The Prank of the Face: Unmasking the “Droeshout” Portrait of William Shakespeare

by

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1. Introduction

In 1977, art historian and pioneer computer artist Lillian Schwartz made a remarkable observation with potentially far-reaching implications for the Shakespeare authorship debate. She took a copy of the famous “Droeshout” portrait of William Shakespeare which appears in the First Folio of 1623, and scanned it into her computer. Then she did the same with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth 1. She overlaid the two images one on top of the other, scaling them to the same size. Then, adjusting their relative transparency so that they could be readily compared, she noticed something very strange: there were certain portions of the Shakespeare portrait which exactly reproduced the features of Elizabeth.

It was not a question of an approximate copy, or a close facsimile, or a loose likeness. There was an exact reproduction of the key sections.

Her discovery, extraordinary as it appears to be, seems to have attracted almost no commentary in the intervening years. It’s perhaps not hard to see why. There does not seem to be any obvious reason why a portrait of Shakespeare should share elements of a portrait of Elizabeth. I must admit that when I first heard of this discovery, my initial reaction was to dismiss it out of hand as too ridiculous to contemplate. The internet is awash with foolish claims of identity between different people based on dubious photo-shop manipulations, wishful thinking and outright stupidity. This claim, I thought when I first heard about it, no doubt fell directly into such a category. That, however, was before I looked at the superimposed images for myself.

In this short article, I would like to revisit Lillian Schwartz’ original discovery, with an open mind. I will present the images, and allow the reader to make up her own mind. Then, once we have seen for ourselves the extent to which the two portraits share common elements, we will explore some possible implications of this challenging discovery.
2. The “Droeshout” Portrait of William Shakespeare

![Image of the Droeshout portrait of William Shakespeare]

Figure 1: The famous “Droeshout” portrait of William Shakespeare which appears as the Frontispiece to the First Folio Collected Works of Shakespeare of 1623.

The famous engraving of Shakespeare which appears in the First Folio has been credited to Martin Droeshout. Born in 1601, he would have been just 21 when he was awarded the commission. William Shakespeare had died six years earlier, when Droeshout would have been 15, so it is highly unlikely that the portrait could have been drawn from memory. It is an image which has attracted much discussion over the years, with the general consensus being that there is something very odd, and very wrong about the portrait. It is not generally regarded as a triumph of the portraitist’s art, but a curious footnote in the history of the First Folio. Amongst those who doubt the orthodox attribution of authorship to the actor Shaxper, it is widely suspected that it may conceal some hidden mystery.
Painted sometime in the late 1580s or early 1590s, by an unknown artist, the “Armada” portrait became the officially approved portrait of Elizabeth in the latter years of her reign. It derives its name from the depiction of the famous sea-battle of 1588, which can be seen in the panel behind Elizabeth. The painting exists in three different versions, all of which share the same rendition of her face. Elizabeth kept a tight control over depictions of her image. It was not permitted to simply create arbitrary images of the Queen. Anyone who wished to publish her portrait was obliged under royal decree to use officially sanctioned versions, of which the Armada portrait was one.
“A 1563 draft announcement “Prohibiting Portraits of the Queen” required that all portraits of Elizabeth be made from pre-approved existing portraiture (Archer et al. 175). In 1596 her Privy Council ordered unapproved portraits of Elizabeth to be destroyed (Strong Gloriana 14). “

- from http://shannonknight.net/?p=1774

The Armada portrait of Elizabeth was far more than simply a depiction of the Monarch. It was a symbolic expression of her regal authority. It dated from a moment in the history of English art when such representations held more in common with heraldry, or iconography, than what we now think of as portraiture. Wikipedia tells us:

“English art in this period was isolated from trends in Catholic Italy, and owed more to Flemish manuscript illumination and heraldic representation than to Renaissance ideas of unity in time and space in art. The Armada Portrait is no exception: the chair to the right is viewed from two different angles, as are the tables on the left, and the background shows two different stages in the defeat of the Armada.[2] In the background view on the left, English fireships threaten the Spanish fleet, and on the right the ships are driven onto a rocky coast amid stormy seas by the "Protestant Wind". On a secondary level, these images show Elizabeth turning her back on storm and darkness while sunlight shines where she gazes, iconography that would be repeated in Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger’s 1592 "Ditchley" portrait of the queen.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armada_Portrait

There is a real sense therefore in which the Armada portrait embodies the symbolic power of the Queen and the Monarchy. It is a highly charged image, with deep cultural resonance, and not a portrait to be handled carelessly, or in ignorance of its inherent potency. Today, surrounded as we are by an infinite proliferation of images, it is easy for us to lose sight of the full implication of representation. In the Armada portrait of Elizabeth, we are reminded of the potential power of such depictions.
4. Overlaying the Two Portraits

Figure 3: The two portraits overlaid at full size. The Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare has been resized so that the separation between the eyes matches that of the Queen and it has also been rotated counter-clockwise by 4°.

Take the Droeshout portrait, and overlay it on the Armada portrait. Adjust the relative sizes of the two images so that the eye separation is identical. Rotate the Droeshout portrait counter-clockwise by 4°. The result is as shown above.

Examine, firstly, the eyes. You will note that it is difficult at first glance to separate Elizabeth’s eyes from those of Shakespeare. There is a simply reason for this: they are identical. Not approximately the same, not a close version, but absolutely identical.
Perhaps the best way to examine this is by viewing the video below. Click on the image or the link to view. It begins with the Shakespeare portrait, then slowly fades in the Elizabeth portrait over the top. Watch it several times. Begin by observing the eyes, both the right and the left. There is no difference: Shakespeare’s eyes are Elizabeth’s eyes.

https://youtu.be/aZ_cuc80S4s

*Figure 4: Video showing the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare with the Armada portrait of Elizabeth slowly fading in over the top.*

Next, we present three still images taken from the video showing the two portraits overlaid at various transparencies. Close inspection of these images reveals that the area around the eyes is as close to identical as would be practically achievable. However, in other areas, notably the jaw line, and the position of the mouth, it is clear that the two portraits diverge.
Figure 5: The portraits overlaid, with Elizabeth at 75% opacity and Shakespeare at 25%
Figure 6: The portraits overlaid, with Elizabeth at 50% opacity and Shakespeare at 50%
The next three images show a close-up of the area around the eyes and nose. In each of these overlays, the Droeshout engraving can be easily identified by the grey/black hatching, whilst the Armada portrait is in colour. The relative transparency has been varied in these images to bring out the detail. Close examination will confirm yet again that the treatment of the eyes is perfectly exact. The engraver of the Droeshout image has obviously commenced with the Armada portrait, and engraved the details of the Shakespeare portrait by simply following the details of the image of Elizabeth.
Figure 8: Close-up of the area around the eyes. The grey/black hatching of the Shakespeare engraving can be easily differentiated from the coloured painting of Elizabeth. It is clear that the engraver of the Droeshout image has used the Armada image as a template and simply engraved the form of the eyes by following the portrait of Elizabeth.

Figure 9. Close-up of the eye on the right, again showing the virtually identical imagery in both the engraving and the painting.
Figure 10: This image shows the eyes and nose of the two overlaid portraits. Close inspection reveals that the Shakespeare nose has been made slightly larger than that of Elizabeth, but the shading on the side of the nose in the engraving is equally obviously derived from the Elizabeth portrait.
Figure 11: Zooming out further to now include the mouth shows that once the artist engraver moved away from the eyes and nose, he began to make some changes. The mouth of Shakespeare has been lowered. The profile of the cheek, on the left, the chin, and the jaw line have been slightly expanded. In this way, the feminine features of Elizabeth have been subtly transformed into the masculine face of Shakespeare.
Figure 12: Zooming out further again shows the framing of the two faces. Shakespeare’s forehead has been made larger, and the hairline created to follow the flow of the curls of Elizabeth’s hair.
Figure 13: This is particularly apparent on the left hand side of the portraits. Notice that the outline of the lower edge of Shakespeare’s hair tracks the shape of Elizabeth’s hair exactly.
5. Discussion

