

QUESTION 19

Could the plays have been written by someone who never left England?

Margaret Drabble

Shakespeare's geography was patchy. He gave Bohemia a sea-coast and a desert, which many, including Ben Jonson, have delighted to ridicule, but *A Winter's Tale* is a romance, and accuracy was not his aim. Illyria in *Twelfth Night* is also a mythical place of dreams, a version of Elysium. His Italian cities, particularly Verona and Venice, glitter with Renaissance glamour, and one would like to think he might have been there, but equally he could and would have talked to travellers, seen paintings, read accounts, and constructed from them the lively cities we see on stage. It was not necessary for him to go to Rome to write his Roman tragedies: he found the Forum and the Capitol in Plutarch. He travelled in books and in his imagination, as writers do, and as the greatest writer of them all, he did it supremely well. His Egypt, with its flies and gnats of Nile, is as real as the Forest of Arden.