

Shakespeare's Impossible Doublet: Droeshout's Engraving Anatomized

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Abstract

The engraving of Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout on the title page of the 1623 First Folio has often been criticized for various oddities. In 1911 a professional tailor asserted that the right-hand side of the poet's doublet was "obviously" the left-hand side of the back of the garment. In this paper I describe evidence which confirms this assessment, demonstrating that Shakespeare is pictured wearing an impossible garment. By printing a caricature of the man from Stratford-upon-Avon, it would seem that the publishers were indicating that he was not the author of the works that bear his name.



he Exhibition *Searching for Shakespeare*,¹ held at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in 2006, included several pictures supposed at one time or another to be portraits of our great poet and playwright.

Only one may have any claim to authenticity — that engraved by Martin Droeshout for the title page of the First Folio (Figure 1), the collection of plays published in 1623. Because the dedication and the address "To the great Variety of Readers" are each signed by John Hemmings and Henry Condell, two of Shakespeare's theatrical colleagues, and because Ben Jonson's prefatory poem tells us "It was for gentle Shakespeare cut," the engraving appears to have the *imprimatur* of Shakespeare's friends and fellows. The picture is not very attractive, and various defects have been pointed out from time to time – the head is too large, the stiff white collar or wired band seems odd, left and right of the doublet don't quite match up. But nonetheless, the illustration is generally regarded as serving a valuable purpose in giving posterity some idea of what the playwright looked like.

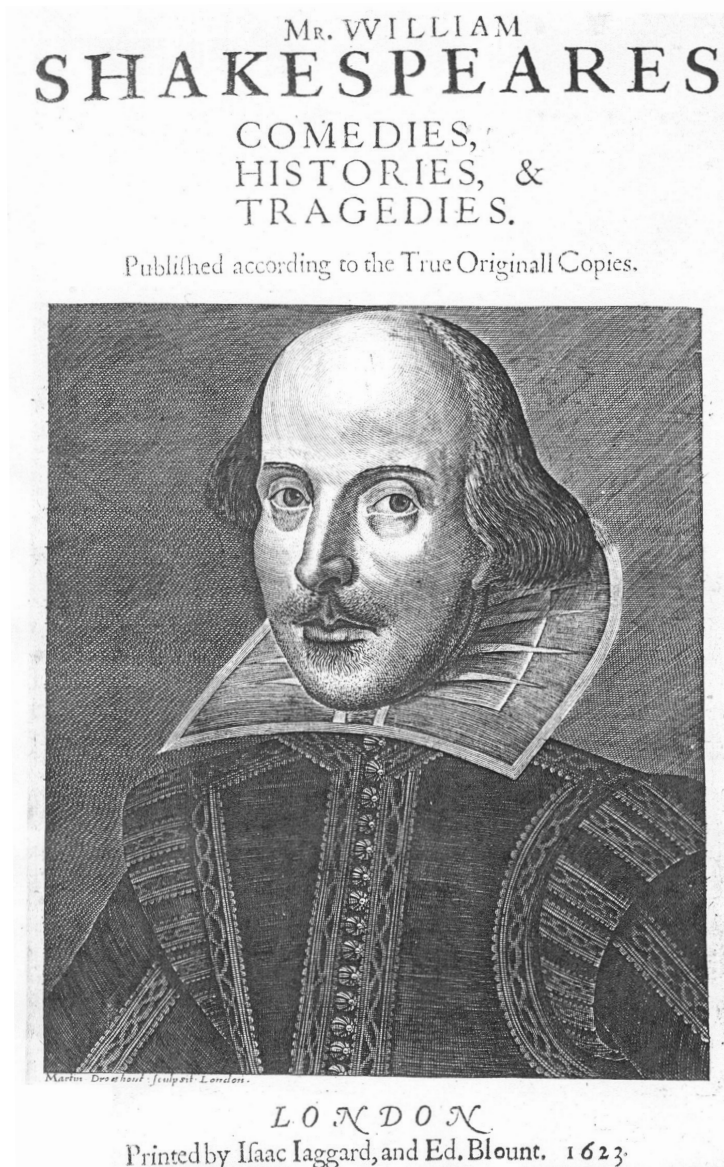


Figure 1. Title page of the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, 1623.

