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Portraiture, Authorship, and the Authentication of Shakespeare

Julianna Bark

This essay analyses some of the numerous controversies over the authenticity of visual representations of William Shakespeare, in particular the Droeshout engraving, the Stratford Bust, and the Chandos and the Cobbe portraits. It argues that what has been at stake in the many controversies over alleged Shakespeare likenesses is less the question of whether a particular image is authentic than whether that image corresponds to the needs and expectations of its proponents. For instance, during the Caroline era, Martin Droeshout's engraved portrait of Shakespeare was adapted by William Marshall's image of the author as a laureate poet. Similarly, during the eighteenth century, Louis-François Roubiliac's statue of Shakespeare seemed to provide an altogether more suitable embodiment than did the swarthy and less elegant Chandos portrait. As for the newly-emerged Cobbe portrait, it reflects the image of Shakespeare as a polished gentleman, in conformity with ideas recently put forward by literary critics such as Stanley Wells. By exploring controversies over the authenticity of Shakespeare portraits, this paper demonstrates that the alleged authenticity of these likenesses is a product of fabrication, and that this fabrication contributes to enlarging the mystique that surrounds the playwright.

A myriad of alleged life portraits of Shakespeare have emerged since the seventeenth century, and, as the recently discovered Cobbe portrait suggests, the search for yet unknown portraits is still ongoing. One might expect that assessment of these portraits' authenticity depends on questions such as provenance and history of ownership, or clothing and hair styles. Yet what has really been at stake in the many controversies over alleged Shakespeare portraits, I believe, is less the question of whether a particular image is authentic than whether that image corresponds to the needs and expectations of its proponents. The aim of this essay, then, is

to illustrate some of the ways in which the life portraits of Shakespeare that have surfaced since the mid-seventeenth century reveal more about their promoters' perceptions of Shakespeare than they do about Shakespeare himself. As Samuel Schoenbaum put it, every portrait tends "towards oblique self-portraiture" (*Lives* ix). By exploring controversies over the authenticity of Shakespeare portraits, in particular the Droeshout engraving, the Stratford bust, and the Chandos and the Cobbe paintings, I argue in this essay that the art history of Shakespeare's alleged likenesses does not rest on the inherent authenticity of portraits, but that this authenticity is itself a product of fabrication.

Tradition has it that only two authentic representations of Shakespeare exist today. Both are posthumous. One is an engraving by Martin Droeshout (figure 1),¹ while the other is a bust in Shakespeare's parish church at Stratford-upon-Avon produced by Gheerart Janssen, a plaster cast of which is illustrated here (figure 2). The claim for authenticity of these two representations rests on the fact that both are vouched for by the First Folio, published seven years after Shakespeare's death, in 1623. The engraving appears on the title page.² The existence of the bust in the church is referred to in a commendatory poem by Leonard Digges, which prefaces the plays in the Folio: "when that stone is rent, / And time dissolves thy Stratford Monument, / Here we alieue shall view thee still. This Booke, / When Brasse and Marble fade, shall make thee looke / Fresh to all Ages" (Shakespeare sig. A7r). Whilst the bust was presumably commissioned and paid for by one or more members of Shakespeare's family (Schoenbaum, *Lives* 6), the Folio was edited by Shakespeare's colleagues and friends, John Hemmings and Henry Condell. The Folio was dedicated to the Earl of Pembroke and the Earl of Montgomery, both of whom appear to have known Shakespeare personally. Moreover, the Folio's prefatory material boasts a commendatory poem by Ben Jonson. Both the engraving and the bust are thus vouched for by those who knew him. This remains the firmest proof of the authenticity of these two likenesses.

¹ The Droeshout engraving in the First Folio exists in four different states. The first, which shows a thin moustache, no shadow on the collar and a different treatment of highlights in the hair, is by far the rarest. The second state includes darker cross-hatching on the collar and jaw line as well as a broader, thicker moustache. As for the third state, it includes small highlights in the eyes, probably done to improve the worn image. A fourth state, which is found in the Fourth Folio of 1685, was greatly reworked (Cooper 50).

² Engraved portraits typically appeared in frontispieces facing the title page, but Droeshout's portrait of Shakespeare was placed on the title page in the first two Folio editions and did not move to the facing page until the Third Folio.

