



Shakespeare Matters

"The Voice of the Shakespeare Fellowship"

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"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments..."

Winter 2002

The Ashbourne Portrait: Part II

Costume dating debunks Folger's Hamersley claim

By Barbara Burris ©2001

"The emperor walked in the procession under his crimson canopy. And all the people of the town, who had lined the streets or were looking down from the windows, said that the emperor's clothes were beautiful. 'What a magnificent robe! And the Train! How well the emperor's clothes suit him!' None of them were willing to admit that they hadn't seen a thing; for if anyone did, then he was either stupid or unfit for the job he held. Never before had the emperor's clothes been such a success."¹

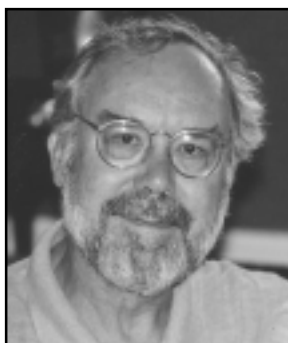
In the area of costume the Ashbourne portrait of Shakespeare has long been a Stratfordian version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Art experts who have examined the painting including Wivell in 1847, Spielmann in 1910, and the art experts the Folger Shakespeare Library has consulted since 1931, when they purchased the portrait, have not expressed what they must have seen, that the costume is that of a nobleman from the 1570s. Like the emperor's counselors, who out of fear for their reputations and positions, concealed what they really saw and pretended to "see" the emperor's invisible "clothes," these art experts have ignored and concealed evidence in this painting that contradicts the Stratfordian mystique and claims for Sir Hugh Hamersley. They have ignored evidence in the painting and the costume that as experts they must have seen and in any other circumstance would have used without any qualms in a rational dating of the portrait.

Only the well known art expert M. H. Spielmann, who examined the painting in 1910, cautiously remarked upon discordant elements in the painting that contradicted the official view of a Shakespeare portrait of the Stratford man. These dissonant elements included the problems with the inscription, nobleman's dress, neck ruff, age of the sitter and similarity of the costume to the Earl of Morton who died in 1581, thirty years before the 1611 date on the painting.² But, like the emperor's counselors, Spielmann hesitated to draw the logical conclusions from his observations. Instead he fell in step with the Jacobean dating of the portrait that fit the Stratford man. Yet it was Spielmann's reference to the similarity of the Ashbourne costume with the costume of the Earl

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First Fellowship meeting held

Board elected; meeting dates, program schedule established



Dr. Charles Berney, Fellowship President

On a cold day in late October, members of the Shakespeare Fellowship met for the first time in the warm and welcoming home of Isabel Holden of Northampton, Massachusetts. Some had arrived from Boston, some from New York and Connecticut. I had come from Toronto. Just shortly after the tragedy of September 11th, it wasn't a time conducive to traveling, but nonetheless, twenty of us still managed to make the trip.

After coffee and greetings, we removed to the living room and began to talk, with Chuck Berney taking the chair. We were thrilled to learn we already had 100 members—we now have over 150—and were even happier to receive our first issue of *Shakespeare Matters*, which—slick and

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On Shakespeare's portrayal of the moral life

By John Baker

Recently I picked up a copy of a nearly century-old book on Shakespeare, Frank Chapman Sharp's *Shakespeare's Portrayal of The Moral Life* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1902), and it reminded me yet again of the timelessness of Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies. Regardless of where one stands on the authorship debate, it is always useful to remind one's self about the man who authored these remarkable works, what he was up to, and why it matters even today, four centuries later.

Since moral philosophy does not change, the book is as valid today as it was a century ago, perhaps more so, since modern philosophers don't seem to think as clearly as Sharp. Moreover the subject, Shakespeare's works, have not changed at all, unless one counts the new texts and manuscripts—such as the Dering and

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Ashbourne (continued from page 1)

of Morton, who died in 1581, that intrigued me and sent me off in the direction of researching the costume to learn the true date of the painting.