The portrait's deficiencies are frequently ascribed to the incompetence of the engraver, usually assumed to be the Martin Droeshout the younger, born in 1601, and aged twenty-one or twenty-two in 1623. It is unlikely that he would have seen Shakespeare (who died in 1616), and it is often supposed that the engraving of the face was based on a portrait from the life, now lost.

The doublet may have been copied from the same portrait, or may have been added by the engraver, perhaps working from a real garment. Although Mary Edmond proposed in 1991 that the engraver was probably the young man's uncle, of the same name and aged around fifty-five,² this view is no longer tenable, following the publication by June Schlueter of fresh archival evidence which strongly supports the attribution to the younger Droeshout.³ Notwithstanding the deficiencies of the engraving, it was evidently found acceptable by the publishers, since they approved it on the title-page of the First Folio.

Many commentators have drawn attention to the portrait's defects, most finding fault with the details of the face and hair, which will not concern us here. Several also point out errors in the costume, for example Sidney Lee refers to "patent defects of perspective"⁴ in the dress, while M. H. Spielmann says that the shoulder-wings are "grotesquely large and vilely drawn."⁵ The nature of the most elusive peculiarity was brought to light in 1911 by an anonymous tailor writing in *The Gentleman's Tailor*, under the title "A Problem for the Trade." After remarking that "it is passing strange that something like three centuries should have been allowed to pass before the tailor's handiwork should have been appealed to," he concludes that the doublet "is so strangely illustrated that the right-hand side of the forepart is *obviously* the left-hand side of the backpart; 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" (emphasis added).⁶ Since what is obvious to a professional tailor may not be obvious to a layman, in the next section I shall analyze the doublet to see whether there is evidence to support this assessment.

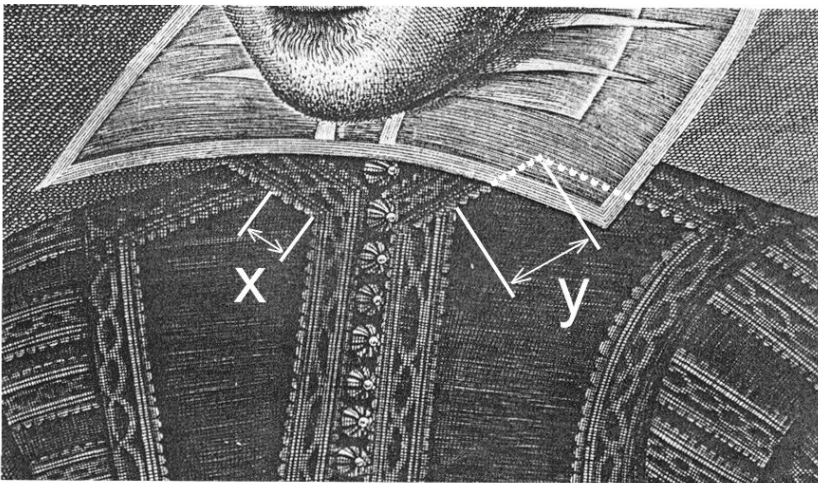


Figure 2. The right-hand front panel is smaller than the left-hand front panel.

Droeshout's Doublet

The doublet in the engraving displays a number of peculiarities. To begin with, the right shoulder-wing (onlooker's left, Figure 1) is smaller than the left shoulder-wing; instead they should be (roughly) the same size, or at least balance pictorially. In addition, the right-hand front panel of the doublet is clearly smaller than the left-hand front panel, as is confirmed by the different lengths of the embroidery edges labelled "x" and "y" (Figure 2). To my knowledge, this is the first time this oddity has been pointed out.

