Smoking Gun: The Midsummer Wedding of Katherine Sheldon?

Of all the Shakespeare plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the one play universally regarded as an absolute Shakespeare original. It has no identified so-called 'source-play.' But the sources of its individual components can be identified, and this paper argues that all can be tied to one man, Ralph 'Raffe' Sheldon (1537-1613). For the theory of Sheldon as Shakespeare, this evidence concerning *AMND* is particularly significant. While there is strong evidence that he was the man who wrote the early versions of the plays (the man posited by John Dover Wilson as the "profound historical scholar"), this evidence firmly connects him to the first performance of *AMND* in 1592, thereby establishing him as the writer still on the scene in the mid-1590s at the time of the first publication of a work under the name William Shakespeare (*Venus & Adonis*, 1593).

A key piece of evidence has recently surfaced that strongly suggests Sheldon as the writer of *AMND*: he married his daughter Katherine in Long Compton, Warwickshire – the location of his manor house Weston – on 25 June 1592,[1] the day after the official Midsummer Night of 1592. Is it possible that Ralph Sheldon staged the first performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the day before the wedding – that is, on the actual Midsummer Night – in celebration of his daughter's marriage and its noble guests of honor, the Earl of Oxford and his recent bride, Elizabeth Trentham?

This Midsummer wedding saw Katherine Sheldon marry Francis Trentham (1564-1626). Francis was the financial advisor to Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford (1550-1604); Oxford had, sometime within the prior year, married Francis's sister Elizabeth. Oxford and Elizabeth – a renowned beauty who was a maid of honor to the Queen – would have been expected as guests of honor at the festivities. While the actual date of the marriage of

[1] Date and location of marriage identified in Bodl MS Wood F.33, f.139.

Oxford and Elizabeth is unknown, it is likely that it happened around Midsummer Night of 1591,[2] making the time of Katherine & Francis's wedding also the first anniversary of the marriage of Oxford and Elizabeth. Thus, the occasion would have featured two couples – one noble and the other commoner – both celebrating Midsummer marriages.

- **The Occasion of the First Performance**

The date of the first performance of this play has been a persistent mystery. Shakespearean scholars have long speculated that the play was first performed for an actual wedding celebration for a noble couple. Various possibilities have been suggested, all with a noble couple, but none with a Midsummer Night date, and none with a joint celebration of a noble and a commoner couple.[3] One external factor limits the date of the first performance: the play is named as a Shakespeare play in Francis Meres' *Palladis Tamia*, published in 1598. This list includes 11 other plays[4]: of these plays, only *AMND* has clear evidence of a first performance after 1590; and, at the same time, six other plays by Shakespeare that, in fact, had likely first performances during the 1590s are not included on the Meres' list.[5] This suggests that while the first performance of *AMND* was most certainly before 1598, it also was most likely in the early part of the decade, leaving time for the play to come to the notice of Francis Meres.

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[2] A document dated 4 July 1591, transferred profits from a highly valuable property in central London to Elizabeth upon the death of the Earl: see The National Archives, C54/1393, mm.22-3; transcript by Nina Green, www.oxford-shakespeare.com. From this it can be assumed that the wedding of the Earl and Elizabeth preceded this date, very near midsummer night, 1591.

[3] E.K. Chambers summarized the identified possibilities: (1) Robert Earl of Essex and Frances Lady Sidney in April or May 1590; (2) Sir Thomas Heneage and Mary Countess of Southampton on 2 May 1594; (3) William Earl of Derby and Elizabeth Vere at Greenwich on 26 January 1595; (4) Thomas Berkeley and Elizabeth Carey at Blackfriars on 19 February 1596; (5) Henry Earl of Southampton and Elizabeth Vernon about February or August 1598; (6) Henry Lord Herbert and Anne Russell at Blackfriars on 6 June 1600. See Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1930), 358. In his discussion of the question, while Geoffrey Bullough recognized that the "emphasis on weddings" suggested that the play was originally written for a "marriage of some noble," he noted that the names listed by Chambers have been "proposed inconclusively." See Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 367.