This second article in the series detailing my more than two years research into the Ashbourne Shakespeare portrait focuses on the costume in the portrait and what it reveals about the sitter and the time period in which the portrait was painted. Through this examination, which dates the painting to the late 1570s, the Folger's claims about the 1611 inscription date and Hamersley's supposed "coat of arms" become irrelevant. Costume evidence proves that the painting cannot have been painted in the 1600s or the 1590s, or even during most of the 1580s. Hamersley was 15 years old in 1580. This costume evidence is there for all to see, but the art experts called on by Stratfordians to evaluate the picture have ignored it, avoided it, and denied it just as the emperor's counselors ignored the evidence they saw when they were questioned about the emperor's "beautiful" invisible clothes.

The late 1570s dating of the painting by costume also confirms Charles Wisner Barrell's X-ray examination of the Ashbourne that revealed a portrait of Edward de Vere beneath the overpainting into Shakespeare.³ And it places the painting back in its correct time frame when the Dutch painter Cornelius Ketel—whose initials were exposed beneath the overpainting by Barrell's X-rays—was in England from 1573 to 1581, and was known to have painted a portrait of Oxford.

At this point you might be asking why all the fuss over a portrait? The answer is best expressed by quoting from a February 1982 letter from the Folger Shakespeare Library when the Library was proclaiming Hugh Hamersley, former Lord Mayor of London in 1627/8 as the painting's subject. The letter, intended for Geoffrey M. Lemmer, conservator of the Baltimore Museum of Art giving him instructions about the portrait, states that, "...the portrait is an important document in the controversy over the true authorship of Shakespeare's works."⁴

Indeed it is an important document in the authorship controversy. In fact, the portrait is actual physical evidence connecting Oxford with the name Shakespeare. The Ashbourne, which is the largest

and most beautiful of all the famous portraits of the poet, is one of three of the well-known Shakespeare portraits, including the Janssen and the Hampton Court, that photographic expert Charles Wisner Barrell X-rayed in 1937. Barrell found that all three portraits were over painted portraits of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.⁵ The Earl is the same man whom J. Thomas Looney discovered to be the real Shakespeare in 1920.⁶

Costume dating

In response to Barrell's evidence for Oxford as the Ashbourne sitter, previous Folger administrations cast about to find anyone but Oxford as the sitter in this portrait. In addition to ignoring the evidence in the painting, like the swindlers who wove invisible cloth for the emperor's "clothes," the Folger since 1979 has woven its own story out of airy nothing, claiming Sir Hugh Hamersley, a Lord Mayor of London in 1637/8, as the Ashbourne sitter. As we shall see in the costume dating of the Ashbourne in this article, the Folger claims for Hamersley based upon the bogus 1611 inscription and the purported Hamersley "coat of arms" are invalidated by the costume evidence that proves the portrait cannot have been painted in the 1600s.

Costume is the single most reliable and universally respected method of dating portraits whose dates are unknown or in dispute. The dating of costume is a reliable means for dating a painting within a range of a few years and sometimes even within a year or two. Just as we can date 1920s, 30s, or 50s pictures from our familiarity with the clothes, hair styles and objects in those times, so art experts rely on extensive knowledge of the changes in fashion and in painting styles in dating portraits.⁷ As in our own time, fashion in Elizabethan and Jacobean England generally changed by decades, with some overlap of course, especially at the beginning and end of a decade.

In studying costume and looking at large numbers of portraits in a particular era, such as the Elizabethan era, one becomes familiar with the patterns of dress and forms of portraiture unique to various decades during that time. One learns from this study that certain aspects of costume absolutely confirm the dating of portraits.

When Spielmann says of the Ashbourne sitter, "We thus have the presentment of a

handsome, courtly gentleman, well formed and of good bearing, and apparently of high breeding...,"⁸ and adds that, "This gentleman is clearly not in stage dress; there is nothing of masquerade about the presentation," he is referring to the kind of presentation and clothing that portraits of noblemen exhibit.⁹ Spielmann also notes that, "It is difficult to imagine Shakespeare's friends, Ben Jonson the dramatist or Burbage the actor, attired in such a costume, rich as it is and fashionable, albeit sober and in good taste."¹⁰ In fact, as Spielmann well knew, all the actors and dramatists of that time were portrayed in commoner's garb—all, that is, except Shakespeare.

