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Repository Citation

Vickery, A. (2017). Fourth Time's a Charm.
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Fourth Time's A Charm

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December 5, 2017

HON 410: 1008

We rode in amiable silence, save the sound of our sovereign's substantial arse beating against the velvet saddle of his ivory shire horse. What, I thought wryly, was the purpose of all this cloak and dagger if the beast was still clothed in the King's colours? Should we be spotted before we dismount, the gold and crimson tassels that adorned its body and snout would surely give us straight away. However, despite its inconvenient fashion, I respected that horse. Their breed are lofty, to be sure. Nonetheless, it requires a buxom stallion of particular temperament and stamina to dutifully support a man of Henry's stature without apparent fatigue. The horse and I were alike in that way; though, unlike me, the horse could remain dignified in his fealty.

This morning I has awoken to raucous ribaldry that surely indicated Henry was in agreeable spirits. This had proven true, and although Henry's gay disposition was cause for jubilation, I had grown weary of those acts and occasions that inspired his elation. Today was to be particularly tedious, as he wished to partake in a juvenile dalliance, the likes of which I had not been subjected to since Catherine, God rest her soul, had occupied the throne. I acquiesced without complaint, not only for my own sake, but also because I knew Henry had not matured as I had in the time since we were boys. Though it surely made me a fool, I could not stand to extinguish the innocent glee that flickered in his expression. So, without hesitation, I faithfully donned the mottled cloak which I was provided, and rode toward Rochester and the new year with my monarch and his company of candle-wasters.

We departed on the morn of first day of January in the year of our Lord, one thousand fifteen hundred and forty. Though the task at hand was an errand which I would rather avoid, the journey was exceedingly pleasant. We travelled from Hampton Court to Rochester, a distance which was adequately brief so as not to inspire fatigue, but appropriately lengthy to allow ample appreciation for the unique pleasure of riding through the idyllic countryside. Though none

among us had dressed with any consideration for the brisk climate, we found that we did not mind the crisp breeze that blew through our weathered regalia. Rather, the shock of biting frigidity combined with the exhilaration of a lengthy ride cumulated into a sense of fulfilling invigoration.

The King of England rode prominently at the head of our party, setting an energetic pace. I followed in the second most prominent position, a short distance behind the King to his right-hand side. Normally this station would be filled by Charles Brandon: Duke of Suffolk, President of the Privy Council, and closest confidant to the King. However, Charles had not yet taken leave from Calais. This was unfortunate, as I much preferred Charles to the man who rode in tandem with me now.

Sir Anthony Brown, Master of Horse, was perhaps my least favorite privy council member. Indeed, Sir Anthony Brown, Master of Horse, was perhaps my least favorite human, come to consider it. Though other men often tried my patience with their various ineptitudes, the vast majority possessed redeeming attributes of one sort or another. As far as I was aware, Anthony stood alone in a category of utter, unbridled dreadfulness.

As luck would have it, on this particular morn Anthony was being rather agreeable. Let it be known that I consider 'agreeableness' to be equivalent to silence in Anthony's case.

We were a half-dozen men in total. Henry, Anthony, and I, Sir John Russell, Lord High Admiral, followed closely by Sir Ralph Sandler, King's Secretary, Sir John Baker, Chancellor of the Court of First Fruits and Tenths, and Robert Radcliffe, Earl of Sussex.

We had been selected this morn to accompany our sovereign to Rochester Castle, where his bride to be was being held before their upcoming nuptials. Henry had proposed a game of sorts, in which we would all disguise ourselves in ragged garb and surprise Anne of Cleves, the

lady in question, two days prior to our expected arrival. According to tradition, true love would win the day and the lady would recognize Henry straight away despite the deception. Hip hip, hurrah.

My only knowledge of the lady originated from letters that Charles had addressed to me from her reception at Calais. Apparently, the affair was one of obscene pomp and circumstance. The girl was escorted by a parade of military officers and noblemen. He explicitly stated that so many shots were fired in her honor that smoke from the muskets reduced visibility to two feet or less in certain areas. Also, the streets and ships were said to be lined with gleaming, gold cloth. Even for the future Queen of England, this reception seemed a bit much.

Charles had described the girl as very beautiful, but I took his words with extreme caution. Charles had been known to exaggerate certain attributes of various women that he encountered. I did not think them downright lies, just inaccuracies guided by his libido.

