

Shakespeare's experiences as a young man in continental Europe, and how that influenced the writing of all his plays set in various European countries outside England.

Michael G. Audley-Charles

Emeritus Professor
UCL
London WC1E 6BT
UK

Introduction

The 23rd April 2014 marks the 450th anniversary of the birth of William Shakespeare in the town of Stratford on Avon, that is situated in the middle of England. This paper is written as a contribution to the celebration of his work.

We present here the case and explanation for the reason why, perhaps counter to expectations, the majority of his plays were set in places outside England and Scotland. The majority of his plays were in fact set in continental European countries, namely: Italy, Sicily, Bohemia, Greece, Denmark, Illyria, and the Adriatic coast as well as in France, Vienna, and in what was then called Troy (which is now called Hisarlik) in NW Turkey.

The following pages of this paper will go some way, we hope, to explain why and how it was that from 1592 and continuing until 1611 he was able to describe in his plays in great detail the nature of life in foreign lands. We suggest that he was writing in fact from memory years after he had returned from those countries and had returned to England. We therefore concur with recent authors (e.g. RP Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, 2011) that

Shakespeare spent a period of his life on the Continent.

Shakespeare reveals his intimate knowledge of foreign parts and practices in many ways, although all his plays are written in English, and all for English audiences. Thus, Shakespeare would never have been permitted by the Lord Chamberlain to allow any obviously important and grand English personages to be insulted or ridiculed on the London stage. Instead, the acting characters in such plays who were ridiculed or insulted, or who were cruel to other characters always had to be characterised as foreigners and not as English. The Lord Chamberlain would always keep a close eye on any such digressions. We contend that on his travels, Shakespeare must have taken careful notice of the appearance, clothing, manners and other characteristics of foreigners who he subsequently used in his plays. The fact that Shakespeare was able to remember the details from his youthful days during his European tours is an indication of his remarkable memory and his obvious intent to make playwriting his way of life. We suggest that it would also seem intuitively obvious that Shakespeare would have kept a record of anything that he thought would be useful to his play writing when he returned to

England, although no such document has been found.

We can now review briefly what some leading biographers of Shakespeare have recorded in their biographies of this early stage of Shakespeare's career. We must obviously begin with the short biography of William Shakespeare that was recorded by the well-known biographer of his time, namely John Aubrey, who lived from 1626-97 and whose brief obituaries were first published in print in 1813. Aubrey's obituary of William Shakespeare includes these brief but valuable observations:

"writing of Shakespeare that understood Latine pretty well: for he had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country."

He also noted that Shakespeare as a boy worked with his father as a butcher. However, Greenblatt in his biography of Shakespeare published by Jonathan Cape in 2004 noted Aubrey's observation that Shakespeare had been a schoolmaster in the country, and 'that people had suggested he had been a school master in Lancashire.' Duff Cooper, who himself had been a courageous soldier in WW1, reported that Shakespeare had been a Sergeant in the army fighting in the Netherlands.

However, we have more to hear about the young William Shakespeare's working life, if it is to be believed. Peter Ackroyd in his biography reported that the young William Shakespeare had worked as a lawyer's clerk in London. Later he was reported to have joined the travelling players passing through Stratford.

It is notable that our biographers seem to have worked in packs to some extent, for the late Professor Nutthall, in his biography of Shakespeare published by Yale University Press in 2007, also reports that the missing 8 years from Shakespeare's career were filled by biographers who reported that Shakespeare worked for a lawyer, and that he served in the army, and was also a schoolmaster. This list of Will's employments seem to correspond, except for the fact for the improbability of his combining all these employments within the same period of 8 years.

What is missing and severely absent is clear evidence of all these careers filled by William Shakespeare in those 8 years of his early manhood.

One hesitates to suggest that Shakespeare was even more occupied with yet another form of travail in those years from his 20th to 28th year. Yet from the evidence in his plays, and the knowledge of continental Europe that they contain, we suggest that it is clear to quite a strong degree that throughout those 8 years William Shakespeare must have spent some of that time in Italy, and quite likely he spent some time in other European continental countries near Italy, including Sicily, Greece and the Adriatic borderland, and quite possibly he spent some time in Vienna and even Denmark, and very possibly in Troy. The indications for these claims are present in the pages of this paper, and support further the claims laid out by Roe.