[4] In addition to *AMND*, eleven plays are listed on Meres' list: *Gentlemen of Verona*, *Errors*, *Love Labors Lost*, *Love Labours Wonne*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Richard the 2*, *Richard the 3*, *Henry the 4*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*.

[5] These six plays include: the *Henry IV* trilogy, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Merry Wives of Windsor*.

By its date and its circumstances, the Sheldon wedding presents a perfect solution to the *AMND* mystery. This wedding ceremony – celebrating the Midsummer Night marriages of both a noble and a commoner couple – is an external fact that completely matches Ralph Sheldon to the actual production of a Shakespeare play.

- **Ralph Sheldon & the Mystery of the Early Source-Plays**

In the first half of the 20th century, study of the Shakespearean works expanded with the confirmation of numerous sources – often rare and arcane – used in construction of the plays. In his 1939 edition of *Richard II*, John Dover Wilson (1881-1969) suggested that an older anonymous play, *The Troublesome Reign of King John*, had provided Shakespeare "not merely with material for his *Richard II*, but for the whole cycle *Richard II* to *Henry V*"; he also alluded to the "strange publication" of *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* – an early play dealing with the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V. Of the author of the *Troublesome Reign*, Wilson wrote that this "unknown predecessor" was "soaked in the history of England, had read the chroniclers for [Shakespeare] and had digested what they had to say upon the downfall of Richard II into a play-book ready to [Shakespeare's] revising hand." Wilson concluded: "Once again, as in *King John*, we have to face the question, 'Was Shakespeare a profound historical scholar or merely the reviser of such a scholar's play?' And, as before, we have been compelled to reply that the probabilities are all in favour of the second alternative."[6]

And, in fact, the conventional view remains that the writer Shakespeare was, indeed, merely the reviser of another scholar's plays. But what if, as argued here, Sheldon was the 'profound historical scholar' who wrote these early plays?

Sheldon's access to the sources of these plays – the same sources identified by these mid-century scholars such as Wilson, Geoffrey Bullough, and Kenneth Muir – can be shown to be unique. For example:

[6] William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. John Dover Wilson, *The New Shakespeare Edition* (Cambridge University Press, 1939, reprinted 1971), pp. lxxiv-lxxvi.

- The early history plays were derived from Hall's *Chronicle*; a rare volume of the *Chronicle* (1550) has annotations that follow the plot of *Famous Victories*, the precursor to the *Henry IV&V* plays: the script of these annotations exactly match Sheldon's own handwriting.[7]
- Plots of four early plays – *Richard II*, *King John*, *Hamlet*, and *Merchant of Venice* – all have significant plot twists directly drawn from the highly estoric legal theories of Catholic jurist Edmund Plowden; Plowden was Sheldon's brother-in-law and co-executor with Sheldon of William Sheldon, Ralph's father, in the 1570s.[8]
- The French novellas of Francois de Belleforest form the basis of *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing*; what appears to have been Sheldon's (as 'R.S.') own translations of other Belleforest novellas were published in 1577.[9]

Given the considerable amount of other evidence supporting Sheldon as the writer Shakespeare – such as the Sheldon First Folio, the date of his death in 1613 (with the ending of the plays), his irrefutable rationale for a pseudonym (his connections with papist militants) – the evidence of his unique access to the sources used in the early plays provides compelling evidence that he was the scholar behind these early plays.

But what about the rest of the plays? Did this scholar go on to write the entire Shakespeare oeuvre? This paper argues that, yes, Sheldon's deep (and again, unique) connections with *AMND* provide absolute proof that Sheldon remained active as the writer Shakespeare in the early 1590s, at the same time that the writer published his first work under the pseudonym William Shakespeare (*Venus & Adonis*, 1593).

