

Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel

Much Ado About Nothing:

why the Cobbe portrait is not an authentic, true-to-life portrait of William Shakespeare

The genius of William Shakespeare, the creator of immortal works for the stage who is celebrated today as an icon of world literature, was already fully recognised in his own day. One drama in particular, *Hamlet*, after 400 years still among the most fascinating, most read, most frequently staged, most discussed and surely most intensively studied plays of all time, had a profound emotional effect on its contemporary audience, in part because of its dangerous political content. However, the student youth of his day had a penchant for *Romeo and Juliet*, and eagerly devoured his lubricious verse epic, *Venus and Adonis*. According to one literary source, they kept a copy of the text under their pillow, and hung a picture of the author above their bed.

Despite his illustrious literary career, the playwright was only 49 years old when he withdrew to the seclusion of his Stratford retreat. He died three years later – probably as the result of a systemic skin sarcoidosis, an internal disease to which all organs are vulnerable, and which leads to death normally after many years. The outer signs of this illness can be seen in all four likenesses of Shakespeare whose authenticity I have been able to establish,* working closely with many scientists and academics from other disciplines, including a number of medics and experts from the German Federal Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BKA = CID or FBI).

All the tests used to establish identity led to the same unexpected and sensational result, namely that all the images investigated show the same man: William Shakespeare, taken from life. The symptoms – in the same location each time, though reproduced at different stages of development - diagnosed by the medics show that the artists must have seen them on the living model or that they were extant in Shakespeare's face after his death. Thus they are significant indicators that the Chandos and Flower portraits, the Davenant bust and the Darmstadt Shakespeare death mask are true-to-life or true-to-nature representations of Shakespeare. The thoroughly researched and publicly documented morphological and pathological characteristics of Shakespeare's face now form a kind of catalogue of criteria, which – as will be demonstrated below – can be applied whenever the claim is made that a well-known or newly-discovered portrait represents Shakespeare.

As befitted the famous author, Shakespeare's family had a lavish funerary monument erected to him, in the Jacobean Renaissance style. It was a monument that can be classed among the funerary memorials of scholars and writers of Tudor and Stuart times, to which Shakespeare as an outstanding poet was entitled. It was embellished with a coloured, true-to-life limestone bust, based on a death mask, and bore eulogising inscriptions putting the deceased on a par with the great literary authorities of classical antiquity (Nestor, Socrates, and Virgil). In 1623 his actor colleagues and friends published the first edition of his plays, in which they included for the first time those dramas that were politically explosive. Perhaps the most precious book in the world, the First Folio contains a frontispiece engraving depicting the dramatist, proclaiming his 'work-author identity' and thus safeguarding Shakespeare's intellectual property. Many laudatory poems were included in the volume. This early homage to the poet was negated, however, by the effect of the English Civil War from which the iconoclastic Puritans emerged victorious. Stratford-upon-Avon did not escape their ravages, which almost certainly included serious damage to Shakespeare's bust in Holy Trinity Church.

When the veneration of Shakespeare reawakened in the second half of the eighteenth century and an exuberant personality cult around the bard began, the poet's admirers were keen to acquire a likeness of the renowned author. Over time, the immense demand has been met by an ample supply, and many images of Shakespeare surfaced. As we now know, only four of them are authentic, true-to-life representations. A few others might merit testing for authenticity. But most are copies or reproductions (of the funerary bust, the First Folio engraving, or the Chandos portrait, for example), imaginary works, and in some cases certainly fakes.

In 2001, when it was announced to the world with much publicity that 'the only picture of Shakespeare painted from life' had been found in Canada, the so-called Sanders portrait, I once again consulted the BKA expert Reinhardt Altmann. He employed the Criminal Investigation Bureau's tried and tested Trick Image Differentiation Technique and was thus able to demonstrate that the features of the Sanders portrait differed markedly from those of the Droeshout engraving of 1623 and of the Chandos and Flower portraits. What is more, the Sanders portrait exhibited not a single one of Shakespeare's distinctive signs of illness. A press release from the University of Mainz making these points could not prevent the appearance of a book called *Shakespeare's Face* (2002), in which with much verve and even more imagination the book's editor and co-author, the Canadian journalist Stephanie Nolan, presented an invented history of the portrait, vividly describing how Shakespeare had sat for a painter in a small town in provincial England. Among the contributors to the volume were Professor Stanley Wells, the influential Chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, and the Tudor and Jacobean curator at the London National Portrait Gallery, Dr Tarnya Cooper: however, neither of them expressed an opinion on the crucial question of the subject's identity. I was able to discover that the Canadian publishers had initially signed up completely unknown authors to contribute to the book, but that these had been replaced at short notice by an illustrious team drawn from Shakespeare studies and art history.

A few days ago, 'the only Shakespeare portrait painted from life' was once more presented to the public (Richard Brooks, 'Is this the real Shakespeare at last?', *Sunday Times*, 8 March 2009). Alec Cobbe, whose family is said to have owned this picture for 300 years, stated three years ago that at the National Portrait Gallery's 'Searching for Shakespeare' exhibition in 2006 he had come across a Shakespeare portrait (he meant the famous Janssen portrait from the Folger Library in Washington) which looked exactly like one of the pictures in the family collection.

This revelation was quite a surprise to me at the time. For how could Cobbe, of all people, a picture restorer by profession, have overlooked a Shakespeare portrait in his own family's collection that bore such a striking resemblance to a well-publicised image of the great writer? Today he maintains – solidly backed by Stanley Wells, who enjoys great authority but is no art historian – that his picture is a true to life depiction of Shakespeare, and that the Janssen portrait is just one of several copies of the original.

