

## Three Shakespearean Mysteries

### What Shakespeare Read, and Where He Read It

One of the few biographical details we know for certain about Shakespeare the playwright is how much he read. Over 200 books are quoted in his plays or serve as sources for them, and more are being discovered every year.

**What did he read?** Mostly history, literature, plays, and poems, with some books on mathematics and medicine. In Elizabethan England, this represents a tiny minority of the books actually published. According to a study by Douglas Bruster, approximately 16 out of every 19 Elizabethan books printed were sermons or books of theology. (These were often political in intent as well as religious.) Two out of every 19 were scientific. Only one out of every 19 was a “liberal arts” book--law, history, poetry, or rhetoric.

Somewhere around 14,500 traceable publications in all were printed during the years 1558-1616. (In contrast, about 150,000 books *a year* are published in the United States.) Thus we can estimate about 750-800 books of liberal arts were published in England between 1558-1616--and Shakespeare is known to have read over 200 of them, and wrote about 40 more.

Most people read far more books than they cite; so, probably, did Shakespeare.

**Where did he read books?** There were no public libraries in England. The largest known library, Lord Lumley's, was 7000 volumes. There were about 10 libraries of over 1000 volumes in England: the Queen's, the universities', the Inns of Court's, and several other private libraries.

Shakespeare the poet read some books in foreign languages and/or not published in England, such as *Diana enamorada*. These would have been specially imported for a private buyer, or read in the original country. Shakespeare the poet may have traveled; he knows France, Italy, and even 16th-century Dubrovnik in geographical detail. Shakespeare the poet also seems to have had access to some manuscript sources, notably one of the four extant Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.

William Shakespeare of Stratford is not known to have traveled abroad. He was not a student at a university or an Inn of Court, nor is he known to have been patronized by any of the owners of large libraries. He had no access to formal study of modern foreign languages. He is not known to have had access to any of the traceable manuscripts.

### Dating Shakespeare's Plays

It is notoriously hard to date Elizabethan plays. A scholar at the latest Harvard Renaissance Conference remarked of an anonymous play, “It was written either before 1612--or after.” A comparatively reliable way of dating plays is through references to current events.

Shakespeare's plays are usually dated from the late 1580's to 1613. However, they contain references to events from the early 1580s, 1570s, and even 1560s.

For example:

- *Hamlet* references the very unpopular Cecil's Fast bill of 1562 supporting the fish industry; “you are a fishmonger,” Hamlet tells Polonius, *Hamlet's* version of William Cecil. (Fishmongering is pandering as well--one of Shakespeare's brilliant and characteristic multiple puns.)

- The nova of November 1572 is visible in the first scene of *Hamlet*.
- Topical references in *All's Well that Ends Well* set it between 1578 and 1584. (It is casually mentioned that Don John of Austria is dead but William the Black Prince of Orange is still alive.)

The current chronology of Shakespeare's plays may depend too strongly on the assumption that they were written by a man born in 1564, who did not arrive in London until, at earliest, 1585.

## Other Oddities

- In *The Tears of the Muses*, Edmund Spenser complains that "our Willy," traditionally taken to be Shakespeare, "is dead of late," i.e. not writing. William Shakespeare of Stratford is supposed barely to have begun writing by 1590.
- With one debatable exception, Shakespeare the poet quotes nothing published after 1603.
- No new Shakespeare plays were published between 1604 and 1609 (when several plays and the *Sonnets* were pirated and Shakespeare made no known objection). After 1609, until the ramp-up for the First Folio starting in 1618, no new Shakespeare plays were published.
- In 1609, on the publication of his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare is referred to as "ever-living," a term usually reserved for dead authors.

Was Shakespeare writing significantly before 1590? Did Shakespeare stop reading after 1603? Did something happen in 1604? Did something else happen in 1609?

## Another Shakespearean Mystery

**Joe has a letter from William Shakespeare.**

**Posy has a tattoo.**

**Which would you rather see?**

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