- **The Sources of *AMND***

Much like the early source-plays, the construction of *AMND* involves some exceedingly rare sources, sources that can be uniquely solved by direct reference to Sheldon's biography. Although there is no one source for the play, components of the play,

[7] See Maude, *Was Shakespeare a Hydden Man*?; pp. 129-42.
[8] See Maude, *Hydden Man*: *Richard II*, pp. 150-52; *King John*, pp. 124-25; 145-47; *Hamlet*, pp.154-56; *Merchant of Venice,* pp. 169; 171-72.
[9] See Maude, *Hydden Man*, 57-66; 160-63.

such as the stories of Theseus and that of the fairies, have been identified as developed from various independent sources and then combined into the play's narrative. While some of these sources were readily available from published sources, others were rare and esoteric.

Regarding the sources for the story of Theseus and Hippolyta, one was Thomas North's *Plutarch's Life of Theseus*, published around 1580; North's published translations are routinely used in various Shakespeare plays. The other main source for the Theseus' story was Chaucer's *Knights Tale*.[10] The *Knights Tale* was a well-known tale, but it was also of particular attachment to Sheldon: the same *Knights Tale* formed the basis for the first play produced by Sheldon for the Queen: court dramatist Richard Edwards' play, *Palamon and Arcite*, performed in honor of the Queen's first formal visit to Oxford in August 1566.[11]

However, as discussed below, the sources used by the writer for the other components of the play were far less routine but still tightly connected to Ralph Sheldon.

- **Dr. Moffett's Silkworm Poem**

Of the uncommon sources used in Shakespeare plays, one of the oddest – if not most odd – source is that used for the *AMND* playlet, *Pyramus & Thisbe*. Since the 1930s, scholars have remarked on the apparent influence of a very obscure poem, *The Silkeworms, and their Flies* by Dr. Thomas Moffett (or Mouffet), on the *AMND* playlet.[12] In first a 1954 article, and then later in his 1977 book on Shakespeare sources, Kenneth Muir reviewed numerous variations of *Pyramus & Thisbe*, and concluded that the version of the story from which the writer had taken the most from was Dr. Moffett's poem on silkworms.[13] The poem was written to advocate the cultivation of silkworms, which feed on leaves of mulberry trees under which Pyramus & Thisbe die. Muir pointed out that the

[10] See Bullough, vol. I, p. 368-69.
[11] Documentation for this statement is from contemporaneous records from Oxford University sources. For specific records, see Nancy Peters Maude, *Was Shakespeare a Hydden Man* (2024), pp. 108-11.
[12] See Margaret L. Farrand, "An Additional Source for a *Midsummer-Night's Dream*," *Studies in Philology*, no. 2 (April 1930): p. 233.
[13] See Kenneth Muir, "*Pyramus and Thisbe*: A Study in Shakespeare's Method," *Shakespeare* Quarterly 5, no. 2 (April 1954); also Muir, The *Sources of Shakespeare's Play* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), p. 73.

playlet's leading actor – who was a weaver – was named after the technical term for a silkworm's cocoon, "bottom," with other fairy names Moth and Cobweb also linked to the cultivation of silkworms. In the 1979 Arden Shakespeare *AMND*, editor Harold Brooks agreed with Muir, arguing that Muir "convincingly" adduced "more than a dozen instances" where Shakespeare "parodies Moffett or picks up an expression from him."[14]

The controversy related to this odd source relates less to its obscure subject matter than to its date of publication, 1599, a date admittedly too late for use in *AMND*. However, Dr. Moffett was a distinguished naturalist who visited Italy in 1579 where he studied the Italian cultivation of the silkworm; according to Muir, he wrote the poem most likely between 1591 and 1595, but possibly as early as 1589.[15] Dr. Moffett was the long-time family physician for Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), and his poem would have circulated in manuscript form among her circle of friends until its publication in 1599. In 1961, Bullough questioned Muir's theory, skeptical that Shakespeare the writer would have been able to obtain the poem in manuscript form;[16] in 1981, Katherine Duncan-Jones followed Bullough, concluding that it could not be assumed that Shakespeare could have had access to "manuscripts of coterie works relating closely to the Countess and her family."[17]