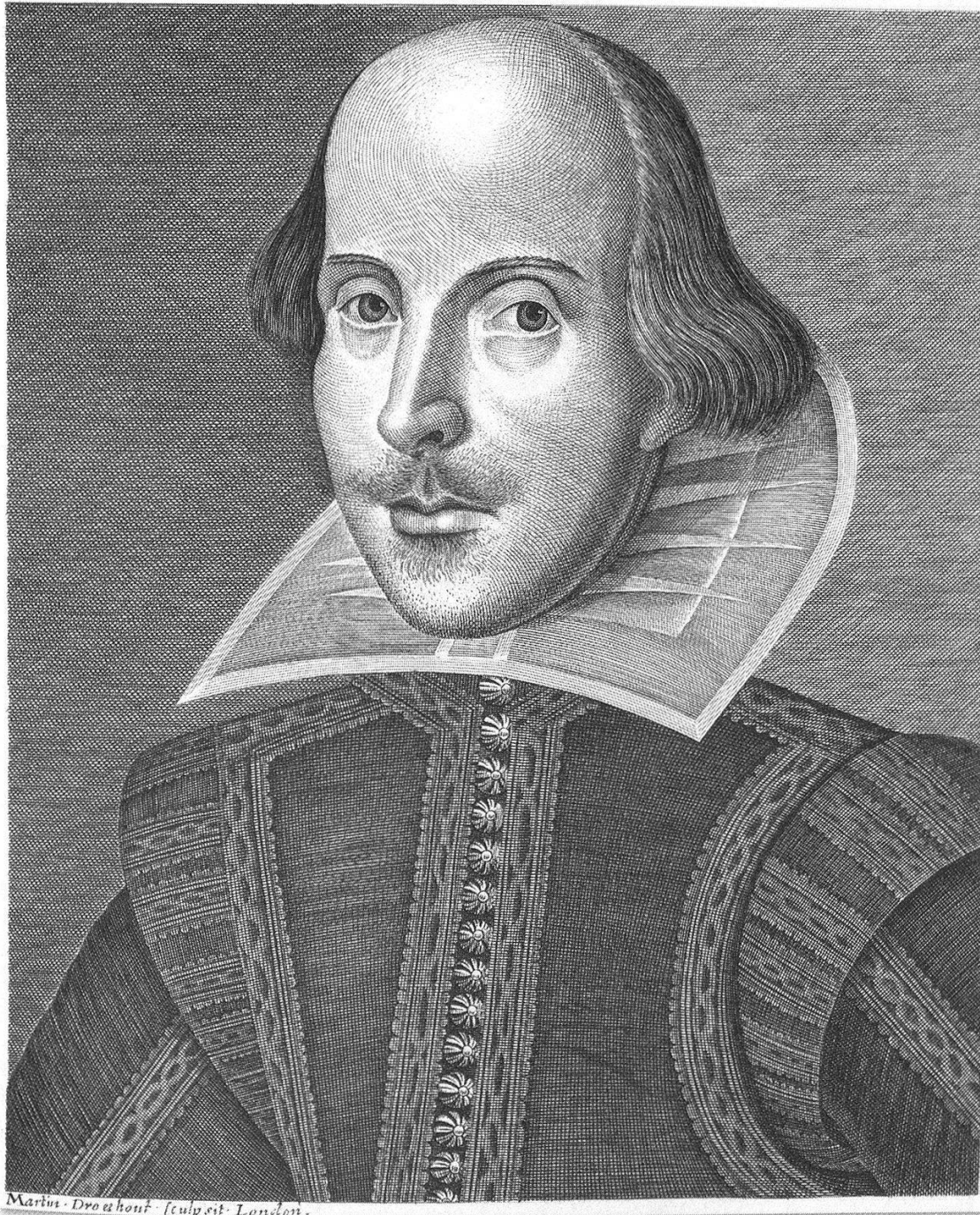


Figure 1: Martin Droeshout the Younger. Title page of *Mr. William Shakespeares comedies, histories, & tragedies*, First Folio. 1623, engraving, PD 1852-6-12-441 (Hind 11). © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 2: After Gheerart Janssen the Younger. Plaster cast of William Shakespeare's effigy in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon. c. 1620, plaster, NPG 1281. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Whilst the Droeshout and Stratford bust are now widely acknowledged to have iconic status, this was not always the case. For all their claims to authenticity, scholars have done much to discredit the two representations and questioned their artistic merit, blaming the incompetence of the artists, the difficult medium, and the circumstances of production. George Steevens described Droeshout's face of Shakespeare as being "as hard as if hewn out of rock" (Keevak 90), Edmond Malone called it a "miserable drawing" (209), and Schoenbaum objected to its "ungainly head too big for the torso, a mouth wandering to the right, locks which fail to balance on two sides; sans neck, and with two right shoulders. (Or is it left?)" ("Artists' Images" 32). Recently, the engraving has been described as "grave, austere and puritanical, wearing the stiff, spread-out collar of the time that made the head look like a dish served on a platter" (Glueck). Caricatures of the Stratford bust are just as numerous; they tend to ridicule its "unintellectual expression" and "its goggle eyes and gaping mouth" (Lee 286; Schoenbaum, "Artists' Images" 37). Stanley Wells has used the supposed artistic shortcomings of the two likenesses to advance his case for the Cobbe portrait: "Up to now, only two images have been widely accepted as genuine likenesses of Shakespeare. Both are dull. [The Cobbe] is a very fine painting" ("Lifetime Portrait"). Of course, the perception of what comprises "dullness" is not only subjective but also, in the given context, arguably immaterial.

Dissatisfaction with the Droeshout engraving and Stratford bust was present from the 1640s when artists started adapting them to produce what they considered more suitable images of the author. William Marshall's engraved frontispiece to John Benson's 1640 edition of the *Poems*, for instance, tidies up the anatomical difficulties of the Droeshout by hanging a cloak on one shoulder, thus lending an air of what David Piper has called "prim and pursued elegance" to the sitter (38). Marshall invests the image with literary authority by including the laurel branch, which Shakespeare is shown to be holding with rather fierce defiance. The Stratford bust was likewise tinkered with to produce a more appealing image of Shakespeare, as exemplified by a seventeenth-century plaster cast copy of the head of the effigy at Stratford (c. 1620, London, National Portrait Gallery, NPG 185a) and a nineteenth-century lithograph of this head made by Richard James Lane (1853, London, National Portrait Gallery, NPG D21778). It is noticeable that the lithograph "corrects" what was seen in the nineteenth century as the rather ugly space between the sitter's nose and mouth.

