

Behold the Man?

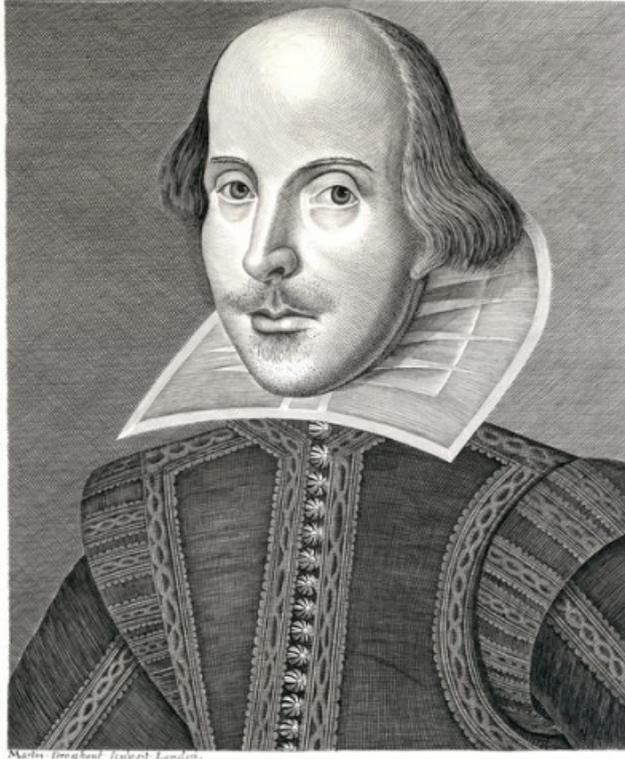
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“A STUPIDER face I never beheld”. Such was the verdict of the painter Thomas Gainsborough in 1768 in a letter to the celebrated actor and producer David Garrick. He had commissioned Gainsborough to paint a likeness of Shakespeare. But what had the artist to go on, more than 150 years after his death? There were two fairly contemporary supposed representations: the *First Folio* Droeshout engraving of 1623 (right) and the bust in Stratford’s Holy Trinity Church. Gainsborough, however, was scathing of both. The comment quoted above was his reaction to the engraving. He added that “it is impossible that such a mind and ray of heaven could shine with such a face and pair of eyes as that picture has”. As for the bust, he described it as ‘a silly smiling thing’. Garrick was furious, called Gainsborough ‘an impudent scoundrel’ and cancelled the commission. So the great painter never did produce a portrait of the bard.

In *Shakespeare: Truth and Tradition*, J.S. Smart writes of the *First Folio* that it contains ‘the author’s portrait for all to see’. But does it? Martin Droeshout, the engraver, was born in London into an immigrant Flemish family of painters and engravers. He went on to make engravings of many famous people, including John Donne, Gustavus Adolphus, the Duke of Buckingham and John Foxe. Clearly he must have had good skills, otherwise those associated with the *First Folio* would not have employed him.

In 1616 Droeshout would have been 15 and is most unlikely to have seen the Stratford man, and therefore the engraving could not possibly have been drawn from life. Nevertheless, the verse opposite the picture appears to suggest that somehow he succeeded:

*This figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut;
Wherein the Graver had a strife
With nature, to out do the life:
O, could he but have drawn his wit
As well in brasse, as well as he hath hit
His face, the Print would then surpass
All that was ever writ in brasse.
But, since he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.*



This verse was written by Ben Jonson, whose contribution to the *Folio* is substantial, including the famous dedicatory poem that refers to Shakespeare as ‘not of an age, but for all time’. He was a comic dramatist fond of puns who courted controversy. Some of the key words in the verse cited have double meanings. The ‘for’ in the second line could mean ‘instead of’, as it does in the line ‘or for the laurel he may gain a scorn’ in his dedicatory poem.

Again, ‘out do the life’ could actually mean ‘do out’, i.e. hide or destroy the life. And to suggest that the engraver has so well ‘hit’ the face is peculiar in view of the facts already outlined about Droeshout’s age in 1616 but would not be so strange if ‘hit’ really meant

‘hid’, the word ‘hit’ being the old past participle of ‘hide’. Chaucer uses it in this way in ‘The Squire’s Tale’ in *Canterbury Tales*:

*Right as a serpent hit hym under floures
Til he may seen his tyme for to byte.*

And why the strange reference to ‘all that was ever writ in brasse’? The word ‘brasse’ is curiously repeated two lines later. Brass gives us the adjective ‘brazen’ which means impudent or barefaced lying or trickery. Brass, we should note, is not a pure metal but an alloy of copper and zinc (the engraving itself was done in copper). There is definitely some kind of jest or hoax going on here. Jonson seems to be writing tongue-in-cheek, outwardly praising the engraving while, by subtle ambiguities of phrase, actually mocking it. Whether we accept this interpretation or not, Jonson does finally tell us that if we want to find the real wit of Shakespeare, then we must “looke not on his picture, but his booke”.

This remark has echoes of a reference to Francis Bacon made by Nicholas Hilliard, best known for his portrait miniatures of the courts of Elizabeth and James I. He did a portrait of Bacon at the age of 18 (right), and around the top in Latin he wrote: “If only a picture of his mind could be painted”.