While the obscurity of the poem and access to its manuscript form are formidable challenges if the writer is assumed to be the actor Shakspere, neither pose a problem if the writer is understood as Ralph Sheldon. Begininning in the 1550s, the Sheldon's father William embarked on a serious endeavor to bring a luxury silk tapestry industry to England. To be successful, silk thread had to be located, either through import or, ultimately, with English cultivation of silkworms. At the time, the supply of silk thread was dominated by

[14] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen & Co., 1979), p. lxxxvii.
[15] Muir, *Shakespeare Sources,* p. 73.
[16] Bullough, vol. I, p. 375.
[17] Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Pyramus and Thisbe: Shakespeare's Debt to Moffettt Cancelled," *Review of English Studies*, vol. xxxii, issue 121 (August 1981) pp. 297-98.

the Italian silk industry.[18] Sheldon, in an effort to assist the family business, traveled to Italy at the end of 1555, where he – like Moffett over two decades later – no doubt studied the Italian silkworm cultivation and silk export.[19] During the period when Moffett would have been writing and circulating his poem, Sheldon was actively engaged in creating the magnificent tapestry maps now known as the Sheldon Tapestries.[20] Moffett's work encouraging silkworm cultivation in England, and his poem advocating such, would have been of great professional interest to Sheldon.

Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, was niece of the Earl of Leicester, and sister of of the poet Philip Sidney. While Sheldon would have known the Countess through her uncle Leicester, a more likely direct connection would have been through poet Nicholas Breton (1545-1626), who was a long-time member of the Countess's circle and reputed to be her one-time lover.[21] Breton was stepson to George Gascoigne, the dramatist who organized Leicester's entertainment for Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1575;[22] although little is known about Breton's life, he appeared to have studied at Oriel College,[23] beginning most likely in the 1560s when Sheldon would have first started his residence at Oriel in 1566. Breton published a series of "madde letters" including letters from R.S. (with one comical legal-language love note from R.S. to mistress A.T.; Sheldon's wife was Anne Throckmorton) in 1606;[24] he was also a principal contributor to the 1593 poetry anthology, *The Phoenix Nest*, edited by R.S.[25] It is argued that R.S. was Ralph Sheldon.[26]

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[18] See Luca Mola, "A Luxury Industry: The Production of Italian Silks 1400-1600," in *Europe's Rich Fabric*, eds. Bart Lambert and Katherine Anne Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 206.
[19] Sheldon's trip to Italy is indicated by contemporaneous documents preserved in the diplomatic records known as the Calendar of State Papers, Venetian. Specific records are documented in Maude, *Hydden Man*, pp. 68-72.
[20] See Hilary L. Turner, *No Mean Prospect: Ralph Sheldon's Tapestry Maps* (Plotwood Press, 2010), p. 5.
[21] See *Dictionary of National Biography*, 1885-1900/Breton, Nicholas, https://en.wikisource.org.; also Mary Ellen Lamb, "The Countess of Pembroke's Patronage," *English Literary Renaissance* 12, no. 2 (1982): p.167.
[22] See C.T. Prouty, *George Gascoigne* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1981), pp. 32, 117-80.
[23] See Nicholas Breton, *A Flourish upon Fancie* (London, Richard Jones, 1577); also James O. Halliwell, ed. *Nicholas Breton, The Will of Wit* (London: T. Richards, 1860), pp. v-vii.
[24] Nicholas Breton, *A poste with a packet of madde letters*. *The second part* (London: John Browne and John Smethicke, 1606).
[25] See Maude, *Hydden Man*, p. 197.
[26] The argument stems from the serious need for secrecy of the identity of the Queen's chief dramatist: public knowledge of Sheldon's ties to militant Catholics would have caused severe political damage to the Queen.