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Figure 3: Attributed to John Taylor. *William Shakespeare?*, known as the Chandos portrait. c. 1600-10, oil on canvas, NPG 1.

© National Portrait Gallery, London.

The appearance of the first alleged life portrait of Shakespeare – the Chandos – in the early eighteenth century changed everything (figure 3). The search for such a portrait had started in the seventeenth century, since it was assumed that the Droeshout engraving was derived from a painted source (Cooper 33). Yet the Chandos – whose name derives from its previous owner, James Brydges, 3rd Duke of Chandos – did not immediately supplant the original engraving and bust. Rather, as we will see below, it became authenticated over a long period of time.

The credentials of the Chandos as an authentic likeness of Shakespeare are uncertain. We know nothing of the picture's early history between 1610 (when it was created) and the first time its existence was recorded in a written document, over a century later, in 1719. If one trusts the account of George Vertue (Myrone), the portrait may have belonged to Robert Keck in 1719, who claimed that it had descended to him from Shakespeare's godson, Sir William Davenant, via the actor Thomas Betterton.³ It is also to Vertue that we owe the portrait's attribution to Shakespeare's alleged friend, John Taylor, who was a member of the Painter-Stainers' company (Cooper 54). This *direct* link to Shakespeare, although impossible to verify, has been crucial in the portrait's authentication. The fact that there is a clear resemblance between the Chandos and the two accepted likenesses of Shakespeare provides additional reason to consider it as authentic.

Another authenticating factor is that of all Shakespeare portraits, the Chandos has been the most frequently reproduced in engravings. Significantly, its earliest champions, the Tonsons, were involved in the book trade. Seeking to capitalize on this newly-discovered "authentic likeness" of Shakespeare, Jacob Tonson Sr. used the portrait in the shop sign of his publishing company.⁴ An example of a Shakespeare signboard has been preserved at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Pressly 288-89), but whether it is the one that belonged to the Tonsons is uncertain. Tonson and his nephew also included engraved portraits on the title-pages of a long line of Shakespeare editions.⁵ The first of these, the 1709 edition by Nicholas Rowe, provides three images of Shakespeare. Two of these were engraved renderings of the Chandos: a rather austere

³ Vertue's "notes on the history of art were purchased by Horace Walpole in 1758, who from September 1759 worked them up into what was published as his *Anecdotes of Painting in England (1762-71)*" (Myrone).