Let us take a closer look at Droeshout's puzzling portrait. What clearly supports a mocking interpretation of Jonson's verse is the startling fact that absolutely nothing is right in this drawing. We might well ask: how could the engraver get it all so badly wrong? Was he totally incompetent? Why was he really employed? Consider the details. The head is out of all proportion, being as big as the body and, if a true likeness, would suggest that the man was a dwarf. It also seems deliberately drawn in the shape of an egg. Indeed it looks like a 'swollen head' because of the bulbous protuberance on the forehead.

Again, many years ago Lord Brain pointed out that it has two right eyes. The inner half of the upper lid of an eye is narrower than the outer half, but in this engraving the left eye is actually a duplicate right eye. The nose is also misplaced because it is not in line with the curvature above the lip, which here runs into the left nostril. So, while the face is looking to its left, the nose is pointing to the right. The piece of the left ear that is shown is deformed and too low (no right ear is visible), the hair on the two sides fails to balance, the face is unshaven and there is no neck. Indeed, the head does not seem to be connected to the body but is sitting on the collar. Sir Sidney Lee, a celebrated biographer of Shakespeare, wrote: "The face is long and the forehead high; the one ear which is visible is shapeless; the top of the head is bald, but the hair falls in abundance over the ears".

Now we know from his other portraits that Droeshout was competent enough to depict facial anatomy correctly. Why, then, did he give this portrait an outsized egg head, a swollen forehead, two right eyes, a misplaced nose and mouth, an exaggerated moustache, an unshaven jaw, and a deformed left ear? Was he actually asked to draw a caricature face? Consider that the engraving is larger than most authors' portraits in book title pages and takes up most of the area so that there is no room for the ornamentations customarily drawn around the author's picture in those days. Here we have only the stark image and no embellishments. Was this because the reader is encouraged to look more closely at the details and detect the anomalies?

In point of fact, there is evidence approaching proof that Droeshout was asked to do precisely what we are saying. It lies in the doublet, which is ridiculously small with oversized shoulder-wings. More significantly, the coat is composed of the front and back of the same left arm. This fact was indicated as long ago as 9th March 1911 in the *Tailor and Cutter* magazine. A month later, the *Gentleman's Tailor* magazine substantiated this claim by stating: "The tunic, coat, or whatever the garment may have been called at the time, is so strangely illustrated that the right-hand side of the forepart is obviously the left-hand side of the back part; and so gives a harlequin appearance to the figure, which it is not unnatural to assume was intentional, and done with express object and purpose".

We can demonstrate this fact in several ways. Notice,

first of all, that the two front panels have different shapes and sizes. The left front panel (A, on the right as we look) curves down to the left side, widening at the bottom, while the right panel (B) goes straight down towards the waist, narrowing at the bottom, thus forming an upright wedge shape. These two panels should be similar in shape and size, but they are not. Second, the two shoulder wings have also different shapes and sizes. The left shoulder wing (C) is wider and longer, curling down below the left sleeve, while the right shoulder wing (D) is narrower and stops before curling towards the right sleeve. The two shoulder wings should be mirror images of each other pictorially, but they are not. Third, the embroidered stripes on the two sleeves do not match. The stripes on the left sleeve are much higher than those on the right.

Finally, the patterns on the embroidery do not match. In fact, the patterns *would* match if the embroidery on the right shoulder wing was the back of the left shoulder wing. Clearly, the engraving shows the left front and left back of the same garment. This suggests that Droeshout studied a doublet closely and deliberately joined the front and back of the left side only.

Left-handedness signifies something dark, veiled or hidden and the purpose of engraving a left-handed tunic may be not only to emphasise the intentional nature of the other deformities but also to communicate the

existence of a secret. And what is that secret? It is that the man pictured has a substituted right arm. He is not the writer.

The whole puzzle may be solved if we look at the expression on the face. It has a vacant stare, or at best an expression of sheepish oafishness. In fact, it suggests a mask, and a clear indication of this purpose is the double line which runs

from the left ear lobe to the chin. If this were meant to indicate that the man was putting on weight and had a double chin, the flesh would protrude most at the chin whereas here it widens as we approach the ear. The whole thing only makes sense if we imagine that the inner line represents the edge of a mask and the outer line represents the outline of a real person, whoever he was, hiding behind it. If so, the true meaning of "hit the face" in Jonson's lines becomes apparent.

Apart from some doubtful and unauthenticated paintings, no other 'portrait' of Shakespeare has come to light. So we are left with the startling likelihood that the only representation of the immortal bard is a deliberate caricature. The same point applies to William Shaksper (the spelling common on contemporary documents). We do know that he was an actor, a shareholder in theatres, a property owner, maltster and money lender. But we can find nothing to warm our hearts to him as the poet who was 'not of an age, but for all time'. His life is a caricature of the nobility of mind, depth of intellect, psychological insight, imaginative power, grand purpose and creative genius of the author of Shakespeare. He simply does not inhabit the same universe. □

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