The dates and settings of Shakespeare's plays

The chronology and setting of Shakespeare's plays are as follows:

| DATE OF PLAY | TITLE OF PLAY | LOCATION OF PLAY |
|--------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1590 | Henry VI, in 3 parts | England & France |
| 1592 | Richard III | England |
| 1592 | Comedy of Errors | Ephesus (now western Turkey) |

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|--------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1593 | Taming of the Shrew | Italy |
| 1593 | Titus Andronicus | Italy |
| 1594 | Two Gentlemen of Verona | Italy |
| 1594 | Romeo and Juliet | Italy |
| 1594 | Loves Labour Lost | NE Spain |
| 1595 | Richard II | England |
| 1595 | Midsummer Night's Dream | Greece |
| 1596 | King John | England & France |
| 1596 | Henry IV, pt 1 | England |
| 1596 ? | Merchant of Venice | Italy |
| 1597 | Henry IV, pt 2 | England |
| 1598 | Henry V | England & France |
| 1598 | Much Ado About Nothing | Italy |
| 1599 | Julius Caesar | Italy |
| 1599 | As you Like It | England |
| 1599 | Twelfth Night | Illyria (Balkan Peninsula & Adriatic) |
| 1600 | Hamlet | Denmark |
| 1600 | Merry Wives of Windsor | England |
| 1601-2 | Troilus & Cressida | Greece and Troy |
| 1602 | All's Well that Ends Well | Italy and France |
| 1604 | Measure for Measure | Vienna |
| 1604 | Othello | Italy |
| 1605 | King Lear | Scotland and England |
| 1605 | Macbeth | Scotland and England |
| 1606 | Antony & Cleopatra | Egypt and Rome |
| 1607 | Coriolanus | Italy |
| 1607 | Timon of Athens | Greece |
| 1608 | Pericles | Mediterranean various sites |
| 1609 | Cymbeline | England and Italy |
| 1610 | The Winter's Tale | Sicily and partly in Bohemia |
| 1611 | The Tempest | Italy and Mediterranean island |
| 1612 | Henry VIII | England |

As can be seen above, there are 16 of Shakespeare's 39 plays (if we include Edward III and The Two Noble Kinsmen) that are set in Britain, of which 11 are dedicated to English history, and there are only 5 of his other plays that are set in England and Scotland, and one of which (Cymbeline) is set in both England and Italy. We can note that 14 of his plays take place in what is now Italy, and one of these is Cymbeline, with longer scenes in England. That means that more than 35% of Shakespeare's plays are set in Italy. This concentration of locations might support the suggestion that Shakespeare could have visited

and perhaps spent some considerable time in Italy during his early years, before becoming a playwright.

Shakespeare made reference in The Winter's Tale to the work of Julio Romano (v, ii, 93-101), an Italian artist born in Rome 1492-1499. Most of Romano's work was in Mantua where he began working in 1524, and where he died Nov 1546. He was an architect and painter, and pupil of Raphael (who died 1520), much of whose unfinished work Julio Romano completed. Romano's main work, that was extensive, and his greatest work was *Palazzo*

del Te on the outskirts of Mantua. The show piece of his work was the *trompe l'oeil* decoration from floor to ceiling. It was this specific work that Shakespeare referred to in *The Winter's Tale*. Of course this reference by Shakespeare could have resulted from someone telling him about it, or it could have been perhaps derived from Shakespeare's reading about this extraordinary work; but the fact that he made this reference as he did would seem to suggest that Shakespeare had seen this work for himself when, one must presume, he was himself in Mantua. But Shakespeare must have been well aware that this was an anachronism, as the scenes of the play are set in an age long passed and certainly long before the art work of Julio Romano was completed.

It is notable that eight of Shakespeare's Italian plays were based in the Mantua region, which suggests he might have been particularly familiar with this part of Italy, thus for example: *The Winter's Tale* (*Mantua*) *The Merchant of Venice* (*Venice & Padua*), *Tempest* (*Milano*), *Romeo & Juliet* (*Verona, Padua, Mantua*), *Othello* (*Venice*), *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (*Verona*), *The Taming of the Shrew* (*Padua & Verona*), *Much Ado About Nothing* (*Padua & Florence*). All these towns are relatively close to each other, such that a man might know them all if he became familiar with this region of Italy. But *All's Well that Ends Well* is set in France and in Italy (specifically it is set in Florence that is located between Rome and Mantua).

There are four of his plays based in and around Rome, namely *Titus Andronicus*, (*Rome*), *Antony & Cleopatra* (*Rome & Egypt*), *Julius Caesar* (*Rome*), *Coriolanus* (*Rome*).

There is a group of his sixteen plays that are set around the Mediterranean: *The Winter's Tale* in Sicily; *Timon of Athens* is set in Greece; *Pericles* takes place in various sites in the eastern Mediterranean; *Comedy of Errors* is set in an ancient Greek city; *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is set in Greece; while *Troilus & Cressida* is set on the coast of the Aegean Sea

at Troy, which was the ancient city of what is now Hisarlik in NW Asian Turkey only 6.4 km from mouth of Dardanelles; and *Twelfth Night* is set along the Adriatic coast.

Possible implications

Few things are certain when we come to consider the movements of William Shakespeare in his early adult life. Those eight years from 1584 and 1592, which cover his life from age 20 to 28 are known as his 'missing years' because there is no firm evidence of his whereabouts during this time.