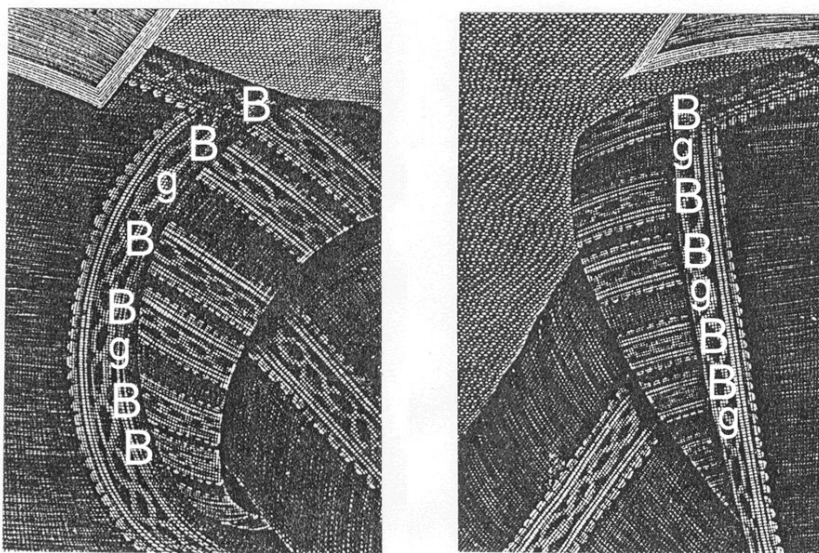


Figure 3. The embroidery on the right sleeve (right) is placed around twice as far down from the top of the shoulder-wing as that on the left sleeve (left).

More significantly, the embroidery on the right sleeve does not correspond to that on the left sleeve (Figure 3). On the left sleeve, the upper edge of the embroidery (when extended) meets the inside edge of the shoulder-wing (where it is joined to the doublet), a distance of just over two bands of embroidery (labeled "B") down from the top of the shoulder-wing. On the right sleeve, the upper edge of the embroidery meets the inside edge of the shoulder-wing a distance of rather over three bands, plus a wide gap (labeled "g," roughly the same width as a band), down from the top of the wing. Instead of corresponding (at least approximately) with that on the left sleeve, the embroidery on the right sleeve is located around a distance of two bandwidths lower than that on the left sleeve, or nearly twice as far away from the top of the shoulder-wing. This too has not been noted before, as far as I know.

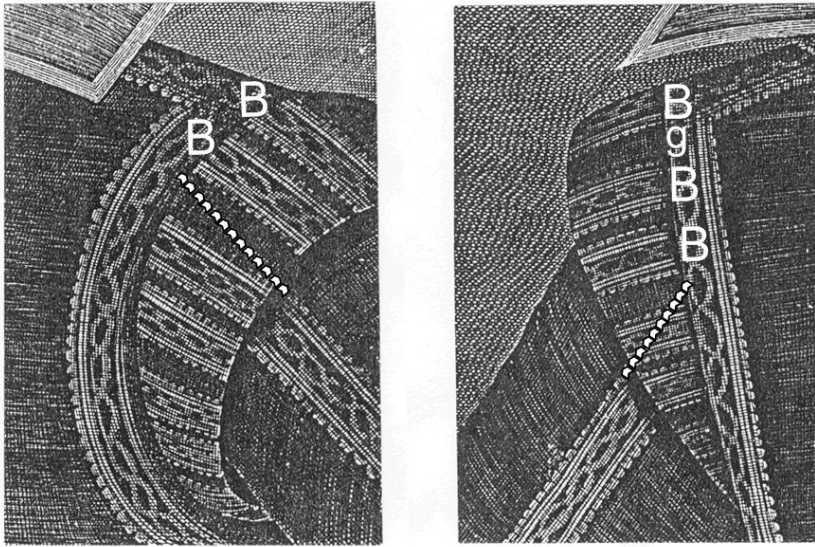


Figure 4. The embroidery on the right shoulder-wing does not match that on the left shoulder-wing.

Most significantly, the embroidery on the right shoulder-wing *does not match* that on the left shoulder-wing. From the top of the left wing (Figure 4), moving down, there are two bands of embroidery close together, a wide gap, and then another pair of bands, and so on. On the right wing, starting at the corresponding place, there is only *one* band of embroidery, then a wide gap, then a pair of bands, and so on. Symbolically, the pattern of embroidery on the left wing, starting from the top, can be represented by “BBgBBgBB,” etc. and that on the right wing by “BgBBgBBg,” etc. These two patterns would match on a normal garment, but here they do not: clearly *this is not a normal garment*. This new piece of evidence, described here for the first time, is crucial to the analysis of the image.