Upon our arrival at Rochester, I noted a bull-baiting taking place in the courtyard. It was New Year's Day, I reminded myself. I should have expected similar festivities before we ever arrived. I paused for a moment to observe the beast. It bled from a myriad of bite marks that coated its belly, but it carried itself autocratically, none the less. This sort of entertainment had never been a particularly enjoyable pastime for me. I just could not see the appeal of watching a great beast suffer and die for hours on end.

"Do not waste your attention for the bull", Henry scolded me. "There is a beautiful maiden waiting for true love just beyond this wall. We mustn't keep her waiting."

"Anthony, go ahead and warn my lady that a gentleman caller has come to present her with a New Year's gift", Henry commanded enthusiastically, practically tittering with excitement.

I carried the crate of fine furs that would be presented to the lady Anne under my arm as the remaining members of our party made haste toward the appropriate chamber. When we finally arrived, Anthony had already entered the room, shutting the door behind him.

The five who remained in the corridor waited with bated breath, willing our hearts to beat coyly. Henry took a tentative step forward, hearkening toward a gap in the chamber doorway, which was so slim that a shilling might prove too ample for entering. Nevertheless, faded voices and swarthy shadows filtered through the crack, teasing our company without revealing any substantial clues as to the happenings within.

I noticed subtle signals that Henry was growing impatient, the sort that were only recognizable by those companions with extreme familiarity and kinship. For instance, his swollen cheeks grew livid, resembling grotesque plums plastered beneath his dewy eyes, which were now darting between the gap and the iron handle that hung seductively mere inches from his twitching thumb. Our sovereign was a profound and abstruse gentleman, indeed. Being the lone voice of reason among us, and not wishing Henry to make himself a fool, it fell upon me to arrest his wambling urges.

“Patience, my friend, the sweetest fruits must be given time to ripen before the feast”, I whispered as I clapped an admonishing hand upon his shoulder.

He mumbled something indiscernible, never taking his eyes off the crack. I stifled a sigh at his juvenile pouting, finding it more difficult every instant to calmly restrict his impulses. Though the man before me was both my friend and my sovereign, my patience for his escapades was wearing thin. I would soon require a holiday, or possibly a war, to quiet my agitation. As fate would have it, just as I began to fantasize about those soothing affairs, the chamber door hastily flew open revealing Anthony, who now appeared disconcertingly pale and grave. As I

examined his distressed demeanor, I steeled myself for the fracas which his expression foretold. I stifled the impulsive excitement that pooled in my chest, for perhaps my fancies of war were not as phantasmal as I had believed. Perhaps this day would not be wasted after all.

Anthony stepped into the narrow hallway, shutting the heavy chamber door behind him swiftly. He slowly turned to Henry, squaring his shoulders, though not quite meeting the desperate man's eyes, "I did as you asked. The lady will be expecting a gentleman caller."

Henry gawked at him impatiently, "My friend, *why* must you prolong this torment? Pray tell what has delayed your return. How did you find my lady? What concerns ail thee, for I can see they be many!"

Anthony shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, "I... am not at liberty to say."

"*You are not at liberty to say?*", Henry hissed. "'Tis not meet! Out with it!"

Anthony recoiled from Henry's fury. Despite the obvious gravity of our situation, I was forced to bite back a chuckle at his discomfort.

"The lady is... not so fair as I had come to expect", Anthony divulged in a whisper.

My mouth fell open in shock. Of all the dim-witted, zany remarks, this was by far the most foolhardy and ill-conceived I had ever encountered. I had not thought anything positive of our Master of Horse prior to this incident, yet, in this moment, he managed to lower my opinion of him to depths that I had not been previously cognizant of. I cannot imagine what circumstances might inspire a man to inform his sovereign that his future queen, a woman who he has yet to meet, is unattractive.

To my surprise, Henry laughed good naturedly, patting Anthony on the shoulder, "You have never though a woman to be sufficiently beautiful. Do not worry though, I do not blame you for excessively high standards."

With this, he brushed past Anthony and entered the chamber where his future Queen awaited. She sat on the window sill, passively watching the bull-baiting in the courtyard while toying with a lock of her hair.

Henry, in his infinite wisdom, apparently judged abrasiveness to be the best course of action for this delicate situation.

“My love, are you enjoying the show?” He asked, partially concealed beneath his mottled cloak.

Anne turned ‘round, assessing the newcomer with a brief glance, judging him worthy of a curt nod and nothing more.

Good lord, she didn’t know what he looked like. I had assumed that she would have seen a portrait of him as he did her. Apparently not, as she did not make any immediate effort to turn back or pay Henry any attention whatsoever. Lord, save us all.

