

"GOOD DANCING AND HANDSOME WOMEN"

program notes by [Emily Otto](#)

We know little about the first production of [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#). Scholars now agree that the premiere took place around 1596, but dispute the circumstances under which the play was first performed. One theory holds that the play was written for a court wedding celebration attended by Queen Elizabeth. Ludwig Tieck, a German director and translator, first proposed this conjecture in 1830, and many other scholars have subsequently developed variations of the theory. Most advocates of the wedding-play hypothesis focus on the fact that [Midsummer](#)'s primary subjects are love and marriage. They point out that the play contains flattering coding references to Queen Elizabeth, implying that Shakespeare knew she would be in attendance at a royal wedding. Other scholars suggest that the characters of Theseus, Hippolyta, and Egeus are modeled after real court figures of the time, basing their assertions on records of guest lists at aristocratic weddings. Over the past two centuries, no fewer than eleven marriage ceremonies have been proposed as the occasion for the [Dream](#)'s first performance. None has been definitively proven.

The scholar David Wiles offers a detailed argument for the wedding-play theory in his book *Shakespeare's Almanac: A Midsummer Night's Dream, Marriage, and the Elizabethan Calendar*. He suggests that the play needs to be understood in the context of the Tudor conception of time. Marriage was seen as a vital part of the cycle of life and death, and the organization of weddings and performances was frequently centered around religious and pagan festive calendars. Wiles uses Elizabethan astrological formulae to analyze the play's frequent references to the passage of time, holidays and the moon, concluding that [Midsummer](#) was written for a specific court wedding that took place on February 19, 1596.

Gary Jay Williams, author of *Our Moonlight Revels, a stage history of A Midsummer Night's Dream*, argues against the

wedding-play theory. He points out that there is no record of a ceremonial performance, and that masques, not plays, were the customary entertainment for court weddings. Williams also suggests that the play is too subversive for performance at a marriage, arguing that Shakespeare elicits our sympathy for the unhappy lovers rather than their parents or the royal court. The play, he contends, was openly critical of the Elizabethan practice of arranged marriage, which would have insulted the wedding party, as well as the Queen, who was widely known to control court liaisons. If Shakespeare had indeed written the play for a court wedding, Williams argues, he would have been taking a great risk.

Proponents of the wedding-play theory generally read into [Midsummer](#) a movement from chaos to order within the love relationships. The beginning of the play is fraught with misunderstandings and disharmony among the characters, while the final act, with its triple wedding, resolves all disputes. Scholars that give no credence to the wedding-play theory assert a different reading of the text. They interpret the confusion of the romantic relationships among the characters as an exploration of the complexity of gender and power in the Elizabethan age. The triple wedding that concludes the play, they argue, hardly represents a model of marital bliss, since they can only occur with the aid of strong, externally imposed, magic. As Gary Williams concludes, "The moment is a midsummer night's amnesty, the momentary concord of all discord that the art of artifice can render."

Regardless of the nature of the first performances, [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) was a popular success and enjoyed frequent revival both before the English Civil War and after the restoration of the monarchy. The play was almost universally praised, and dissenting voices are hard to find, with the exception of the curmudgeonly Samuel Pepys who saw a production in 1662, and noted in his diary: "To the King's Theatre where we saw [Midsummer Night's Dream](#), which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life. I saw, I confess, some good dancing and some handsome women, which was all my pleasure."

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