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Adam Gopnik: Look Here, Upon This Picture



A lot of talk has been occasioned by the supposed find, over in England, of a new portrait of Shakespeare—the one that made the front page of the *Times* and that makes him look like George in the “Penny Lane” video, circa 1967. The “Cobbe” portrait is said to date from 1610, when he was well along in his forties—the science of dendrochronology, or dating wooden-panel pictures by the number of tree rings, presumably anchors the certainty—and, while we wait to find out more about it, a lot of bad ideas about Shakespeare, pictures, and the period have been going around, herein to be cleared up.

First, the two familiar portraits of Shakespeare—the Droeshout engraving from the First Folio and the Stratford bust at Holy Trinity Church, in his home town—are not “thought to be” portraits of Shakespeare or “widely accepted” as portraits of Shakespeare. They *are* portraits of Shakespeare. They were commissioned soon after he died, by people who knew him intimately, in order to give other people a sense of what he looked like while he was alive. Ben Jonson said that the First Folio engraving looked just like him, saying, “could he [Droeshout] but have drawn his wit as well in brass, as he hath hit his face/the print would then surpass/all that was ever writ in brass,” and Jonson knew him as well as anyone. The Shakespeare family put up and paid for the monument, sculpted by an artisan named Janssen, in Stratford right after their dad died—the Shakespeare scholar René Weis thinks the likeness was “almost certainly” made from a life mask taken not too long before the poet drew his last breath, in 1616—and though it makes him look like a Thurber husband, that must have been just how he looked, at least by the end.

Neither image is especially masterly, or even much good at all. To use an old distinction, they’re “conceptual” rather than “optical”—they show an assembled stack of features rather than a convincing illusion of a specific face—but

the concepts are clearly articulated: he's a bald guy with a short beard. Mrs. Shakespeare might have said, "Well, he was better-looking than *that*, dammit" (then again, given what she had put up with, she might not have), but she wouldn't have said, "He didn't look like that at all," or she wouldn't have let it happen. Any portrait of Shakespeare in his forties that doesn't look like these portraits of Shakespeare isn't a portrait of Shakespeare.

Nor is it true that there was, in the Jacobean period, a kind of broad, hazy latitude about portrait-making, in which artists were free to make people look however they wanted them to look and everyone accepted it. All author pictures are cosmetic, then as now—do you think that the sage man with his hand to his head, the wry woman novelist with the half smile actually look like that?—but they were no more stylized back then than any other kind of portraiture. In Elizabethan portraits, people look like the period, but they also look like themselves: a portrait of Southampton looks different from a portrait of Ben Jonson which looks nothing at all like a portrait of Richard Burbage. You really can tell these guys apart. Differences in likeness were as evident to them as they are to us—that's why Hamlet urges his mom to "look here, upon this picture, and on this." There is not a single line or scrap of evidence from the time in which someone says, Well, sure, the picture shows him with a full head of hair (or beard or whatever), but he didn't really look like that. Shakespeare lived in as satiric and short-tempered a circle as has ever existed; if, close to his retirement, he was bald, and had a picture painted where he wasn't, they would have jumped on him, and he knew it. Ben Jonson was so jaundiced about anything that struck him as pretension that when poor Shakespeare got enough money to buy a coat of arms and the motto "Non Sanz Droict" ("Not Without Right") Jonson immediately introduced a dim-witted social-climbing character into a play just so that he could have him say that *his* motto was "Not without mustard."

There is, however, another angle, not often cited, that suggests that there might have been other, more romantic pictures of Shakespeare making the rounds a few years earlier. A Cambridge student play from the period, the so-called "Parnassus," refers to it: a swoony courtier named Gullio is a crazy fan of "Venus and Adonis" and "Romeo and Juliet," and cries, "O sweet Master Shakespeare, I'll have his picture in my study at the court" (meaning in his rooms on the courtyard of his college, not alongside the Queen). This might just be loose talk, like someone saying he's going to keep a portrait of Wes Anderson in his room, but it sounds as if such things really happened.

This presents a problem, since it is a rule of life that undergraduates don't put pictures of bald, funny-looking guys up in their dorm. But the play seems to have been performed around 1600, a good ten years earlier than the date on this portrait, while the work that Gullio refers to is mostly still earlier than that, from Shakespeare's first lyric crop in the fifteen-nineties. And that Shakespeare was good-looking as a young man, before he lost his hair and puffed out from home-cooking, seems at least likely, on the fixed general principle that writers who become very celebrated in their youth, as he did, are, to a first approximation, almost always good-looking. Byron and Shelley, Mailer and Updike and Salinger, Fitzgerald, Dickens, Tennyson, Lowell, Ted Hughes—all celebrated in their youth, all not just O.K.-looking but an oil painting, each and every one. There are many good funny-looking writers, but it's hard to think of good funny-looking writers who get famous young. Funny-looking writers, at least funny-looking male writers, get famous late—Samuel Johnson and Sinclair Lewis and John Milton and Philip Larkin all come instantly to mind—or else they don't get famous. They get read, but they don't get celebrated. (The only exception is Alexander Pope, who got famous young and was a humpback dwarf, but he was so good that no one noticed, and anyway he looked fine from the neck up.) If you could push the date of the new portrait back a decade or so, and make it of the young, swoon-inducing Shakespeare, it might make sense.

And then the other really odd thing, which is causing heartburn in Canadian bosoms, is that another, even better-credentialled romantic painting of the Bard emerged in Canada a scant three years ago, and never got what the political writers like to call "traction." This one, the so-called Sanders portrait, its wood securely dated to the early seventeenth century, also shows a good-looking rock-star Shakespeare—though the Sanders looks less like George in '67 and more like Dylan on the cover of "New Morning," a shaggy guy with a wry smile—and has every bit as good a provenance as the new one, and a better direct claim: there's a slip of paper, securely dated to the period, on the back of the thing that once read, in part, "Shakespere...this likeness taken 1603." Post-Gullio, but not badly so... And the Canadian portrait shows a guy who, though not yet bald, is unmistakably going bald.

So the real takeaway ought to be that, if this is a new portrait of Shakespeare, it would probably have to date earlier than the date they're giving. Or else, as Ben Jonson said, that we ought to look "not on his picture, but his book." Or, best of all, just trust Canada.

(Photographs: Left, the "Cobb" portrait by Oli Scarff/Getty Images; Right, the "Sanders" portrait, courtesy of the Canadian Conservation Institute)

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Posted by *Adam Gopnik*

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