Henry, being only slightly discouraged, tried once more, “My love, I have brought you a gift! The finest furs money can buy, worthy of a lady so magnificent as you.”

This time she did not even bother to look back.

At this point, Henry became more forceful. He walked purposefully toward the window sill, and physically turned her face to look at him. I perceived the shock and disgust that flashed across her face, and I could only guess that he read those same emotions as easily as I had.

In one last, desperate act, he grabbed her neck, forcing her face to his. She struggled wordlessly, clearly trying to break free.

Finally, with his boyish hope demolished, Henry pushed her away and fled down the corridor from whence we came. We five confidants trailed behind him closely, at a loss for words.

“I LIKE HER NOT!”, Henry bellowed, bursting through a random bed chamber door. It violently slammed against the stone archway, causing tiny wisps of dirt and ash to vacate their ancient resting places and drift downward in lazy spirals. Two young maids who had been folding the bed clothes shrieked in fright, taking quick leaves once they recovered themselves. Anthony followed their flight, though only with his eyes rather than his fiddle. I have never seen a surer sign of grave times.

“How DARE she? I have seen better manners from the guinea hens... down at...”, Robert trailed off as he caught sight of my frigid expression. Luckily, Henry was entirely oblivious to our exchange.

He was pacing back and forth in front of the hearth, wringing his hands and mumbling to himself, “too fat... uncomely... nothing like Holbein’s portrait... stupid...”.

I briefly considered his assessment, concluding that it was only partially true. The girl was daffyish, to be certain. However, I doubt that I had ever beheld a *less* hideous figure. Her porcelain skin was smooth and flawless, which accentuated her soft, child-like features, like those of a poppet. As for her stature, she possessed ampler womanly contours than Anne or Jane. Still, she was much more petite than Catherine had been, and Henry had never complained of her proportions.

The other members of our company stood awkwardly near the perimeter of the chamber, seeming lost for words. That is, all members save Anthony.

“I knew you would find that boss sorely lacking”, Anthony bragged, his eyes twinkling. “I’ve had mares more fit to be Queen of England. Honestly, no fooling, had an auburn ginete born a fortnight past who was more articulate than that one”, he jerked his thumb toward the

door. “She’s probably easier to mount, too”, he chuckled, causing the feather in his flat cap to tremble.

I quelled the urge to pluck that feather from his cap and skewer his tongue. Luckily for him, one of us was capable of self-control.

Henry looked ashen, a mere phantom compared to the giddy, naïve man who had woken me just this morning. I mourned the loss of his joy, both my sovereign and my friend deserved some happiness in this wicked world.

“So, she’s a bit dim, eh?”, I remarked softly, donning a casual smile. “There are far worse fates than a dim wife... a keen wife, for starters...”, this received a chuckle from the group and a fleeting grin from Henry. “Perhaps we’ve grown too adept at camouflage. In hindsight, what chance did the poor maiden stand against England’s finest? Even Alamire could not conceive more cunning disguises than these... regard this uncoined raiment and oppose me, should I be amiss.” I held out a fistful of the soiled cloak that hung limply ‘round my neck, hoping that my conviction would conceal my obvious misrepresentation of the garment.

“Love sees not with the eyes”, Henry responded glumly, collapsing with a deep thump into the Italian X-frame chair that guarded the hearth.

“Perhaps”, I conceded, “But few possess your wisdom in the ways of the heart. God would not have gifted us eyes if we were not meant to use them from time to time.”

Henry met my compelling gaze from beneath his furrowed brow, which had begun to soften slightly. His eyes were wide and misty, characteristics that I was not accustomed to perceiving on his masculine features. In that moment, he was no longer my sovereign. He was a scared, defenseless creature that had been deeply wounded. My thoughts inexplicably drifted to

the bull in the courtyard, but I quickly refocused on the task at hand. Henry's woeful appearance had given me an idea.

"Come, let us not wallow", I pronounced with renewed fervor. "We are great men, are we not?" My inquiry was met with meek assent by the cohort. God grant me strength, I thought bitterly. Why could these gits never permit effortless exposition? "In that case I retract my former assertion, you lot may be impotent ninnys, but at the very least Henry and I are great men."

Henry snorted with amusement, blinking away a bit of the moisture that pooled beneath his eyes. I noted that a hint of color had returned to his cheeks and that he was carrying himself somewhat more purposefully than he had been a moment ago.