⁴ According to Don-John Dugas (66), "the Tonsons' choice of logo suggests that their Shakespeare editions were so successful that they decided Shakespeare should become the new symbol of their business. The most striking and permanent way to do this was to create a new corporate logo that drew attention to their popular brand."

⁵ The Tonsons had a monopoly on the publication of Shakespeare's plays for much of the eighteenth century (Taylor 70). For more on copyright law, see Saunders.

portrait made by Benjamin Arlaud and Gaspard Duchange, and a frontispiece by Michael Vandergucht (1709, NPG D25484), in which the poet, heir to the classical tradition, receives the laurels from Tragedy and Comedy, while Fame floats above, blowing her trumpet. This design was directly lifted from the 1660 Rouen edition of Corneille's collected works, which was most likely supplied to the artist by Tonson (Taylor 76). The third image of Shakespeare in Rowe's edition shows the Stratford bust considerably altered: the poet's countenance has become subordinated to the architectural frame and his social status is evident in the prominent coat of arms. The use of architectural apparatus and classical iconography in both of these engravings clearly suggests Tonson's desire to market Shakespeare's status as a classical English writer.

Like Rowe, Edmond Malone was persuaded that the Chandos represented the authentic Shakespeare, but he did something different with it. Being the first Shakespearean scholar "to take a serious, authenticating interest in Shakespeare's appearance" (Martin 91), he decided in 1783 to seek out the original portrait, which not many people had seen since the first decade of the eighteenth century, and secured permission for a copy to be made. As he wrote to the Duke of Chandos, he wished this new copy to be a more "faithful engraving" than earlier ones (Martin 92). This copy, by the artist Ozias Humphry, was included in Malone's 1790 edition of Shakespeare as an engraving. Although it is not a very faithful copy of Humphry's drawing, Malone clearly intended the engraving to suggest that this was the authentic, "faithful" image of Shakespeare (de Grazia 152-54).

While there is some awareness that the Chandos has not been firmly established as authentic, it is still the strongest contender for the title of authentic life portrait in the collective consciousness. Having survived the racial and anti-Semitic slurs heaped upon it by George Steevens, for whom the subject of the painting exhibited "the complexion of a Jew, or rather that of a chimney-sweeper in the jaundice" (Schoenbaum, *Lives* 282), and by the Victorian writer James Hain Friswell, in whom the portrait stirred xenophobic anxieties because of the sitter's "Jewish physiognomy" (Halpern 165), the Chandos was also the only painting of six whose identification was left intact after the extensive restoration campaign conducted by the National Portrait Gallery before the "Searching for Shakespeare" exhibition in 2006. While the Flower and the Soest portraits were discovered to be nineteenth-century forgeries, the Grafton, the Sanders and the Janssen were demoted and claimed to represent gentlemen other than Shakespeare (Cooper 62-75). The evidence linking the Chandos to Shakespeare is in fact as inconclusive as it is for these other pictures, but the Chandos, it seems, will not be dismissed as easily, perhaps because it was the first portrait to have entered the National

Portrait Gallery collection as a donation in 1856 when the museum was established (Cooper 54). The fact that it figures as “number one” in the museum inventories gives it a unique status, both in the gallery’s history but also in the public’s collective memory. Since the Chandos forms the cornerstone of the National Portrait Gallery’s collection, it also symbolizes the authority of the museum as guarantor of the national cultural heritage. Debunk the Chandos and you debunk the claims to authority on which the National Portrait Gallery is assumed to rest.

The author-cult of Shakespeare during the second half of the eighteenth century sanctioned the production of bardolatrous portraits, such as the marble statue by Louis-François Roubiliac (figure 4). Here Shakespeare no longer appears as a balding and pudgy middle-aged man; he has become a tall, debonair, inspired poet. This is Shakespeare as “national institution, the living classic theatre that the playwright became in the eighteenth century” (Orgel 135). Whilst the face is vaguely reminiscent of the Chandos, the statue also suggests how forcefully Shakespeare came to be appropriated by others. This is a portrait not so much of Shakespeare, but rather of the actor David Garrick who commissioned the statue and sat for it as well.⁶ The monument thus constitutes an attempted appropriation of Shakespeare’s genius and fame by Garrick (McPherson).