Ruth Loyd Miller notes that "there are at least 12 altered portraits (into Shakespeare) of undoubted Elizabethan or Jacobean composition. Until very recent times 6 of these paintings had been held by various members of the old English Aristocracy and had no connection whatsoever with Stratfordian ownership."¹¹ For example, the Hampton Court portrait of Shakespeare, which Barrell found to be an over-painted portrait of Oxford holding the sword of state (blacked out), did not leave the collection at Penshurst Place, seat of the Sidney-Herbert families, until it was given to King William IV. This was the same Sidney family of whom Mary Sidney's sons, the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, were the "incomparable brethern" to whom the 1623 Folio was dedicated. Oxford's daughter Susan was married to the Earl of Montgomery, one of these two "incomparable brethern."

Miller adds that, "Of the 12 genuine 'Renaissance studies' of Shakespeare listed by *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 depict him wearing the attire of a nobleman."¹² One of the most interesting of these is the portrait of Shakespeare in nobleman's garb formerly in the Tudor collection at Windsor Castle, given by Queen Victoria to the novelist Lord Lytton. "Another is the miniature called 'Shakespeare' acquired by the Earl of Oxford (2nd creation) about 1719 showing the bard in the dress of a 16th century nobleman."¹³

The sitter's wardrobe

So we first take note of the nobleman's rich yet tasteful black velvet doublet and

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Ashbourne (continued from page 17)

black velvet and gray trunk hose in the Ashbourne portrait. He is sporting a richly tooled dress dagger belt and holding the top of a gauntlet embroidered in cloth of gold—of the kind courtiers wore on dress occasions. Spielmann notes these aspects of the painting and then states, “Just such a dress, belt, and glove as we see in the portrait of James Douglas, Earl of Morton, who died in 1581—that is to say 30 years before the date of this picture.”¹⁴

Intrigued by Spielmann’s comparison of the Ashbourne costume to the costume of the Earl of Morton, I began a quest to date the painting by costume. I found that the Earl of Morton painting had been dated by costume to circa 1575 by Sir Roy Strong.¹⁵ And I soon found out why Stratfordians have avoided this issue of the costume. As I learned more about Elizabethan and Jacobean fashion it became clear that the outfit worn by the Ashbourne nobleman fit into a 1570s time frame.

I was soon excited to learn that after 1583 in England wrist ruffs were no longer worn, but were replaced by wrist cuffs. As Spielmann noted in his description of the Ashbourne, “around the wrists are small figure-eight edged ruffs (rather than ruffles) with small white corded edging.”¹⁶ The wrist ruffs in the Ashbourne (Fig. 2), originally a brilliant white, had been deliberately muddied with dark gray paint to make them less noticeable but they had not been altered or completely painted over as had the original neck ruff. Here was compelling proof dating the Ashbourne painting before 1583, making it absolutely impossible that the portrait was painted in the 1600s or the 1590s or even during most of the 1580s. I poured over portrait books looking at wrist ruffs and cuffs and found that wrist ruffs had indeed begun to phase out at the very beginning of the 1580s and cuffs had replaced them in English fashion by 1583.

I also explored neck ruff fashions because Barrell’s X-rays had uncovered the outline of a very large circular neck ruff under the much smaller crudely painted ruff now visible in the painting. Spielmann’s observations from his naked eye examination of the portrait in 1910 anticipate and coincide with many of Barrell’s findings in 1940, including his description of the visible neck ruff. “The multifold ruff, zig zagged, yellowish in tint, with highlights of



Fig. 1. This 1848 woodcut of the Ashbourne reveals more of the detail of the doublet, with its close fitting sleeves and a waistline dipping slightly below its natural position, elements that place it clearly in the 1570s / 1580s era of Elizabethan men’s fashion.



Fig. 2 (Ashbourne detail). The wrist ruffs worn by the Ashbourne sitter went out of fashion in the 1580s.

a stronger yellow almost seems to be by another hand, and is certainly the most, and indeed the only, scamped part of the picture.”¹⁷ (emphasis added)

What Spielmann is saying is that the ruff doesn’t fit this painting. It is fuzzy, muddied and crudely executed, like the over-painting of the sitter’s hair, both of which are unlike the finely painted detail in

the rest of the painting.

The crude ruff now visible in the portrait is formed to look like an early 1600s ruff, as can be seen in many paintings of that period, such as the portrait of Robert Cecil in 1602.¹⁸ In viewing the painting in person one can even see with the naked eye differences in the background paint around the head area where the original ruff was over-painted.