This encouraged me to begin again, not giving a damn whether or not my colleagues chose to help or hinder, "In my experience, great men do not retreat to murky bed chambers to cower in fear of any tribulation, much less for fear of the suppositions of an insignificant, German woman."

"Hear, hear!" Anthony chimed in, toasting with an illusory goblet.

I shot him a tight-lipped, insincere grin and continued, "Let us emerge from this den of melancholy transformed. Let us dress in our most ornate finery and reacquaint ourselves with your future bride. Let your magnificence strike the lady blind as surely as if you were the midday sun blazing before her!"

At last, my words seemed to pierce the gloom that hung around Henry. He smiled widely, rising from his seat with substantial, but enthusiastic effort. "Fetch my esquires of the body", he wheezed, having to catch his breath, "Tell them to gather my grandest garments, sparing no ornament."

Though Anthony had not been specifically addressed, he acquiesced to the request with alarming eagerness, bounding from the room as if pursued by a pack of ravenous wolves.

“Who needs a doting wife when one has Anthony?” I remarked, coaxing another chortle from Henry.

“Any man who isn’t a eunuch. I would lay with his damn ginete before I would lay with him... the horse would be less long-faced”, Henry joked to my thorough amusement and content.

Our good humor was curtailed by Anthony’s sudden reappearance. He seemed overly pleased with his own swiftness, strutting back into the chamber with Henry’s esquires in his wake, both of whom were struggling to bear the weight of several substantial garment chests. He spared them no mind, collapsing onto the feather bed as if it were he who experienced the taxing exertion.

All except Henry dressed unattended and in relative silence. I paid little attention to my colleagues as I gathered my familiar regalia, opting to carry out the same structured dressing routine that I had since the time of my youth. Were this a typical morn, I might begin by laying my garments out on the mattress, piece by piece. However, the lone bed in this unfamiliar chamber continued to be occupied by my least favorite Master of Horse. In an effort to restrict our proximity, I chose instead to dress beside the tiny, oak writing desk that stood beneath the chamber’s lone window.

Though the desk itself was miniscule, it was accompanied by a sturdy, X-frame chair, similar to those flanking the hearth, which served to ease my burden. I arranged my garments in a chronological stack on the writing desk, save my simarre and nether hose, which I laid over the upper rail of the chair.

I hurriedly removed my wretched disguise with an audible sigh of relief, lightly tossing it into a remote corner of the chamber. No garment should decide the course of nations, much less one so knacker'd and common. With any luck, it would become a rat's nest and be tossed out by twilight. Though the adept esquires had provided me with a fresh waistcoat and breeches, I opted to remain in my current pair in an effort to make haste. I pulled my freshly laundered chemise over the soiled waistcoat, which, as I had predicted, adequately disguised the musky odor of the article.

The chemise was followed by a durable, sleeveless doublet and an unpatterned, velvet jerkin. The jerkin and matching upper hose were a deep ebony, which suited my modest sensibilities. I relished the fluid suppleness of these garments, appreciating their quality more fully than I had been capable prior to dawning the course, mottled disguise. After pausing for a moment to appreciate the fine craftsmanship of my ensemble, I reluctantly pulled my ivory nether hose into place, fastening them at my knees with tight, gold garters. These were my least favorite garments, as they tended to painfully constrict the woolly hairs that sprouted from my calves like untended wheat from a field.

I finished my routine by donning my boots, simarre, and chain of office. The boots were especially fine, having been crafted from a rich, ebony leather with gold clocking at the ankles. Though I knew that the embroidery was meant to be floral, the thorns that extended from each rosebud made them more closely resemble stars twinkling in the inky heavens. The simarre was the only aspect of my fresh attire that was not ivory, ebony, or gold. It was sewn from a billowing, mahogany fur that served to stave off the penetrating chill that crept in through the chamber window. This same chill caused me to wince as I wrapped my chain of office around

my neck. The metal had grown unpleasantly frigid as it sat on the writing desk, but I ignored it as best I was able.

I arose from my solitary seat to rejoin my cohort, who also appeared to be completing their transformations. One by one we gathered near our sovereign, like moons orbiting around a planet. I grinned as I considered his fashion revival.

Having served Henry for many a decade, his drastic alteration in image did not shock me in the least. I had witnessed the man devolve from handsome charmer to rotund megalomaniac with a period of relatively few years. I harbor doubt that there be any costume or state capable of rendering me unable to recognize him. Even so, I was impressed at the difference achieved by a simple change of clothes.