Close examination of the images and video above leave no room for doubt. The eyes of the two portraits are, for all intents and purposes, identical. The nose of Shakespeare has clearly been based on the nose of Elizabeth. Finally, the shape of the outline of the face, the jaw line and the hairline of Shakespeare, are all based with slight deliberate variation on the Elizabeth portrait.

Lillian Schwartz’ discovery in 1977 is absolutely correct: the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare has been created by using the features of Elizabeth as the basis.

As noted above, there has been almost no discussion of this remarkable observation since 1977. One exception is an online note by Stratfordian Terry Ross.

Ross, not unexpectedly, rejects the possibility outright that the Droeshout portrait could be based on the Armada portrait. It is not hard to see why: it is simply an inconceivable result under the orthodox view of the authorship. Ross begins by making various criticisms of Schwartz’ methodology, which may or may not be valid, but in any case, are entirely besides the point. It is not Schwartz’ original methodology which is important but whether or not the two portraits share common traits.

He proceeds to attempt to prove that the two portraits are different, but in order to do so, he does not even take the elementary step of overlaying the two images over each other at correct scale and orientation. As a result, his analysis is fundamentally flawed from the outset. He had obviously convinced himself before he started that it could not be true, and frankly all he has done is confirm his own prejudice, without taking the time and trouble to evaluate it properly.

Other than this analysis of Ross, Schwartz’ discovery does not seem to have provoked any further discussion. It is not hard to see why. If she is correct, and I believe that she is, it potentially throws the entire authorship question into disarray: why would “Shakespeare” be depicted using the face of Elizabeth?

Let’s consider this question carefully. If we concede that the Armada portrait was used as the basis for the Droeshout engraving, there are only two possibilities. Either it was done as an artistic short-cut, without any intention of implying any meaningful connection between the two images. Or, it was done deliberately, in order to convey some genuine link between the two portraits. Which of the two is it?

If the artist decided simply to take a short-cut, and use Elizabeth’s eyes as the basis for Shakespeare’s eyes, it is hard to imagine that such an approach could have been condoned by those in charge of the production of the First Folio. The portrait of Elizabeth was an important image which could never have been employed disrespectfully, even after her death. The Shakespeare works are the supreme examples of art in which all potential layers of meaning are consciously handled. It is very difficult to imagine that both the Elizabeth portrait and the Shakespeare portrait could have both been handled so carelessly, with no regard for the mutual implications of such a decision on the cultural and historical legacies of these two giants of the era.
If this is so, then the decision to base the Shakespeare portrait on the Armada image must have been taken with full appreciation of its implication. Someone took that decision, and they took it for a definite purpose. What might that be?

The first thing to say is that, whatever the ultimate reason for basing the engraving of the face of “William Shakespeare” on the portrait of Queen Elizabeth, we are in the presence of a grand prank. The person or the group responsible for the production of the First Folio were having a laugh. This is really a tremendous and hilarious joke. For nearly 400 years, this odd portrait of the Bard has stared out of the page at generations of readers, concealing a hidden surprise. It is an Easter Egg in the modern use of the term, a secret compartment placed at the very beginning of the collected works of the greatest playwright who ever lived.

Lillian Schwartz opened this secret compartment, but its contents have still not been given the examination that they deserve. There is certainly a mystery here, tightly wrapped inside an excellent riddle. Let’s first appreciate the simple humour of this. For all the ink that has been spilt discussing the strange aspects of the Droeshout engraving, it has remained undetected all this time until Schwartz’ discovery that it is not a genuine portrait of any man at all. It is a confected face which has been elaborately created out of the official portrait of Queen Elizabeth. But why? What does this all mean?