After I had studied enough portraits and read enough about various aspects of Elizabethan and Jacobean costume to be certain that the evidence of the doublet and trunk hose and ruffs fit the 1570s date, I wrote for expert confirmation of my findings on the Ashbourne costume. I received a gracious response from Susan North, head of Textiles and Dress at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Along with other visuals, I had sent her a copy of the 1848 woodcut made directly from the Ashbourne (Fig. 1) that clearly delineates the costume details that are hard to see in reproductions of the portrait because of the black dress.

Ms. North agreed with my conclusions, writing, “I would agree that the dress does not appear to date from 1611...The general shape of the doublet with close fitting sleeves and a waistline dipping only slightly below its natural place in front corresponds with men’s dress of the 1570s...Regarding your comments on the wrist ruffs, I agree that these go out of fashion in the 1580s.”¹⁹

Everything she said agreed with my conclusions about a 1570s costume including the fact that the wrist ruffs on the portrait precluded any possible claim that this could be a 1600s portrait. But Ms. North also wrote that she was “puzzled” about the large neck ruff which the X-rays had uncovered under the visible circa 1610 smaller ruff painted over it. She noted that, “Those [ruffs] of the 1570s are quite modest in size for men and women. It isn’t [until] about 1585 that the ‘cartwheel’ shape becomes popular.”²⁰

She was puzzled because the visibly scamped and muddied ruff clearly didn’t fit the 1570s costume or detailed painting styles of that time, yet the over-painted large circular ruff underneath it (uncovered by Barrell’s X-rays) also didn’t seem to fit the 1570s costume, because—as she noted—neck ruffs in the 1570s were smaller. But I eventually found these doubts easy to resolve.

During most of the 1570s neck ruffs

were smaller, such as the neck ruff in the 1575 Welbeck portrait of Edward de Vere or the considerably larger but still modest neck ruff in the Ketel portrait of Christopher Hatton in 1578.²¹ The large cartwheel ruff (which the over-painted ruff in the Ashbourne is not) became popular in 1585 as can be seen in the 1586 portrait of Sir Henry Unton.²² Although it was not yet the dominant fashion, by the end of the 1570s some gentlemen and aristocrats were wearing the large French style ruff as is shown in the 1581 picture of the Duc and Duchess de Joyeuse.²³

In fact we have examples of English gentlemen in 1579 and 1580 wearing this very large French style ruff in the portraits of what is called Philip Sidney in 1579²⁴ and William, Lord Russell in 1580.²⁵ (Figs. 3 and 4.) Both are wearing the French style ruff, which differs from the later cartwheel ruff fashion that became popular in the mid-1580s. Lord Russell's ruff has details similar to the lacy detail that was kept on from the original ruff in the Ashbourne and re-used in the detail of the ruff now visible on the painting. It is significant that Lord Russell's French ruff fits perfectly over the X-ray outline of the original over-painted ruff in the Ashbourne.

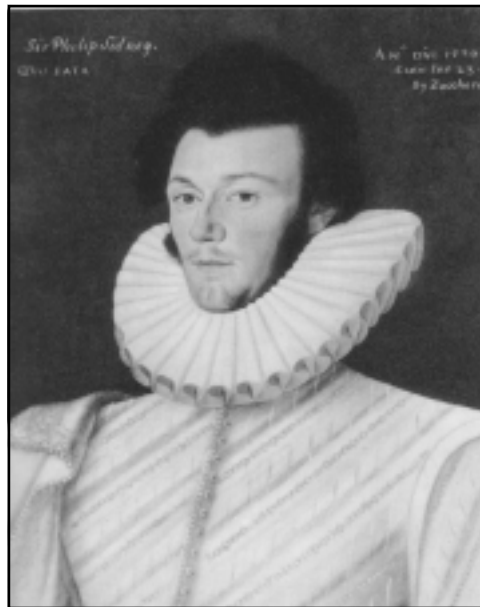
Direct testimony about Oxford's wardrobe

Gabriel Harvey provides evidence that in 1580 Oxford was wearing this large French style ruff made with expensive fine Cambric or Camerick linen, in his mocking poem about Oxford, *Speculum Tuscanismi*, printed in mid-1580:

"...A little apish flat couched fast to the pate like an oyster, French Camerick ruffs, deep with a whiteness starched to the purpose..."²⁶ (emphasis added)

Harvey's description of the French Camerick ruffs as being "deep" or wide and "starched to the purpose" refers to the fact that these large ruffs had to be heavily starched to be stiff enough to stand up off the shoulders and frame the face. Sometimes a kind of frame was used to hold them up as well. But as critics of fashion at the time sarcastically observed, they became something of a wilted problem when it rained.