The man who had so recently seemed distraught and haggard now appeared powerful and confident. I knew his regalia to be overly formal for the setting in which we found ourselves, yet it appeared to inspire an expressive regality that kind words alone were unable to arouse.

He wore a rich, purple simarre with extravagant puffing at the shoulders and a flawless, ivory fur collar. This was draped over a heavily ornamented jerkin of gold and ivory, which was embroidered repetitively with the Tudor rose. As if these aspects were not grand enough, his knuckles seemed weighed down with diamonds and rubies the size of walnuts, though, even these paled in comparison to the jewels that hung round his neck. Henry's chain of office was composed of fist-sized, solid gold semi-circles inlaid with the finest rubies, diamonds, and pearls I had ever known. The overall effect was striking, though I had always known his true identity. I almost pitied the poor maiden who would be unexpectedly subjected to this grandeur.

As we made our way down the long corridor for a second time, I noticed a metallic jingling that had not been present the first trip. I was amused to realize that we had adorned

ourselves so heavily that our jewels and finery were noticeably rattling as we took our steps. England's finest, indeed.

I expected Henry to pause at the threshold of the chamber, but he did not. For the second time this afternoon, I witnessed a door thrown open with such fervor that the occupants within were visibly and audibly frightened.

Anne, who had apparently not moved since the time of our first meeting, very nearly collapsed to the floor. She shrieking a brief exclamation in German, which I assumed was some sort of obscenity. In that moment, I felt like a lion on the savannah. Our prey was cornered and we wanted her to recognize us for what we truly were: predators.

Her head snapped in our direction and I watched various stages of recognition pass over her features. First, she was shocked, audibly gasping and losing what little color her features possessed. Then, she was scared. Her pupils dilated and she began to tremble. I pitied her, for she was surely convinced that this blunder would cost her her life. I might have reached the same conclusion, had I not witnessed what happened next. I was prepared for a variety of reactions: begging, groveling, indifference even. However, I was decidedly not prepared for competence.

In a matter of seconds, she carefully composed her features into a blank slate, revealing nothing of whatever turmoil was boiling beneath the surface. This would have been impressive at any stage, though it was astounding in that it occurred before Henry had even had a chance to speak. I was dumb-struck.

“May I now be permitted to show you affection, or dost thou continue to harbor indifference toward your future husband?” Henry scolded, flaring his nostrils and puffing his chest.

Her maid of honour quickly translated under her breathe, though Anne looked not at her but at Henry. Once she was finished, Anne began speaking very quickly and very emphatically without a second's hesitation.

"Your majesty", she humbled herself before the King, "had I known it was truly you who offered me affection, I would have thrown myself into your arms straight away. I have heard tales of your kindness, and hope that will offer me the opportunity to explain my foolish actions before you relinquish hope for any affections we might have shared."

Henry nodded shortly, refusing to offer any consolation or affirmation beyond that.

Once more, she launched into her explanation without a second's hesitation, "As I said, I am a foolish girl, naïve to the ways of the world. When you first entered my chamber, you must know that I suddenly felt a passion the likes of which I have never known. Not knowing that you were truly my intended, I attempted to conceal this passion. Do you not remember how I turned away, how I rejected your kiss? How could I allow myself to feel this way for a man who would not be my husband? Your grace, I may be foolish, but I am loyal." She paused dramatically, a large, apparently genuine, smile creeping across her features and a single, glistening tear forming on her lashes. "You cannot imagine my joy now that I realize your true identity. Please, my love, look into my eyes and see the truth of my words. I love you as I have never loved any other!"

I could not believe what I was witnessing. It struck me so violently and abruptly that I completely failed to witness Henry's reaction to her ingenious charade. I had always assumed that I, and I alone, was capable of playing the game this masterfully. I had never witnessed another with my skill, much less a woman with no real title or education to boast. No, I corrected myself, this woman did not match my skill level, she *surpassed* it.

I felt as if I was drowning. Everything that I considered absolute, my entire perception of myself and my abilities, was a lie. I had been an arrogant fool. I tumbled numbly in the rip-current of my thoughts, trying desperately to regain a foothold in reality. It felt like an eternity had passed, but I was eventually able to somewhat accept this new reality in order that I may reground myself in the present.

By the time I regained this awareness, it was too late to act or speak. Henry and Anne exited the chamber alone, arm in arm, as lovers do. I watched as they drifted slowly out of my sight. For the first time in my life, I felt utterly helpless.

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