These four points confirm the verdict of the tailor of 1911; the garment consists of the left front joined to the left back of a real doublet – a sartorial anomaly. The right-hand half of the front of the doublet (Figures 3 or 4) is clearly not the mirror image of the left-hand half (even after taking perspective into account); and the embroidery on the right sleeve indicates that this is in fact the *back* of the left sleeve, where it would be correctly placed. The smaller size of the front right-hand panel (shown by seam *x* being around half the length of seam *y*, Figure 2) would be appropriate for the left-hand panel of the back of the doublet; the (non-matching) embroidery on the (smaller) right shoulder-wing would be what one would expect to see on the back of the left shoulder-wing, the “BBg” pattern being repeated regularly around it (Figure 5). It is now clear that no tailor-made doublet ever had such a counterchanged or “harlequin appearance.” We are left wondering how this might have come about.



Figure 5. A mock-up of the left shoulder-wing (left) from the front, (center) from the side and (right) from the back. Compare with Figure 3 or 4.

It has been frequently asserted that the engraver was incompetent and that the publishers, principally Isaac Jaggard and Edward Blount, were prepared to accept an imperfect image of the author and his doublet, despite the fact that such a costly undertaking (one of the most expensive to date by an English publisher) would surely demand a flawless frontispiece. Although incompetence in perspective drawing might possibly account for the first three points above, it cannot account for the last, the embroidery mismatch on the shoulder-wings. No tailor, dressmaker, painter or sculptor – or engraver – could ever commit such a gross error, unless it were expressly required by a patron or employer.

Thus, for whatever reason, the so-called “deficiencies” were apparently intentional, just as the tailor of 1911 supposed, and accepted as such by Jaggard and his colleagues (who would likely have approved initial sketches and might well have kept an eye on work in progress). If they didn’t like what the engraver first produced, they had only to withhold payment until he produced something more acceptable. Moreover, a young man undertaking an important commission early in his career is going to make absolutely certain that the finished product is exactly what his patrons require. Anxious to gain a reputation and a living, he would strive to avoid errors at all costs, knowing that his work would be subject to severe scrutiny on account of his youth. That the engraver signed with his full name suggests he was fully satisfied with his achievement.

Nevertheless, the engraving was not found to be entirely satisfactory, since changes were made as printing proceeded. According to Peter Blayney, in the first stage (of which only a few examples survive), there was “so little shading on the ruff that Shakespeare’s head appears to be floating in mid air.” Shading was therefore added, and later small changes were made to the hair and eyes when the plate was modified a second time. Blayney adds, “It is unlikely that anyone but Droeshout

would have considered those alterations necessary.”⁷ But despite such close attention to detail by the artist on going to press, none of the other peculiarities in the engraving were altered in any way. (Errors in draftsmanship could have been removed by use of the burnisher, at least in the early stages.)

The mismatch between the patterns of embroidery on the shoulder-wings can only have been achieved deliberately; to put it another way, even a child of ten would know that the bands of embroidery on the two shoulder-wings should be mirror images of each other. An artist or engraver, having completed one shoulder-wing, would *automatically* make sure the second wing matched the first, unless instructed otherwise. Together with the other peculiarities, this specific feature shows beyond doubt that the engraved doublet was carefully designed to consist of the left half of the front and the left half of the back of a real garment. It would appear that the artist had a real doublet in front of him; having depicted the front left half with the central fastenings and embroidery, he turned it round and drew the back left half. Why the engraver should have distorted reality in such a way as to produce a sartorial absurdity remains open to speculation, especially as other engravings signed with his name or monogram are executed with more than average competence.⁸

This departure from reality raises the question of whether anyone else has ever been portrayed in a similarly counterchanged or “harlequin” type of costume; and, if so, for what purpose? Alternatively, if there is no history of similar iconography, what would persons buying a copy of the First Folio in 1623 make of the engraving, assuming they spotted its peculiarities, which must have been far more readily apparent to them than to us? Leaving these questions aside, it comes as no surprise to find that the oddities of the portrait seem to have aroused a certain amount of skepticism when it was later used as the basis of another frontispiece. John Benson’s 1640 edition of Shakespeare’s *Poems* employs a reversed and simplified version of the engraving made by William Marshall (Figure 6).⁹ The anomalous right-hand side of the doublet is covered by a cloak, and beneath the portrait are eight lines of verse, the first two of which read:

This Shadowe is renowned Shakespear’s? Soule of th’age
The applause? delight? the wonder of the Stage.

