

Preface

This publication is linked to my book *The True Face of William Shakespeare: The Poet's Death Mask and Likenesses from Three Periods of his Life* (2006), in particular to the proof it adduces (in collaboration with many experts) of the authenticity of the Flower portrait of 1609, and to the appendix chapter added to the volume shortly before going to print under the title 'The Flower Portrait in the Royal Shakespeare Company Collection, Stratford-upon-Avon: Original or Copy?'

After the exhibition catalogue *Searching for Shakespeare*, compiled and edited by Dr Tarnya Cooper, appeared in 2006, and following the return of the Flower portrait from the exhibition of the same name in the London National Portrait Gallery and then in the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, I turned my attention again to the intensive study of this portrait of Shakespeare, particularly to the new investigative results put forward by Dr Cooper in *Searching for Shakespeare*. In 'the crucial test', the analysis of paint samples in 2005 under Cooper's direction, 'chrome yellow' was identified. But since chrome yellow was not commercially available until after 1814, according to Cooper this demonstrates that the Flower portrait she examined was produced after 1814, so that it must be a 19th century copy or forgery (cf. Cooper, *Searching for Shakespeare*, p. 72).

I hoped to achieve clarity, (1) by inspecting the painting after it was returned to Stratford from New Haven at the end of 2006, and (2) by evaluating the BBC television film 'The Flower Portrait' by John Hay, shown on 21 April 2005. This announced and documented - ahead of the exhibition - the findings of Dr Cooper.

My inspection and photo-documentary recording of the portrait Cooper had examined took place in January 2007 at the Royal Shakespeare Company depository in Stratford, in the presence and with the kind permission of the curator, David Howells; I was also accompanied by a small delegation. The TV producer at the BBC, John Hay, had let me have a copy of his film 'The Flower Portrait' on video cassette at the end of April 2005. This contained the BBC time code, which enabled me to pinpoint the film excerpts and freeze frames used for pictorial quotation later.

Close scrutiny and evaluation of the film, meticulous examination of the portrait and panel, as well as the expert opinions of specialists from various disciplines, led to the conclusion that there must be not just one, but two copies of the Flower portrait extant, copies varying distinctly in many particulars not only from each other but also from the original painting. Both copies must have been used in the investigations prior to the exhibition 'Searching for Shakespeare': one for the x-ray image, and the other for the paint analysis.

My investigations and the statements of the experts I had consulted led me further to conclude that the Flower portrait that was x-rayed in 1966 and thoroughly restored in 1979, beneath which lay (as the x-ray image, over forty years old but well-defined and easy to read and decipher, had shown) a clearly delineated Italian Madonna painting of the late 15th or early 16th century, was without doubt the original 1609 Flower portrait of William Shakespeare. For, as regards the condition of the panel, this is the only painting that matches the descriptions left to us by eminent British experts around 1900; furthermore, it is in agreement in every detail with the x-ray picture of 1966. This picture alone possesses the essential and unmistakable hallmarks of authenticity that clearly identify an image from Shakespeare's lifetime. Other criteria of authenticity unique to this image include the clearly marked signs of illness which became visible again only after the restoration of 1979, and were diagnosed at my instigation by medical experts in 1995/6. None of the hallmarks cited can be seen on the copies mentioned above.

Right up to the present, the central and crucial question – 'where is the original Flower portrait?' – has had to remain open. It remains unanswered, despite the many new findings which are described in this publication. We can now add to it the open question of the provenance of the copies examined by Dr Cooper.

I am hoping that this book will trigger a debate among those who have taken part in these investigations, as well as among international experts and the wider public, and will thus lead to a joint resolution of these important questions.

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Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel