

Is This a Shakespeare Which I See Before Me?

Scholars in London Monday showed the portrait, from the collection of an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, the Cobbes, who have owned it for nearly 300 years.

By JOHN F. BURNS March 9, 2009 The New York Times

LONDON — Nearly 400 years after his death, William Shakespeare appeared in a new and more handsome guise on Monday, thanks to a recently discovered portrait that a group of Shakespeare scholars and art historians said was the only known likeness to have been painted in his lifetime.

Stanley Wells, the chairman of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, based in Shakespeare's birthplace of Stratford-upon-Avon, described the portrait at a news conference as a "pinup." It shows the Bard as a far more alluring figure than the solemn-faced, balding image that has been conveyed by engravings, busts and portraits that have been accepted by scholars as the best available likeness of English literature's most famous figure.

Until now, scholars have deemed the most authentic representations of Shakespeare to be a black-and-white woodcut engraving by the Flemish artist Martin Droeshout that appeared in the first folio edition of Shakespeare's works in 1623, and a marble bust displayed since the 1620s in a Stratford church.

In their place, the scholars in London showed reporters a portrait taken from the private collection of an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family, the Cobbes, who have owned it for nearly 300 years, since inheriting it through a family relationship with Shakespeare's only known literary patron, Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton. The earl was a rakish aristocrat who eluded a death sentence passed on him after joining a rebellion against Elizabeth I. But not all Shakespeare scholars are convinced the Cobbe portrait is an authentic likeness, or even that it is of Shakespeare at all, given the aristocratic dress of the man in the portrait and the idealizing tradition of Elizabethan portraiture, which often produced images that bore little resemblance to nature.

The Cobbe portrait, as the scholars now call it, shows a head-turner of a man. In middle age, this Shakespeare has a fresh-faced complexion, a closely trimmed auburn beard, a long straight nose and a full, almost bouffant hairstyle. He is dressed in elaborate white lace ruff and a gold-trimmed blue doublet of a kind worn only by the wealthy and successful men of his age.

Mr. Wells and other experts said they were convinced after three years of studying the portrait, and after elaborate scientific tests at Cambridge University, that it was, in effect, the holy grail Shakespearean scholars had sought for centuries: a portrait done in Shakespeare's lifetime, and the original from which other Shakespeare paintings of the period were copied. They said their studies showed it probably was painted in 1610, when Shakespeare was 46, and only a few years from his death in 1616.

In a brochure for an exhibition opening in Stratford in April, titled "Shakespeare Found," the birthplace trust offered a lyrical interpretation. "His face is open and alive, with a rosy, rather sweet expression, perhaps suggestive of modesty," it said. "There is nothing superior or haughty in the subject, which one might well expect to find in a face set off by such rich clothing. It is the face of a good listener, as well as of someone who exercised a natural restraint."

In a handout for reporters, the trust said the portrait might open a new era in Shakespeare scholarship, giving fresh momentum, among other things, to generations of speculation as to whether the playwright, a married man with three children, was bisexual. Until now, that suggestion has hinged mostly on

dedications to the Earl of Southampton that Shakespeare wrote with some of his best-loved poems and some of the sensual passages in his poems and plays, particularly his sonnets, most of which, the London scholars said, are centered on expressions of love and desire for men, not women. “This Shakespeare is handsome and glamorous, so how does this change the way we think about him?” the handout said. “And do the painting and provenance tell us more about his sexuality, and possibly about the person to whom the sonnets are addressed?”

David Scott Kastan, a Yale Shakespeare expert, said by telephone that there were reasons to question the Cobbe portrait’s provenance — whether it was in fact once owned by the Earl of Southampton or commissioned by him, as the trust representatives believe — and to doubt whether the richly dressed man in the portrait was Shakespeare. “If I had to bet I would say it’s not Shakespeare,” Mr. Kastan said. But even if it was, he said, the traditions of Elizabethan portraiture meant that it would be unwise to conclude that Shakespeare actually looked like the figure depicted in the portrait. “It might be a portrait of Shakespeare, but not a likeness, because the conventions of portraiture at the time were often to idealize the subject,” he said.

Scholars searching for a Shakespeare likeness have concentrated on four other paintings with strong similarities to the Cobbe portrait, one of them the so-called Folger portrait displayed in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. But the experts in London said they were sure from their study of the Cobbe portrait that it was the original from which the other portraits were based.

The experts said the portrait came to light when Alec Cobbe, an art restorer and heir to the family fortune, visited the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2006 to see an exhibition, “Searching for Shakespeare,” at which the Folger portrait was displayed. They said Mr. Cobbe concluded that the Folger portrait, whose authenticity had been doubted for decades, was a copy of the one that had been in his family’s art collection since the mid-18th century, with the family unaware that the man depicted might be Shakespeare.

Mr. Wells, the Shakespeare scholar, said that compared to the Cobbe portrait, the other portraits presented “an inanimate mask” of Shakespeare and that they were “dull copies of the original.” He added, “No one who has seen the four paintings can doubt that the Cobbe portrait is the original. You don’t need an expert to see that.”

Scientific studies at Cambridge showed that the oak panel on which the Cobbe portrait was mounted came from trees felled in the last 20 years of the 16th century, pointing to a date for the painting in the early 1600s, experts at the news conference said. They said the paint used was also characteristic of that period, as was the intricate and costly style of the lace ruff worn by the man in the portrait.

Rupert Featherstone, assistant curator for the university’s Fitzwilliam Museum, said another clue pointing to the Cobbe portrait’s claim to be the original from which Shakespeare paintings of the period were copied came from X-ray studies that showed the “pentiments,” or changes made by the painter as he progressed. He said these included the inclusion of a small, fleshy bulge at the upper corner of Shakespeare’s left eye, a detail typical of the minor adjustments made in original portraiture.

Mr. Wells and other experts said the Cobbe painting, if accepted as the only original lifetime likeness of the playwright, could be worth millions. But they said that pecuniary considerations played no part in their scholarship. “It hasn’t been for sale for 400 years, and it’s not for sale now,” said Mark Broch, the curator of the Cobbe collection.