The use of question marks rather than exclamation marks might appear to suggest that doubts about the engraving had already surfaced.



Figure 6. William Marshall's engraving of Shakespeare for the frontispiece of John Benson's edition of *Shakespeare's Poems*, London: 1640.

The Uncomely Frontispiece

To examine the strangeness of the doublet from a wider perspective, I shall quote from observations made by Leah S. Marcus, in *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*.¹⁰ In the first chapter of her book, Marcus makes some trenchant observations about the title page of the First Folio under the heading “The Art of the Uncomely Frontispiece.” Compared with other folio volumes of the period she finds the Folio title page peculiar, to say the least. To begin with, she reports that the Droeshout portrait has been “the object of much vilification. It has, we hear, a depressing ‘pudding face’ and a skull of ‘horrible hydrocephalous development’” (2). Readers, she says, “have delighted in pulling apart Droeshout’s engraving. Shakespeare, it is complained, has lopsided hair and a doublet with two left armholes, a displaced nose, eyes that don’t match, a head much too big for the body” (20). Compared with other portraits on title pages of the period it is “extremely large.” It is “stark and unadorned” – it has “no frame, no ornamental borders” (even though such “embellishments” are found elsewhere inside the volume), and it is devoid of the allegorical figures and emblems which customarily surround such portraits and are typical of the title pages of the age, including comparable volumes printed by William and Isaac Jaggard (2).

Marcus compares the First Folio title page with those of Samuel Daniel’s *Civil Wars* (1609), Samuel Purchas’s *Pilgrims* (1625), John Taylor’s *Works* (1630), Raleigh’s *History of the World* (1614), and Jonson’s *Works* (1616). In these books the author’s engraving is surrounded by elaborate symbolical devices, designed to characterize the author and his book (3). As a representative example, consider the engraving of Samuel Daniel (Figure 7); note the modest costume appropriate to a middle class writer and poet, set off by complex ornamental designs. By contrast, the First Folio title page “appears stripped down to essentials,” differing from all the others by offering “no particularising details – only the raw directness of the image, as though to say that in this case, no artifice is necessary: this is the Man Himself” (18). Jonson’s poem facing the portrait adds further to the puzzle. It begins:

This Figure, that thou here seest put
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut

and ends, “Reader looke / Not on his picture, but his Booke.” Shakespeare, the verses tell us (according to Marcus), “is not to be found after all in the compelling image opposite” (8). It is a “Figure” cut “for” Shakespeare, and should be ignored (according to Jonson), in favor of the volume’s contents.



Figure 7. Frontispiece of Samuel Daniel's *Civil Wars*, engraved by Thomas Cockson. London: Simon Waterstonne, 1609.

Commentary

Such details invoke a puzzling discrepancy on the title page of the First Folio between what one should expect, and what one finds. In place of a lifelike or at least credible portrait of the “Soul of the Age,” the “Star of Poets,” dressed appropriately, we are offered a picture of a man wearing a nonsensical costume – a garment consisting of the left front and left back of a real doublet.¹¹ What can this mean?



Figure 8. Detail of the portrait of Sir John Petre (1603).

If similar portraits or historical parallels exist which might supply an explanation, an exhaustive search has failed to produce a single example, and so we can only entertain a few conjectures. The idea that Martin Droeshout might have had a grudge against Shakespeare or the publishers of the First Folio, and set out to poke fun at him or them by producing an engraving full of faults (hoping no one would notice), can I think be discarded as implausible. Another possibility is that the two left sleeves symbolize the fact that Shakespeare was the servant of two masters, Queen Elizabeth and James I, badges of allegiance being worn on the left sleeve. But the man in the portrait, so far from wearing the clothing of a retainer or actor, is dressed in clothing appropriate to a landed gentleman such as Sir John Petre¹² (Figure 8). Shakespeare might have been given such clothing as a castoff to wear on the stage, but could hardly have worn it in ordinary life in view of the existing sumptuary laws. Another suggestion is that since left-handedness¹³ is sometimes associated with covert dealings, the portrait may hint at some subterfuge connected with the publication, perhaps that his role was not what it appeared to be (that of author). A further possibility is that the depiction of the face was imaginary, and the anomalous doublet was thus intended to warn the onlooker that it was not to be regarded as a true portrait (that is, not to be taken at face value).¹⁴