- **Shakespeare's Own Vision: (1) The Rude Mechanicals**

Then, there are Shakespeare's own inventions: the acting troupe of "rude mechanicals," and the quarreling fairy King and Queen. There are no known literary sources for these key components of *AMND*. But again, much like the wedding itself and the use of Dr. Moffett's silkworm poem, both can be fully explained by reference to specific experiences in Sheldon's life.

Rather than traditional English "players" – actors who were servants of nobles – *AMND* portrays its troupe of actors as "rude mechanicals," men of working trades – a carpenter, a weaver, a bellows-maker, a tinker, a joiner, and a tailor. The play reenacts the troupe's performance of *Pyramus & Thisbe*, an early version of the *Romeo & Juliet* story, in a manner that Bullough described as perhaps a "whimsical burlesque of Shakespeare's first experiment in romantic tragedy." [27]

Bullough concluded these rude mechanicals were "drawn from life."[28] If so, how close to life? That *AMND* is explicitly nostalgic of these working class actors seems clear. Philostrate, Theseus's Master of the Revels comments on the troupe: of the acting, he says "There is not one word apt, one player fitted" but nonetheless "when I saw rehears'd, I must confess made my eyes water; but more merry tears the passion of loud laughter never shed" (*AMND* 5.1.65, 68-70). (Of interest: in the First Folio version, these comments were made by Egeus – the father of the bride – not Philostrate.)

Who were these actors, not one of whom "fitted" but who still could make people laugh until they cried? They seem, indeed, to be taken from real life.

So, was there a period of English drama where the acting troupes were reliant on working class men rather than professional players? In fact, there was such a historical

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So, much the same as the plays were published anonymously or under the pseudonym Shakespeare, so also were other literary works by the writer shrouded under "R.S." See generally, Maude, *Hydden Man*, pp. 57-66. The concealment with R.S. also seems connected with attempts at deliberate obfuscation. See Maude, pp. 159-63; 199-200.

[27] Bullough, vol. I, p. 269.

[28] Bullough, vol. I, p. 372.

period: in the reign of Mary, professional players had been widely banned beginning in August 1553, effectively leaving such working class men as what remained of the professional players at the start of Elizabeth's reign in November 1558. As it happens, this period coincides not only with the formation of the premier early Elizabethan troupe – Lord Robert Dudley's (1532-88) (later Leicester) Men – in 1559, but also with the first stage performance of *Romeo & Juliet* circa 1560, and the start of Ralph Sheldon's career as a court dramatist.

As described by drama historian Laurie Johnson, when Dudley first set up his troupe in June 1559, there were "no obvious candidates for any active company that Dudley could have acquired" at that time.[29] According to Johnson, the reign of Mary was marked by a series of prohibitions against playing, beginning with a proclamation on 18 August 1553 which included a ban on the playing of interludes of any kind without her special license. Although a few companies survived with Mary's consent, these were very few companies with only limited appearances.[30]

However, there is evidence that despite the general ban against playing, there remained a group of players who continued to perform in London in the central northern parish of St. Stephen Coleman Street.[31] This area was heavily working class, with a long history of performances in worker's halls, such as that of the Weavers, the Armourers, and the Masons.[32] One of the residents of the parish in 1559 – when Dudley would have been recruiting actors for his troupe – was James Burbage (c. 1532-97). Contemporary records indicate that Burbage lived in this parish from at least April 1559 until June 1574. At this time, he was identified as a joiner by trade.[33]

Thirteen years later, in 1572, Burbage signed as the first member of the Leicester's Men as one of Leicester's "Players."[34]

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[29] Laurie Johnson, *Leicester's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 28-9.
[30] Johnson, p. 29.
[31] Johnson, pp. 30-2.
[32] Johnson, p. 30.
[33] Johnson, p. 33.
[34] Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, vol. II, p. 86.