What he achieved in his 52 years of life suggests that he must have been an extraordinary young man. He was educated in a Stratford on Avon school, from where he had acquired a working knowledge of Latin, that would have been useful when travelling in Europe; and maybe he could read and speak French (if his play *Henry V* is anything to go by); he may even have had some knowledge of ancient Greek. His works reveal that he was very inquisitive. Equally he was ambitious, as his great achievements show, and he had an exceptionally powerful, brilliantly creative imagination. He was an observer of Nature, that he seems to have loved, and he was interested in and enjoyed music as his works show. His sense of humour revealed in his works is witty, creative and entertaining. In these 'missing years', when he was young, it must have been obvious to educated people that he was exceptionally bright, and as reported by John Aubrey (who lived from 1626-1697), who gathered what information he could about Shakespeare from the comments he could gain from those who knew Shakespeare, he was polite, and he is referred to as 'gentle Shakespeare'. His wit as a playwright was recognised by his contemporaries. What this all adds up to is that he would have been an entertaining, witty, polite, lively and knowledgeable young man with a marvellous turn of phrase and astonishing use of English. Did fortune grant him, and thus all of us, by seeing to it that Shakespeare was invited to

accompany a rich man who was planning to travel to Italy, and maybe around parts of the eastern Mediterranean, where the Roman Empire had left its mark, and, where earlier, those astonishingly creative Athenians of fifth century BC had lived and worked? Will's written works leave us in no doubt that among such a wide range of subjects he was curious about the roles and consequences that Fortune sometimes kindly, or equally unkindly, plays in Men's lives. By these possibilities did Will Shakespeare spend some years with such a rich patron in Italy, with a visit to Sicily perhaps, and possibly spending some time around the Aegean and Adriatic, in Greece and even visiting what was left of Troy on the Aegean coast of what is now NW Turkey? Consider the possibility of all or part of this experience having been visited on Shakespeare in his 20's. Think of it in terms of the influence it very likely would have had on his writings, especially in view of his astonishingly powerful memory. There is no proof of Shakespeare's visiting any of these places during his life between his age of 20 to 28, but neither is there any evidence that he did not make such journeys during those 'lost years'. What cannot be disputed is that more than 35% of his plays he set mainly in two parts of Italy, the area around Mantua, and in Rome and in one play in Florence.

Discussion

Only 11 of his 39 plays are about the history of England and only 3 of his tragedies and 2 of his comedies are set in England. All his other 23 plays we have by Shakespeare are set outside Britain. Shakespeare's decisions to write less than 41% of his 39 plays that were set in England and Scotland seems a surprising way to have chosen how he wanted to entertain English audiences in the middle & late 16th and early 17th centuries. We need to bear in mind that very likely most of the audience who were standing would not have ventured beyond the shores of Britain. However, some of those who watched the plays from their comfortable seats will very

likely have travelled on the European continent beyond the shores of Britain. But why, in particular, did Shakespeare choose to set the majority (23) of his plays in Italy, Greece, France, the Adriatic coast, the Aegean Sea and in Vienna. France is by far the nearest country to England so that may not be surprising. But his plays set in Greece and Italy meant in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, and he chose Vienna for his marvellous play *Measure for Measure*.

One obvious reason for Shakespeare choosing locations for his plays in continental Europe rather than in Britain is that such plays that insulted, denigrated, traduced and ridiculed important English people, and who were in positions of power in England, having high status and influence, would likely be rejected and refused a permit to be shown on the stage immediately by the Monarch's Lord Chamberlain, and its author warned against criticising and ridiculing such important English people.

On the other hand, to traduce, vilify, and ridicule important foreigners would probably not disturb the Lord Chamberlain who would permit such plays to be shown on the London stage where they could include all kinds of important people committing all kinds of wickedness and cruelty, and the proud and important could be ridiculed. It is notable that Shakespeare in his history of England plays stopped writing these histories with the killing of Richard III in battle in 1485 by the future king Henry VII. Shakespeare did not write a play of Henry VII, and his play Henry VIII was not written until 1612, which was nine years after the death of Queen Elizabeth (the daughter of Henry VIII) in 1603. This Queen would certainly not have tolerated a play about the last Tudor monarchs by Shakespeare, or by anybody else, on the London stage during her life time. Shakespeare's splendid play of Henry VIII scrupulously avoids showing Henry VIII tearing down or selling off monasteries, nor sending his wives to the scaffold. It is notable and little surprising how Henry VIII's cruel

behaviour to his Queen Catherine, who is deemed to have been greatly admired and liked was permitted to be shown on the London stage. However, this queen was a Spanish woman and Spain was detested and feared in England during Elizabeth's time. But Elizabeth having died, Shakespeare's plays must have seemed acceptable by the Lord Chamberlain and the Monarch, James I, where any play that showed Henry VIII, father of Queen Elizabeth, in a poor light would never have been permitted on the stage during her lifetime. Cautious and prudent Will Shakespeare waited those nine years after her death before he produced his play about the father of Queen Elizabeth who was the last monarch of the Tudor family to sit on the throne of England.