In the absence of a clear interpretation, perhaps something can be learned from other aspects of the engraving. Among the many peculiarities to which Marcus draws attention is that the portrait of Shakespeare is “extremely large” (2). In fact, it is around four times larger in area (six and a half inches by seven and a quarter) than

the title page head-and-shoulders portrait of any other author of the period. Why is this? I would suggest that if the image had been of normal size (e.g. that of a playing card or postcard), the details, especially those of the embroidery, would have been so difficult to make out that the implication they were presumably designed to convey might never have been suspected. To ensure that the left-front left-back character would be noticed, the engraving had to be as large as possible; as a consequence no space was available for the conventional allegorical figures and emblems usually surrounding such an image.

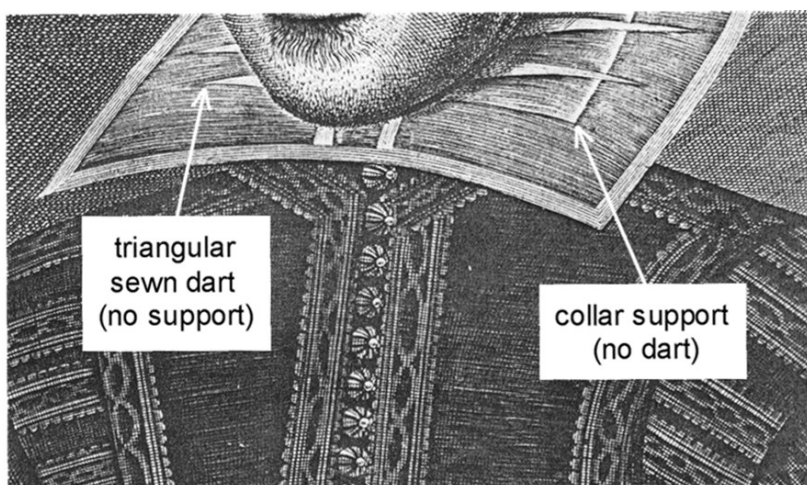


Figure 9. Showing the omission of the right-hand side of the collar support, and the lack of symmetry in the depiction of the triangular sewn darts in the wired band.

Further evidence of the engraving's duplicity is provided by the starched white collar or wired band under the head (Figure 1). Its support, known as an "underpropper" or "supportasse" (made, e.g., from lightweight material covered in silk) shows clearly through the linen on the left side of the collar (onlooker's right), but is not visible on the right side; both Sandy Nairne¹⁵ and Tarnya Cooper¹⁶ draw attention to this curious omission in the National Portrait Gallery's publication *Searching for Shakespeare*. It is also worth noting that the collar conceals part of the embroidery edge labelled "y" (Figure 2), in such a way that the exposed part is the same length as the edge labelled "x." The left and right seams in the neck area therefore appear to match each other, creating a kind of *trompe l'oeil* effect which tends to obscure the differing sizes of the front panels. In addition, the triangular sewn darts of the collar are almost comically unsymmetrical: left and right bear no kind of mirror relationship with each other, even allowing for perspective; Figure 9 draws attention to the chief mismatches.¹⁷ It is no more a real collar than the doublet is a real doublet, and it is difficult to resist an impression that the person depicted is being gently and surreptitiously mocked. Although one or two peculiarities might be ascribed to carelessness, six or seven (some obvious at first glance) seem to point towards a deliberate agenda of some kind.

Conclusion

The engraving by Martin Droeshout on the title page of the First Folio shows a man, identified by Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges¹⁸ as William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, wearing an impossible garment which, it is reasonable to suppose, carries some symbolic implication. If no likeness of the poet had been available, the publishers could have commissioned an imaginary portrait properly costumed (as has sometimes been done, for example, with editions of Homer), or omitted one altogether; instead, they chose a course apparently intended to invite speculation.

