s head to Butler, and then to Queen Elizabeth.

This scenario places the composition of the Act 5 Chorus in the six month period between mid-November 1583 and mid-May 1584, just a few months after Oxford had regained the favor of the Queen and returned to court. Since the fifth act Chorus occurs with only fifteen per cent of the play remaining, it is likely that by November Henry V was nearly completed, and that the reference to Butler’s return could be easily inserted before the final act. A patriotic play about an English king’s victory in France would have pleased the Queen – and a reference to the recent conclusion of a lengthy rebellion in Ireland by one of her favorite generals would have been doubly satisfying.

An additional detail supporting a 1583/4 date for *Henry V* is Pistol’s response to the French soldier’s question in Act 4, Scene 4 – “calen o custure me.” The phrase is an English corruption of a popular Irish song, *cailín óg a stór*, “maiden, my treasure” (Taylor 234). The song was registered in March 1582 (Arber 2:407) and was issued on a single sheet, a “broadside,” between that date and 1584, when it was included in the ballad collection *A Handful of Pleasant Delights* (Rollins viii, 38-9, 99). Frequent references to it suggest that it was popular at that time; it was clearly more topical in the early 1580s than in 1599.

The entire body of evidence for a date of 1583/4 for *Henry V* is set out in my 2001 paper.⁹ What follows is evidence of the location and audience for the performance.

Further Evidence -- The Audience and the Venue

Certain other lines in the Prologue and Chorus supply clues about the audience and the venue for a performance of the play written during the six-month period described above. Several scholars have proposed that the use of the Chorus, and certain language in the Chorus, imply a court or private performance, rather than one in a public playhouse. In a 1978 article, G. P. Jones wrote that “the Chorus of *Henry V* is fundamentally incompatible with the public theatre and is fully comprehensible

only in terms of performance under more specialised conditions” (95). He pointed out that language alluding to “the spatial inadequacies of the theatre” and “the discrepancy between the size of the real events and the size of their theatrical representation” suggests that the manuscript for the Folio text was prepared for a performance “under more cramped conditions,” such as at court or at a private residence.

Another aspect of the Chorus’s language suggests the same thing. Such facetious solicitations as “Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts” (Prologue. 23), “Play with your fancies” (3. Chorus. 7), “eche [eke] out our performance with your mind” (3. Chorus. 35), and “Heave him away upon your winged thoughts” (5. Chorus. 8) all suggest that the audience is “confidential and personal,” rather than “collective and public.” As Jones remarks, such requests “might have met with ribald counter-suggestions in a public forum.” Jones also cites such language as “But pardon, gentles all” (Prologue. 8) and “the scene / Is now transported, gentles, to Southampton” (2. Chorus. 34-5) as evidence that the Chorus is addressing a royal or, at least, an aristocratic audience (96-8). The complimentary, even affectionate, reference to Queen Elizabeth – “our gracious Empress” – strongly suggests that she was in the theater.

If it were a royal or an aristocratic audience, it would not be an unusual venue for a Shakespeare play. In his 2004 paper, “Shakespeare’s Audience,” Richard Whalen presented substantial evidence that Shakespeare wrote primarily for “royalty, the nobility, educated aristocrats, their retainers and court officialdom.” The admittedly scanty records that survive list more performances at court or aristocratic homes than in public theaters. These facts comport with the view that the Folio text of the play was derived from a prompt copy that the author prepared for use at a court or private performance. Considering the author’s relationship to such an audience, they also suggest that the Chorus’s remarks were personal and that he may have been the person delivering them. In the opening lines of the Epilogue, he may well have been referring to himself:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,
Our bending author hath pursued the story,
In little room confining mighty men,
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.
(Epilogue 1-4)

It is easy to imagine the Earl of Oxford, perhaps clad in the hooded, black cloak typical of the role, speaking the lines of the Chorus, carefully introducing each act to his Queen and fellow courtiers.¹⁰

Other phrases in the Prologue to *Henry V* – “this unworthy scaffold,” “Can this cockpit hold / The vasty fields of France?,” “Or may we cram / Within this wooden O,” “the girdle of these walls” – have been cited by editors as indications that the author was anticipating a performance by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men at either

the Curtain theater or the newly-constructed Globe in 1599 (Craik 3-4; Gurr, *Henry V* 5-6; Wilson xiv). But these lines, and another in the Epilogue – “In little room confining mighty men” – suggest a much smaller space than either the Globe or the Curtain. The Globe was an open-air amphitheater with a yard about one hundred feet in diameter, and a capacity of over 3000 spectators (Gurr, *Stage* 128; Egan, *Globe* 1). Nor does the Curtain seem a likely venue for the theater described by the Chorus. Although theater historians have long maintained that the Curtain was an amphitheater of about seventy-two feet in diameter (Bowsher 64-7), excavations of the site in the spring of 2016 revealed the foundation of a rectangular building of approximately one hundred by seventy-two feet that could hold about 1000 spectators.¹¹

Reacting to this discovery, Heather Knight, a senior archeologist at the London Museum of Archaeology, suggested that the play may still have premiered at the Curtain in 1599, but without the prologue. “There’s a school of thought now that says prologues were actually a later addition,” she said. This school of thought would, of course, invalidate the claim that “the general of our gracious Empress” refers to the Earl of Essex in the spring of 1599. Any reference after July or August 1599 to the triumphal return of Essex from Ireland would have been met with disbelief or laughter, or both. What seems more likely is that the performance, perhaps the first of *Henry V*, took place at Elizabeth’s Whitehall palace, her principal residence during the 1580s, and one of only two containing a “cockpit.”

The history of the complex of buildings known as Whitehall confirms that such a performance could have taken place. In the 1530s, Henry VIII undertook a major redesign of York Place, Cardinal Wolsey’s former residence, later called “Whitehall.” According to John Stow, there were “divers fayre Tennis courtes, bowling allies, and a Cocke-pit, al built by King Henry eight” on the west side of the roadway that bisected the palace grounds (Stow 2:102; quoted in Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage* 1:216, n.2). Henry VIII’s Cockpit was a square two-story building, within which a quasi-circular space was constructed with tiered seating to enable spectators to witness cock-fighting.¹² On occasion it was modified to accommodate the performance of plays and masques. With temporary alterations, such as “added curtains for a tiring-house and scaffold planking for a stage” the space could be easily “turned to use as a simple, intimate theatre protected from wind and weather” (Wickham v. 2, pt. 2: 47). The Revels Accounts clearly record that in the early years of his reign, James I witnessed plays performed in the Cockpit at Whitehall (Streitberger 5, 7, 25, 30, 31, 36; Wickham v. 2, pt. 2: 78-81). Although there is no surviving record, modern stage historians agree with Edmond Malone that Queen Elizabeth also witnessed plays performed in Henry VIII’s Cockpit (Malone 3:166; Ordish 258-9; Gurr, *Stage* 121; Kernan 18, 53).

It was not until about 1630 that Inigo Jones transformed the interior of the Whitehall Cockpit for Charles I to create a permanent theater. It would serve as such until

1698, when it and nearly all of the surrounding palace were destroyed by fire. The word “Cockpit” evolved to denote a complex of buildings on the same site that were used for various purposes, including residences of the nobility and, in later times, government offices (*ODNB* 1.c.(b)). Considering the importance of the Cockpit at Whitehall to the accurate dating of *Henry V*, and to the authorship question in general, it is fitting to note that the site retains some importance in the modern era. “Its site is now occupied by the Prime Minister’s London residence, No. 10 Downing Street” (Wickham v. 2, pt. 2: 45).

Surviving records of entertainments at court, fragmentary as they are, also support the observations detailed above about the audience and the venue for a performance of *Henry V* at the Cockpit at Whitehall in late 1583 or early 1584. One of the thirteen appendices that E. K. Chambers included in his *The Elizabethan Stage* was “A Court Calendar,” in which he summarized all the information he could obtain about the monarch’s location between 1558 and 1616, and about “the plays, masks and quasi-dramatic entertainments at court” (4: 75). The Court Calendar appendix indicates that Queen Elizabeth arrived at Whitehall on December 20, 1583 and remained there, except for visits to Heneage House and Tower Hill, until April 20, 1584 (4: 100). The Calendar also records that the newly-formed Queen’s Men played at court on December 26 and 29, 1583 and on March 3, 1584; that the Children of the Chapel performed at court on January 6 and February 2, 1584; and that the Earl of Oxford’s Men performed on January 1 and March 3, 1584.

