

William Shakespeare's 'Lost Years'

William Shakespeare's life is something of an enigma. On the one hand, almost everyone who has ever tried to write his biography has to preface their efforts with some kind of disclaimer to the effect that the actual facts of his life are very sparse. Bill Bryson, in his spirited little biography, quotes historian George Steevens who observed that all we know about William Shakespeare is contained in a few scanty facts: that he was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, produced a family there, went to London, became an actor and a writer, returned to Stratford, made a will, and dies. As Bryson points out, this summary has never been quite true, but it isn't far from the truth, either.

On the other hand, we *feel* we know the man because of his plays and, to a lesser extent, his poems. In thirty-eight works for the stage, two brilliant narrative poems, and 154 sonnets, Shakespeare's writing seems to cover every point of the emotional compass and tackles all the great themes of human existence. So, fact-starved biographers argue, he must surely have had a wide life experience to be able to attack his subjects with such clarity and vivacity. It's a reasonable conclusion, but a moot one. After all, he was a creative writer, and like Stephen Crane he didn't have to actually fight in a battle to imagine it, nor did he need to commit murder in order to envisage its horrors. And of course he was living in a London that was awash in pamphlets and books on every conceivable subject from which he could draw knowledge and material to include in his plays; like the modern internet, the invention and widespread use of printing had revolutionised the intellectual life of Europe in the second half of the sixteenth century.

But if Shakespeare did have life experiences outside the world of the theatre, when would he have had them? After all, for much of his adult life he was a very busy man, not only writing plays but also acting in them, not to mention dealing with the affairs of the company on which he had a financial share and the theatre in which he had a part-ownership. The most obvious candidate is the so-called 'lost years', from roughly 1585 to 1592, when we know even less about his life and movements than at any other time. I say 'roughly' because even the boundaries of this period are a little fuzzy.

Here is what we know: in February 1585, twin children were baptised, the son and daughter of William and Anne Shakespeare, and we assume that he was in Stratford at that time (though it is possible that he had already left Stratford and was already in the routine he would keep until his retirement of making regular visits home). After that, we have no record of him until the publication in 1592 of a book called *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, purporting to be the last work by London poet and playwright Robert Greene. In it, Greene makes a reference to '...an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *Tiger's heart wrapped in a Player's hide*, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes factotum*, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country.' Decoded, this seems to be a rather derogatory reference to Shakespeare, with its snide reference to a line from *Henry VI* and its sneering implication that this mere actor, whose name Greene can't even bring himself to write accurately, has the skills to compete with the university-educated literary men of the day.

Groatsworth may not actually be Greene's, as there is some evidence that it was fabricated by its publisher, Henry Chettle. But it has been taken as a clear marker that by the time it was published Shakespeare was at least well enough established in London to have produced a play or two, and probably was sufficiently successful to excite the jealousy of Greene, if not of others in his set. If so, he must have been working in the theatre in some way for at least a year or two. It is unlikely he could have mastered the arts of acting and writing for the stage without having some practical training and experience.

But that might account for a mere year or two, and we are still left with five blank years in which the young William Shakespeare might have travelled to the continent, been a soldier, sailed the oceans, had love affairs, fought duels, or done any of many other things that imaginative historians have come up with as possibilities. It is also possible he simply stayed in Stratford for many of those years, coming down to London for reasons unknown sometime around 1590 and finding his way into the theatre then. We don't know.

Why did he even leave Stratford in the first place? In the late sixteenth century travel was still fairly arduous, and most people didn't venture far from their home towns. Unless they had to, and here we come across a couple of theories that have been advanced for Shakespeare leaving the bosom of family and home. One is the story that he was caught poaching deer on the land of Sir Thomas Lucy, a powerful local landowner; another is that he wrote a scurrilous and insulting poem about the same man. Either way (and readers of *What News on the Rialto?* will know which one I plumped for), the implication was that he was given a choice: get out of dodge or face prosecution.

Then there is the idea that he was recruited to join an acting troupe, Queen Elizabeth's Players, who visited Stratford and performed there in 1587. Historians have noted that the Queen's Men, as they were more familiarly known, had lost the services of two of their actors not long before, when a duel between William Knell and John Towne left the former dead and the latter incarcerated awaiting the coroner's verdict (it ended up being self-defence). Might, the speculation runs, have young Will been recruited to fill the gaps left by this tragic event? It is possible, though not all that likely, since it does seem a little improbable that one of the leading acting companies of the day would have picked up a young man in a country town with no prior acting experience that we know of and put him up on the stage.

Another trail leads in a different direction entirely. A coincidental reference to a 'William Shakeshafte' in the will of a Lancashire landowner named Alexander Hoghton has given rise to the idea that Shakeshafte might in fact have been Shakespeare and that the future bard was employed in some capacity in Hoghton's household, perhaps as a tutor or schoolmaster. The fact that Hoghton was a catholic provided even juicier meat for speculation that Shakespeare might himself have been a secret catholic and involved with what was in those days an illegal religious sect in England. Alas, the theory, much fun as it is, is built on fairly shifting sands, for Shakeshafte was in fact a common name in the Lancashire area, so Hoghton's lucky beneficiary probably bore no relation at all to our man from Stratford.

Might young Will have travelled overseas? Not an impossibility, for continental travel was fairly commonplace among those who were wealthy enough to be able to do so, though the son of tradesman like Shakespeare might not have had the wherewithal to do so on his own account. One tantalising reference comes from Sir Philip Sidney, who writes to his father-in-law, Francis Walsingham, to complain about a letter that had

been wrongly delivered by 'Will, my Lord of Leicester's jesting player', who was conveying it to London from Denmark (apparently he delivered it to Lady Leicester rather than Sidney's wife Frances). Since Leicester had an acting company, the possibility has been advanced that the 'Will' referred to was Shakespeare; more likely, though, Sidney is referring to Will Kempe, Shakespeare's later colleague and friend, who was a well-known comic actor employed in Leicester's troupe.

All of these tales have one thing in common: they have been crafted based on mere scraps from the historical record. The only thing we know for sure is that we don't know what he was doing between 1585 and 1592. Which is deeply frustrating for historians, but perfect soil for a novelist to till. Readers of my first novel will know that I have come up with at least one possibility. But that book only brought young Will as far as early 1587, so there are a few more lost years to play with yet!