If nothing else, this analysis of Shakespeare's doublet draws attention to an astonishing aberration at the heart of the First Folio. Whatever its interpretation, there can now be no doubt that the left-front/left-back anomaly is a fact. What is usually taken to be a poorly drawn portrait of the playwright turns out to be a skillfully executed depiction of a carefully designed enigma. Droeshout's engraving of Shakespeare has become, down the years, the most famous literary icon in the world, yet while ostensibly a portrait of our great poet, it hides beneath a more or less plausible surface a so far unresolved problem.

Perhaps light can be shed on this problem by examining other volumes of the period. Head-and-shoulder portraits of the following authors appear on title pages of their publications: John Florio, Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, Ben Jonson, John Donne, John Weever, Samuel Purchas, John Taylor, John Milton; none show any peculiarities of costume and none are associated with questions of authorship. Only Shakespeare's dress is anomalous, and only Shakespeare's authorship is in doubt. Many people will be likely to conclude that by printing a caricature of the man from Stratford-upon-Avon, the publishers were indicating that he was not the author of the works that bear his name.



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↪ Endnotes ↪

- ¹ *Searching for Shakespeare*, Exhibition curated by Dr.Tarnya Cooper, National Portrait Gallery, London, March to May, 2006.
- ² Edmond, Mary. "It was for gentle Shakespeare cut." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 339-344; "Martin Droeshout." *The Dictionary of Art*. Oxford: OUP, 1996; "Martin Droeshout." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
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- ⁴ Lee, Sidney. *A Life of William Shakespeare* (third edition of revised version). London: John Murray, 1922: 529.
- ⁵ Spielmann, M.H. *The Title Page of the First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays: a comparative study of the Droeshout portrait and the Stratford bust*. London: H. Milford, 1924: 32.
- ⁶ Anon. "A Problem for the Trade." *The Gentleman's Tailor* 46 (1911): 93.
- ⁷ Blayney, Peter W.M. *The First Folio of Shakespeare*. Washington, D.C.: Folger Library Publications, 1991: 18.
- ⁸ Martin Droeshout had a successful career as an engraver both in England and Spain, and engraved portraits of many well-known and distinguished people including John Donne, the Duke of Buckingham, the Bishop of Durham, the Marquis of Hamilton and Lord Coventry. In 1631 he was commissioned to illustrate the second edition of Crooke's *Mikrokosmographia* (over 1000 pages long), testifying to an excellent reputation. The title page of this work is given here: <http://www.bpi1700.org.uk/jsp/zoomify.jsp?image=157307> . Other examples of his work are included in June Schlueter's paper referenced above, and on the website of the National Portrait Gallery, <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person.php?LinkID= mp06906&role=art> .
- ⁹ Shakespeare, William. *Poems: written by Wil. Shake-speare*, Gent. London: John Benson, 1640.
- ¹⁰ Marcus, Leah S. *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents*. Berkeley; London: U. of California Press, 1988: 1-30.
- ¹¹ With plain material and bold colours, this is the style of dress of jesters.

- ¹² Detail from the painting of Sir John Petre, 1603. At the time he was Lord Lieutenant of Essex, and was later created Baron Petre.
- ¹³ It may be relevant to note that the primary meaning of the word “ambodexter” or “ambidexter” (having two right hands) in the 16th-17th centuries was “double-dealer” (OED), in particular someone taking money from both sides in a dispute. The corresponding word, ambisinister, was very rarely used, though by inference it might convey the same meaning, especially as left-handedness is sometimes associated with underhand dealing. Characters named Ambodexter in dramas of the period were notably greedy for money.
- ¹⁴ I am indebted to Phyllida McCormick for this suggestion.
- ¹⁵ Nairne, Sandy. “Supportasse, 1600-1625.” *Searching for Shakespeare*. London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006: 120.
- ¹⁶ Cooper, Tarnya. “William Shakespeare, from the First Folio, c. 1623.” *Searching for Shakespeare*. London: National Portrait Gallery, 2006: 48.
- ¹⁷ In William Marshall’s 1640 version of the engraving, Figure 5, the underpropper shows through on both sides of the collar, and the triangular darts on left and right are mirror images of each other. Through restoring symmetry, Marshall acknowledges – by correcting them – two of the more obvious peculiarities of the Droeshout original.
- ¹⁸ In their poems prefaced to the first Folio, Ben Jonson addresses the poet as “Sweet Swan of Avon,” and Leonard Digges refers to “Thy Stratford Monument.”