Another bardolatrous portrait of sorts made its appearance in March 2009 (figure 5). This splendid painting, which is in the family collection of the art restorer Alec Cobbe, meets our current expectations of what a good portrait is. Could there be a better representation of that authorial construct called “Sweet master Shakespeare”? Could there be a better image to mirror current popular perceptions of Shakespeare as the man who, in the year 2000, was named the “man of the millennium” by listeners of BBC4’s Today programme? The Cobbe was the centerpiece of an exhibition at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 2009.⁷ Grandly called “Shakespeare Found,” the exhibition opened with a press conference and a ceremonial “unveiling” of the portrait. The image has taken the internet by storm, with the result that the Cobbe is now receiving ex-

⁶ Garrick housed the statue in a specially constructed Palladian temple dedicated to Shakespeare which still stands today and has been restored. The statue was transferred to the British Museum in 1823.

⁷ The Cobbe portrait is preserved in Newbridge House in Dublin together with the rest of the Cobbe collection. The painting may have been acquired by Thomas Cobbe during the second half of the eighteenth century. Cobbe was then being advised in his art acquisitions by Mathew Pilkington, the author of the *Dictionary of Painters* (1770) (see Elias).



Figure 4: Louis-François Roubiliac. *William Shakespeare*. 1758, marble, M&M 1823, 1-1, 1. © Trustees of the British Museum.