One of Will's characteristics seems to have been his prudent and careful behaviour throughout his life to avoid personal and private difficulties especially with the influential and powerful of England.

Let us just look at some of the indications that hint at Shakespeare possibly having lived in the foreign towns in continental Europe, and in one example of the play *Troilus & Cressida* in Troy. Why Italy and Greece and especially why Troy? The educated members of the audience at the Globe would immediately know they were in for Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome and the ancient city of Troy famous for the Greek legend. Troy must have been a very attractive subject for a playwright as skilful as Will Shakespeare who wished to entertain a sophisticated and educated audience as could be found in London. The strongly political themes in this play revolve around the questions of authority, justice and the law. It involves debate about value and will and even more so is it concerned with what is right and what is wrong and this is extended into debate about will and power. These topics are not exactly what helps the English monarch and her nobles to sleep comfortably in their beds at night. But set these themes in Troy of over a thousand years ago, and with the intervening love story of Troilus and the beautiful Cressida,

and with her lascivious tendencies to seek other's beds, and the pandering of Pandarus and Thersites sexual banter, and the Lord Chamberlain concerned with the security and protection of the English throne from dangerous plays would not object to the searching political debates concerning governments of peoples in far off and forgotten Troy.

Now let's consider why Shakespeare might have chosen Vienna for his play *Measure for Measure*, when this play could have been set equally well in England, or if he had to place it in a foreign land why not in France? One reason for choosing Vienna may have been because the form of government in Vienna could be linked to the story line of *Measure for Measure*, a story of gross misgovernment for reasons of the temporary ruler's lust for a young novice nun.

A very different example is the comedy of *Twelfth Night* set in Illyria on the Adriatic coast. This must have seemed to the audience as being as geographically remote in the minds of those standing in the pit as could have been chosen. Here again the malleable, comic and entertaining possibilities of the story line of his play were suited to a story that could best be located in a far-away town on the Adriatic coast. Perhaps Shakespeare had visited this lovely region during his postulated European tour. It might have been too difficult to convince a London audience with the improbable gullibility of Malvolio. Equally the dressing up of the lovely young woman, Viola, as the young man, called Cesario, with whom the Countess falls in love, thinking Cesario a man, who at one stage has to participate in a sword fight. And then, finally, Viola has to admit she is not a man but a woman dressed up as a man, Cesario. On now knowing that the handsome young man Cesario is really a lovely young woman, Viola, the Duke Orsino then marries her. If all this were to have been set in England, it might have been difficult to convince a London audience. This is just part of this fabulous comedy which is set in Illyria,

which most of the audience, would probably not know, but which sounded suitably exotic to be acceptable as a splendid comedy on the London stage.

It is obvious that we cannot with complete confidence answer this question of why Shakespeare chose these foreign topics and historical events in foreign places for the majority of his plays; except in so far that if he wanted to write a play about the killing of Julius Caesar and the behaviour of Antony and Brutus, and the historical associations and consequences then the play would have had to be set in Rome. And once again a sophisticated, literary and educated London audience would be entertained by such a topic where the drama and characters would be as convincing as any that Will Shakespeare created.

We close this discussion of why and how it was that Shakespeare wrote so many of his plays that he set not only in England or Scotland alone but a majority in Italy and many other European countries. It should be mentioned here that the book that we entitled *Shakespeare's Voice As Spoken By His Characters* (<http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1410461/>) reflects to a large extent the wider world than England and Scotland. That freely available open access book discusses nearly all of Shakespeare's own plays. What those 37 plays reveal is the extraordinary wide range of Shakespeare's

creative mind, but it also reveals the enormous range of humankind. One reason that Shakespeare seems to have decided to leave England for those 8 years of his early manhood, and to travel to Italy and the many other countries of western Europe, seems likely to have been because he recognised that to become the kind of very great writer he wanted to be, then he needed to spend sufficient time seeing a wide range of people and how and where they lived.

What was so important to Shakespeare in those 8 years was that he was seeing people of so many different languages, different music, different kinds of work, how they and their children behaved, what other skills they had. One great consequence was that the majority of characters he created showed something of the wider range of humanity. Yes, he made them all speak English, but he gave some of them different names, names belonging to their language, and he dressed some of them in the clothes of their region. But what he gave us, his own people, was a wide range of men and women. He wrote so much of his work in beautiful language both in prose and poetry.

We hope that together, our open access book and this paper will lead to many reading not only the plays but also the wonderful poems and the 154 sonnets that were written by William Shakespeare.