As noted, the period of the working class actors also coincides precisely with the earliest known stage performance of *Romeo & Juliet* c. 1560: a performance which poet Arthur Brooke (d. 1563) noted in the preface to his own variation of the same work, *Romeus and Juliet* (1562).[35] Was this play – of which the *AMND* playlet *Pyramus & Thisbe* is an early version – one of the first plays of the repertory of the early Dudley's Men? Was *AMND* harkening back to the first early, rustic performances by the working class actors of Dudley's Men of the iconic Shakespeare tragedy?

While it cannot be conclusively determined that this early stage performance was an early version of Shakespeare's own – the play script is lost and the author unnamed – there is evidence that Brooke added elements to his poem (a straightforward translation of a French version of the story) that specifically match the Shakespeare play. As Brooke witnessed the early stage version – which he acknowledged and highly commended – it cannot be ruled out that the stage version he watched was his actual inspiration for these added elements.

Moreover, the presence of Ralph Sheldon in London at the time of the *Romeo & Juliet* stage performance, studying in London at the Middle Temple from November 1556 through 1560, makes the possibility quite likely. Robert Dudley was closely associated with the Inner Temple (as was Arthur Brooke). These two Inns of Court – the Middle Temple and the Inner Temple – were located in separate wings on the same premises, and both were known for their Temple entertainments. In early 1560, Sheldon negotiated with his father-in-law Robert Throckmorton to obtain Dudley's stewardship of Warwick Castle.[36] Subsequently, in April 1566, Dudley (then Leicester) insisted that Oriel College Oxford give a 60-year lease for a rural college residence tp Sheldon,[37] a residence later used for rehearsals for the play to be performed in honor of the Queen's first official visit to Oxford in August 1566.[38]

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[35] See J.J. Munro, ed. *Brooke's 'Romeus and Juliet'* (London: Chatto and Windus Duffield, 1908), lxvi.
[36] Simon Adams, *Leicester and the Court* (Manchester University Press, 2002), p.321, 357 (note 77).
[37] *The Dean' Register of Oriel*, eds. G.C. Richards and H.E. Salter (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 156.
[38] See Frederick S. Boas, *University Drama in the Tudor Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), pp. 100-01.

Significantly, Sheldon's life seems strongly intertwined with *Romeo & Juliet*. As noted, Sheldon traveled to Italy in 1556 on behalf of his father's silk tapestry business: at the time Verona – the city backdrop of *Romeo & Juliet* – was the center of the Italian export of silk thread. Further, Sheldon traveled to Italy in the retinue of Edward Courtenay (c. 1527-56), the White Rose heir to the English throne, an ally to the Catholic Montagues. In 1554, Edward first courted Mary and then her younger sister Elizabeth. The same year he, along with Elizabeth, was imprisoned for allegedly fomenting rebellion against Mary, with Edward exiled to Europe in 1555, where he died suddenly, possibly of poison. Sheldon could not have found a closer model to Romeo Montague.

- **Shakespeare's Own Vision: (2) The Quarrelling King and Queen of Fairies**

In his study of sources for *AMND*, Bullough determined that Shakespeare's name "Titania" was drawn directly from Ovid's name for the goddess Diana, but he could find no similar story in literature for that of the incessantly jealous fairy king quarrelling with his queen.[39] However, if one examines the life of Sheldon, one can identify a remarkably close story, drawn again from his early travels to Italy in 1556.

In January 1556, Courtenay and his retinue first entered Italy through the Gonzagan principality of Mantua,[40] where, as it happens, commedia dell'arte – the novel naturalistic acting technique – was being developed in Mantua by troupes of street entertainers[41] The technique greatly influenced the Shakespeare plays.[42]

In addition, though, at the same time, the Gonzagan prince Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna (1531-91 [43] and his beautiful wife Diana de Cardona began construction in Mantua