In February 2006, after some ten years of research and collaboration with numerous experts from other disciplines, I presented in book form my proof of the authenticity of four Shakespeare images. Shortly before the book was published, I applied the criteria of authenticity I had put together to – among others - the impressive Janssen portrait (known since 1770). I had, however, previously consulted the BKA expert Altmann, who used the Trick Image Differentiation Technique to bring to light significant correspondences. It turned out that – subject to the resolution of certain as yet unanswered questions about its history – this picture too could well be admitted to the small circle of genuine Shakespeare portraits.

Comparing the Janssen portrait (restored in 1988) today with the Cobbe portrait, I was able to establish that in terms of general impression they differ very considerably from each other, and that they do so particularly in regard to morphological and pathological details. This led me to consult the dermatologist Professor Jost Metz, who specialises in diagnosing signs of disease in Renaissance portraits. Metz had earlier submitted his professional opinion concerning the pathological symptom on the forehead of the Flower portrait and the death mask. In his comparative assessment of the two portraits, Cobbe and Janssen, dated 12 March 2009, the dermatologist noted so many important divergences that he doubted ‘whether both portraits featured one and the same subject’. To cite just a few examples: ‘the nose in the Janssen portrait was considerably longer than in the Cobbe portrait’; the distances between the point of the chin and the tip of the nose and also from the tip to the root of the nose too failed to correspond. The left nostril on the Janssen portrait appeared ‘clearly more flared’ than in the Cobbe. The lips too were different. The lower lip of the Janssen portrait corresponded more to the ‘full’, not to say ‘plump’ (lower) lips which ‘characterised the Davenant bust and the Chandos and Flower portraits’. With regard to the left earlobe, Metz found that the one in the Cobbe portrait appeared misshapen, and did not correspond to that in the Janssen. In contrast to the rims of the eye-sockets (orbit) in the Janssen portrait, whose shape (together with that of the eyebrows) formed a segment of a circle, in the Cobbe picture this area took a ‘more horizontal course’. While the right eyeball of the Janssen painting was higher than the left, in the Cobbe portrait ‘the eyeballs were painted level with each other’. There were also significant differences in the clothing. The ‘patterns of the expensively fashioned collars’ were ‘completely different’, appearing ‘even more intricately worked’ in the Cobbe portrait than in the Janssen.

Particularly important are the divergences apparent in the reproduction or the absence of pathological symptoms. Metz notes that ‘marked annular infiltration (inflammation)’ in the ‘left forehead area’ of the Janssen portrait, ‘in the same location’ as in the Flower portrait and the death mask, was missing from the Cobbe portrait. With regard to the pathological swelling of the left upper eyelid, ‘so conspicuous’ both in the Chandos and the Flower portraits as well as the Droeshout engraving, he states that this ‘pathological alteration’ is to be found also ‘on the upper left eyelid’ of the Janssen portrait. But in the Cobbe portrait there was little more than a suggestion of this symptom.

The conclusion is that the painter of the Janssen picture was very well acquainted with the pathological details of Shakespeare’s face – and with its precise morphological characteristics – whereas the Cobbe portraitist was not, or only to a limited extent. While the creator of the Janssen portrait, discovered in 1770, can only have derived this knowledge from the living model, the originator of the Cobbe portrait, which first became known in 2006, appears to have acquired his very limited information at second hand – possibly from the reports of my research findings that appeared in the British media (e.g. Rob Edwards, *New Scientist*, 21 October 1995, Andrew Thompson, *BBC*, ‘Tomorrow’s World’, 15 December 1995, Roger Boyes, *The Times*, 24 April 1996, and Steve Connor, *The Sunday Times*, 15 March 1998). My results drew attention to the significant signs of disease visible in Shakespeare’s face for the first time. All of this indicates that the Cobbe painting cannot be an authentic portrait of William Shakespeare painted from life.

This conclusion is supported not only by the youthful appearance of the subject, estimated by Professor Metz as ‘mid-30s’, and certainly not ‘aged 46’; it is also reinforced by the expert opinion of Dr Eberhard J. Nikitsch, a specialist in inscriptions at the Mainz Academy of Science and Literature, dated 11 March 2009. Nikitsch stated that the inscription on the picture – ‘*Principum amicitias!*’ [‘Be afraid of] the friendship of

princes!' - 'was not carried out in epigraphic script, but in a cursive hand using a brush'. This was not something one might expect to find 'in this form at the beginning of the 17th century'. For it lacked 'the capitals, fracture, and (slightly sloping) italic minuscules' that are the 'the scripts normally used for portraits of the time'. As a result, it looks 'somewhat clumsy, like schoolboy writing', and must have been added later. A comparison with English examples from that period - as, for instance, the portraits of Thomas de Hoghton (Hoghton Tower, Lancashire, after 1564); Robert Cecil, First Minister of Elizabeth I (Hatfield House, around 1600); and the third Earl of Southampton (Tower portrait, Duke of Buccleuch's collection, after 1603) - showed that they all displayed the 'capitals' typical of the time..

* The images in question are the Chandos portrait, dating from around 1594-99 (National Portrait Gallery, London); the Flower portrait, painted in 1609 and restored in 1979 (Royal Shakespeare Company collection, Stratford-upon-Avon, until c. 1999, and since missing without trace); the Davenant bust in terracotta, made c.1613 (Garrick Club, London); and the Darmstadt Shakespeare death mask, taken between one and two days after Shakespeare's death (Hessische Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt). See Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *The True Face of William Shakespeare. The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of His Life*. London: Chaucer Press, 2006.