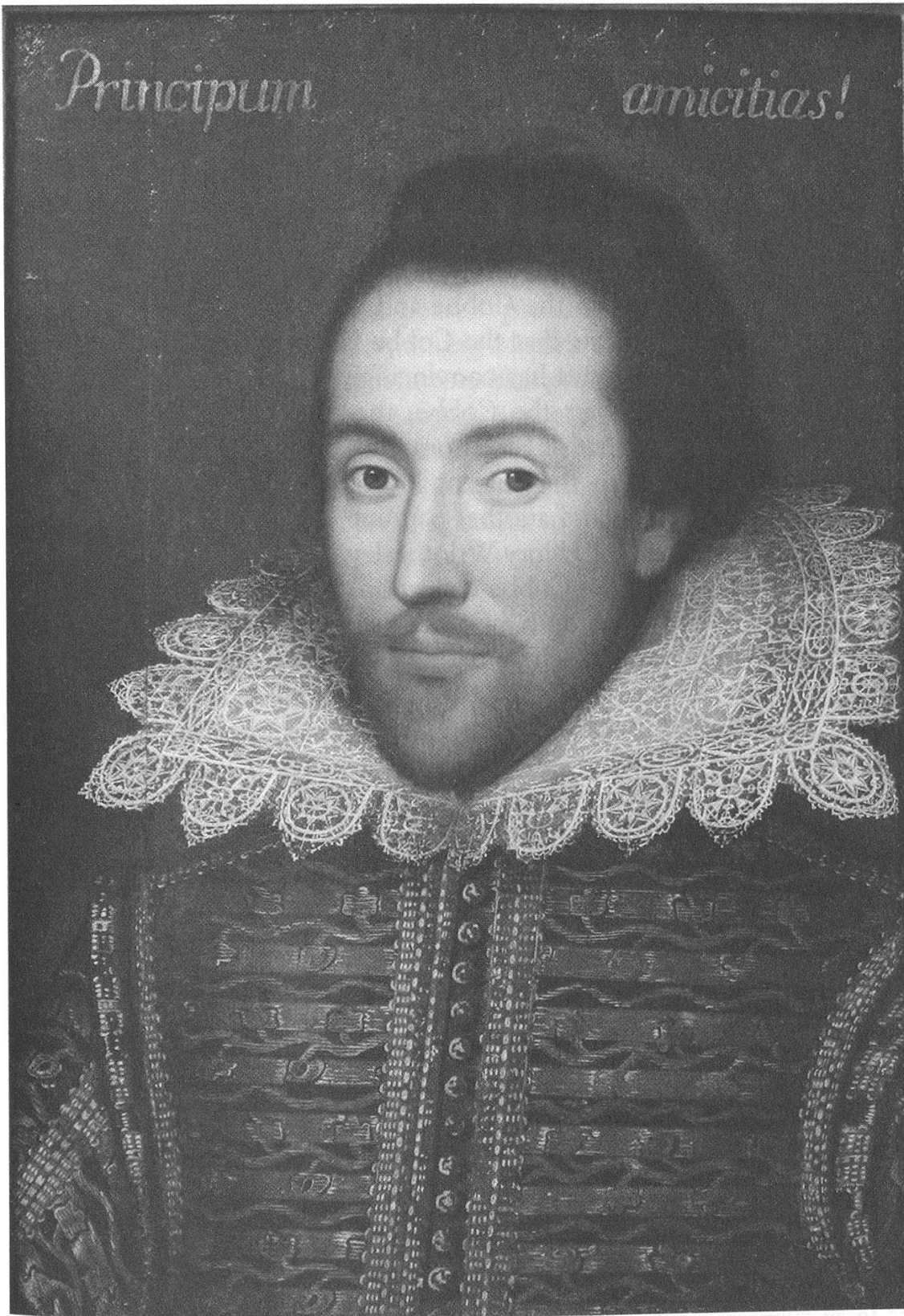


Figure 5: Anonymous. The “Cobbe” portrait. c. 1610, Newbridge House, Dublin. Image credit: Wikipedia. Public domain.

posure on hundreds of websites as well as on miscellaneous accessories such as shoes.⁸

Published concurrently with the exhibition, a book edited by Stanley Wells, entitled *Shakespeare Found! A Life Portrait at Last*, embodies another effort to authenticate the portrait definitively. The claims by Wells and the book's other contributors are chiefly based on three pieces of evidence (Bearman 484). They first show that the portrait can be dated to the early seventeenth century. Second, they argue that there are three other portraits – the Janssen, the FitzGerald, and the Ellenborough – which derive from the Cobbe. Whilst it cannot be denied that there is a clear resemblance between the Cobbe and these three portraits, it does not support the hypothesis that the Cobbe is a portrait of Shakespeare. As Katherine Duncan-Jones has convincingly argued, one of these supposed “copies” made after the Cobbe, the one called the Janssen, is more likely to be a portrait of Sir Thomas Overbury.⁹ The final piece of evidence has to do with the current location and provenance of the Cobbe. Both the Cobbe and another painting, which in 2002 was identified as a representation of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, are today conserved in the Cobbe collection. Wells and his contributors argue that it follows that both of these paintings must once have belonged to Wriothesley himself. Whether or not we adhere to this argument about ownership, it seems clear that the final piece of evidence is at best inconclusive. Robert Bearman, for one, seems skeptical, arguing that Wells's “is a bold if not controversial claim,” and adding that “somewhat frustratingly, it is not argued with the support of references by which such claims can be checked” (484).

The most significant problem with Wells's argument, then, is that it is insufficiently substantiated. Wells has admitted that he would need a document or signature to prove the Cobbe's authenticity beyond all doubt.¹⁰ That the Cobbe is indeed “Shakespeare Found” is not something the book with that title can actually demonstrate.

Why then would Wells wish to associate his name with a claim that is at best inconclusive? The desire to be remembered by future generations as the man who discovered the only life portrait of Shakespeare may have been impossible to resist. One is reminded of A. L. Rowse and the

⁸ An example of such shoe wear may be found at <http://zazzle.com.au/> (accessed 1 January 2011).

⁹ For more on the Janssen portrait, see Pressly 291-95 and plate 24.

¹⁰ In an interview for the online journal, *The Literateur*, Wells stated: “We could only have 100% assurance if we had something like an account book mentioning it, or if it was inscribed with Shakespeare's name perhaps; if we had an account book belonging to the Earl of Southampton saying that he had commissioned this painting by such and such a painter” (Sawmill).

various “discoveries” he made about Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (Schoenbaum, *Lives* 761-64). Or can the ultimate motivation for the promotion of the Cobbe be located in what Marjorie Garber has called “more pragmatic issues having to do with the huge economic investment in the Shakespeare business – from publishing to tourism to T-shirt” (215)? Whatever the underlying motivations, the discovery of the Cobbe seems culturally symptomatic insofar as it follows a historical pattern of attempted authentications of alleged Shakespeare portraits.

If there is one thing that Shakespeare’s portraits can teach us, it is that they reflect our need to construct the author in our own image. Some may regret that Shakespeare’s precise appearance will forever elude us, yet there is also something historically congruous about our lack of access to a visually satisfactory likeness of Shakespeare. If Shakespeare, as Patrick Cheney has recently argued, practiced “an oblique literary form of self-representation that allows the author to hide behind the veil of his fiction” (14), then it seems strangely appropriate that the portraits too give us at best oblique access to Shakespeare.

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