If we consider that this portrait is a rebus, or picture puzzle, we are on the right track. To put it as simply as possible: the portrait is telling us that this author, “Shakespeare”, is but a mask, and behind the mask lies the eyes of Queen Elizabeth.

It is true that many commentators have suggested that the Droeshout engraving depicts a mask. There is an entirely unnecessary line which runs along the jaw line and terminates at the ear which has no basis in biology. Yet, until now, the tendency has been to suggest that the identity of the person behind the mask is the true author of the plays. Now however we are in a position to state exactly the identity of the person behind the mask. It is Queen Elizabeth. Quite obviously, she was not the author of the Shakespeare plays, so how could it be that she is being depicted as the face behind the Shakespeare mask?
Figure 14: In this image, the area of the overlay has been confined to the rectangle around the eyes and nose. Shakespeare’s eyes now form a mask over Elizabeth’s eyes.
Another way to look at this conundrum is to suggest that it is the eyes of Elizabeth which peer out from the portrait of “Shakespeare”; that is to say, the author, “Shakespeare” looks at the world with the Queen’s eyes. It has long been recognised that, at one level, the plays are pure Tudor historical propaganda. In a very real sense, therefore, the plays do indeed portray the world as seen through the “eyes of Elizabeth”, or the Tudor view of history. But again, how could this be?

I suggest that the answer is, literally, staring us in the face. Francis Bacon is the true author of the Shakespeare works, and he is also the son of Queen Elizabeth. Both of these propositions, controversial as they still are in the wider world, have long ago been proven beyond any doubt by
the ranks of Baconians who have studied the questions with an open mind. So, now, if Francis Bacon is the son of Elizabeth, then perhaps the answer to the riddle begins to come into focus. It seems to me that the Droeshout portrait is telling us, whether we are able to hear the message or not, that Bacon’s enterprise in writing the plays was conducted with the knowledge, and approval, of the Queen herself. This is a radical suggestion, and yet, there are certain other clues which point in the same direction.

One of these is the corpus of the History plays. Shakespeare’s history plays form an unbroken sequence from the reign of Richard II through to the reign of Henry VIII, with the exception of a gap covering the reign of Henry VII. As many Baconians have noted, this gap is precisely filled by Francis Bacon’s prose history work The History of the Reign of Henry VII. Taken together, therefore, the Shakespeare plays and the Bacon prose history form a continuous sequence. However, it is possible to extend this sequence even further back in time, if we include certain other historical plays which also appear in the 1590s. I have covered this topic briefly with additional details in a short note published in the Conference Brochure for the recent meeting of the Shakespeare Authorship Trust, available online here. The conclusion is inescapable: there must have been a co-ordinated program throughout the latter part of Queen Elizabeth’s reign to produce for the stage a complete cycle of history plays covering the reigns of all of the English monarchs from King John to King Henry VIII. Furthermore, Francis Bacon must have been involved in this as he has supplied the missing piece of the unbroken sequence in the prose history of Henry VII.

But is it conceivable that such a program could have been undertaken without the explicit knowledge, and consent of the Queen herself? If the plays do represent the Tudor view of English history then surely the answer is no. The Queen must have known. She must have given her assent, especially given that the playwright and author responsible was her own son.

Here, finally, we may have the solution to the riddle of the Prank of the Face. The Droeshout engraving of Shakespeare turns out to be not quite as incompetent as generations of commentators have concluded. When Ben Jonson wrote: “Look not on his Picture, but his book”, perhaps he was not simply dising a piece of inferior engraving work, but stating plainly that there is more to this depicted face than meets the eye.

Additional Resources for the Lillian Schwartz discovery:


“The Art Historian’s Computer: Riddles posed by ancient works of art fall to historical analyses and electronic explorations” By Lillian Schwartz . Scientific American, April 1995

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