[39] Bullough, vol. I, p. 370-71.
[40] See *Calendar of State Papers, Venetian,* vol. 6, Part I, ed. Rawdon Brown (London, 1877), p. 243 (No. 273, 11 Nov. 1555).
[41] See *Scenarios of the 'Commedia dell'Arte,'* trans. Henry F. Salerno (Third Limelight Edition, 1996; originally printed New York University Press, 1967), p. xiv.
[42] See Kathleen Lea, *Italian popular comedy; a study in the Commedia dell'arte, 1560-1620* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962).
[43] Vespasiano was the eldest son of Luigi 'Rhodomonte' Gonzaga (1500-32). By a manuscript dated in 1538, Luigi was wrongfully accused of killing Francesco Maria I delle Rovere (1480-1538), the Duke of Urbino married to Leonora Gonzaga (1493-1570). The Duke died in 1538, and his barber confessed under torture that he poured poison into the Duke's ear at the instigation of another Luigi Gonzaga – the Marchese di

of a utopian Renaissance city, Sabbioneta. Records show that Vespasiano actually visited the site in January 1556, publically urging the fabrication of the city.[44] Known locally as "La Piccola Atene" (The Little Athens), the city was dedicated to the concept of the ideal classical city, with complete religious tolerance, including for Jews, with a Temple (a school of Hebrew studies) in the city since around 1552.[45] The city was surrounded by mulberry trees, and was the center of a major center for silkworm cultivation.[46]

Unfortunately, the jealousy of Vespasiano towards his tempestuous wife Diana was well-known: shortly after they first married and arrived in Sabbioneta in 1550, Diana had a miscarriage and rumors spread that she had lost the child because it was not that of her husband.[47] Diana died in 1559, officially by a stroke, but according to Italian tradition, Vespasiano forced her to take poison after he accused her of infidelity.[48]

By what seems a remarkable coincidence, when Vespasiano started work in January 1550, he started the construction at the western fortifications of the city[49] – at the western gate called "Il Quercia dei Duca" (the Duke's Oak).[50] Of course, in *AMND*, the rude mechanicals meet for rehearsals at a location referred to as "the Duke's oak" (*AMND* 1.2.103). This location was very near the lair of Titania, the Queen of the Fairies. This reference can be paired with the play's 28 references to 'Athens' or 'Athenians', and its 4 references to 'temple.' But while western literature is replete with references to 'Athens' and

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Castelgoffredo. After her husband's death the Duchess Leonora eventually returned to Mantua; she died in 1570. As discussed by Bullough, the story of the playlet in *Hamlet* "The Murder of Gonzaga" parallels the muder of the Duke of Urbino: see Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. VII (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.; New York: Columbia Univ Press, 1973), pp.31-4; also "The Murder of Gonzaga: A Probable Source for *Hamlet*," *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 30, no. 4 (Oct. 1935; jstor.org/stable/3716252) pp. 433-44; for the story of Luigi 'Rhodomonte' Gonzaga, see *MLR*, 435.

[44] Ireneo Affo, *Vita di Vespasiana Gonzaga duca di Sabbioneta* (Parma: Presso Filippo Carmignanini, 1780), p. 23.

[45] See James Cowan, "Hamlet's Ghost: Vespasiano Gonzaga and his Ideal City," PhD Diss., University of Queensland (2016), pp. 37-8.

[46] See Antonio Racheli, *Delle memorie storiche di Sabbioneta* (1849), pp. 23-4.

[47] See Cowan, p. 37, paraphrasing from Gian Francesca Marini, *Sabbioneta, Piccola Atene* (Casalmaggiore: G. Toscani, 1914).

[48] See Umberto Maffezzoli, *Sabbioneta: Visitor's City Guide* (Pro Loco Sabbioneta, 2008), 105.

[49] Maffezzoli, pp. 9-10.

[50] Richard Roe, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), pp. 178-87.

‘temples,’ a search of the digital file of early English literature, EEBO, would suggest that the Shakespeare play is the only source of the phrase ‘Duke’s oak.’

This odd circumstance would seem best explained by Sheldon as Shakespeare. At the time *AMND* was produced, Sheldon was about 55 years old, and would have been developing English drama for the past three decades. Was this entire play a metaphor for his own dream of a new English drama, and all the bumps along the way to the ideal?