In another appendix, “Court Payments,” Chambers listed the information available about “the expenditures on plays or masks at court” (4: 131). This appendix lists a payment of £20 made at Westminster to the Queen’s Men on May 9, 1584 for their performances in the previous December and March. The plays listed for this payment were “vj histories, one Comedie” (4:159). The Court Payments appendix also lists payments to the Children of the Chapel and to the Earl of Oxford’s Men for their performances during the same period, but does not indicate what plays were performed.

Thus, it appears that the Queen’s Men performed one or more history plays before the Queen at Whitehall on several occasions during the winter of 1583-4 and that two other companies, both controlled by the Earl of Oxford, performed there several times during the same period.¹³ As Jones noted, the words of the Chorus referring to a confined circular space and to a “cockpit” suggest that *Henry V* was performed at the Cockpit at Whitehall, rather than at the Great Chamber or the large Banqueting Hall, which were rectangular rooms also used for theatrical performances (96-7). The words of the Chorus also suggest that the audience was an aristocratic one, very likely a royal one, with the Queen present. This internal evidence comports with the external evidence and topical references already described, and in my 2001 paper, that place the composition of the Chorus during the six-month period ending

in May 1584, when Sir Thomas Butler returned to London.

A secure date for the composition of *Henry V* in 1583 serves as a benchmark for an accurate dating of the first half of the Shakespeare canon. In the forty-year writing career of the Earl of Oxford, the play falls naturally at about the mid-point, just as it falls at the mid-point of the career of the author alleged in the Stratfordian theory. The fifteen-year difference between the two theories – Stratfordian and Oxfordian – reflects the nearly fifteen-year difference in their birth dates.

Moreover, in the orthodox sequence of composition, *Henry V* is the eighteenth or nineteenth play and the last history play that Shakespeare wrote, except for *Henry VIII* (Chambers, *William Shakespeare* 1:246-50; Wentersdorf 164). There is a consensus that Shakespeare wrote the *Henry IV* plays in the two or three years just prior to writing *Henry V*. It is reasonable to assume that during the five years after 1575 Oxford was occupied with writing the half-dozen early Italian plays in the canon. It is likely, then, that he wrote the six earlier history plays, at least the *Henry VI* – *Richard III* tetralogy, before beginning his European tour in 1575.

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Notes

- 1 Quotations from the Shakespeare canon are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*. G. B. Evans, ed.
- 2 The documents attesting to the affair are cited in Hammer at 320-1. See also Anderson pp. 297, 538.
- 3 *Dictionary of National Biography*. v. 8, p. 80.
- 4 David Edwards, 'Butler, Thomas, tenth earl of Ormond and third earl of Ossory (1531–1614),' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 5 Calendar of State Papers, Ireland. 2: 478, 480.
- 6 "broach, v.1 3b." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2015.
- 7 Carte 1: cv-cvi.
- 8 The letter can be seen at [//www.oxford-shakespeare.com/StatePapersOther/SP_63-51-3_%20ff_92-3.pdf](http://www.oxford-shakespeare.com/StatePapersOther/SP_63-51-3_%20ff_92-3.pdf)
- 9 "The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth – Key to the Authorship Question?" *Shakespeare-Oxford Newsletter*, Vol. 37, N. 3 (2001). Available online at [//shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SOSNL_2001_4.pdf](http://shakespeareoxfordfellowship.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/SOSNL_2001_4.pdf)
- 10 Wilson 122. Creizenach describes the customary garb of the Prologue/Chorus, and comments further that the *Henry V* Chorus "occupies a place apart. Its services . . . could well have been spared; it seems rather as if the author's object had been to give direct expression to his patriotic enthusiasm for the glorious deeds of his favorite hero by breaking through the dramatic form" (275-6).
- 11 "London's theater dig's surprise." Associated Press story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. (May 23, 2016) p. E3.
- 12 Astington 46-56. On p. 49 the square Cockpit building with a pitched polygonal roof can be seen in the detail of the painting, "Whitehall from St James's Park," done in 1674 by Hendrick Danckerts (c. 1625-1680).
- 13 According to Chambers, the Children of the Chapel were under the patronage of the Earl of Oxford in 1583-4 (*Elizabethan Stage 2*: 37, 101, 497).