In these examples of large French ruffs



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Figs. 3 and 4. Large French neck ruffs started to come into fashion by the late 1570s. These two examples—of Sir Philip Sidney (Fig. 3, left) and Lord Russell of Thornhaugh (Fig. 4, right)—both appear in Roy Strong's *The English Icon*. Russell's elaborate ruff is similar to what the original Ashbourne ruff may have looked like.

that were worn in 1579 and 1580 and in Harvey's poem that describes Oxford sporting this type of ruff we have the answer to Ms. North's questions. The large white starched French Camerick ruff, which Harvey describes Oxford as wearing, was the same as the original white French ruff in the portrait. This original white French ruff was partially painted over and what was left was muddied over into the scamped imitation of a circa 1610 ruff to fit the altered 1611 date on the painting.

With this information about the original French style ruff in the painting we can now refine our dating of the portrait even further to the very late 1570s when these large French ruffs were worn by a number of fashionable gentlemen most likely at the Court. Thus the painting can be dated circa 1579 to 1580. Hugh Hamersley was 15 years old in 1580. But most importantly Cornelius Ketel, a fine Dutch portrait painter, was in England at that time doing his best portrait work.

Ketel's friend and biographer Van Mander noted that Ketel had painted a portrait of Oxford.²⁷ This portrait, which all evidence points to as the Ashbourne portrait of Shakespeare, was most likely painted sometime after his painting of Hatton and the Queen in 1578. Hatton is credited with introducing Ketel as a painter to the Court²⁸ which fits the costume dating

we have done placing this portrait circa 1579-80.

Mark Evans, Head of Paintings at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, England wrote to me that the "format of the portrait of which you sent me a photocopy would appear more consistent with a date in the 1570s than circa 1611."²⁹ In fact there is a striking similarity of the style of the Ashbourne to another Ketel portrait of the period, the Thomas Pead portrait, painted in 1578.³⁰ (See Figs. 5 and 6, next page.) Pead was a registrar recording births and deaths. The painting of Pead includes a partial corner of a table in the front right hand side of the painting covered with a green cloth painted in the same manner as the red cloth on the table in the Ashbourne. The table also has a skull on top, representing Pead's recording of deaths, and the painting has the same kind of brown tone in the background as the Ashbourne. Pead is also dressed in black with brilliantly contrasting white detailed neck ruff and wrist ruffs, indicating what the Ashbourne's original ruffs would have looked like before they were muddied over.

The dating of the Ashbourne painting by costume which sets the Ashbourne in its proper time frame of circa 1579-80 raises the issue of the incongruity of the costume of the St. Alban's portrait with the inscrip-

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Courtesy, The Berger Collection

A 1578 Cornelius Ketel painting of Thomas Pead (Fig. 5, above) shows remarkable similarities to the Ashbourne (Fig. 6, right), particularly the skull sitting on a partially-showing table, the sitter's black costume with white trim, and a medium-brown background.



By permission of The Folger Shakespeare Library

Ashbourne (continued from page 19)

tion denoting that it is a portrait of Edward de Vere. The style of the doublet and the high collar with its tiny lace edged in black that is a precursor of the ruff, in the St. Alban's portrait belongs to the period of the late 1550s or 1560s. Sir Roy Strong has dated it circa 1565.³¹ Because of the intertwined ribbon of black and white (the Queen's personal colors, not the Oxford colors) suspending the Oxford boar, I would date it from 1558 (when the Queen came to the throne) to 1562 when its sitter, most likely John De Vere, the 16th Earl of Oxford died. Because the sitter appears to be in his early 40s and the costume is of the early 1560s it cannot be Edward de Vere who was in his teens in the 1560s.

The inscriptions

Which brings us to the issue of inscriptions. Spielmann's suspicions about the 1611 inscription on the Ashbourne that was in a different paint from the original paint

and stood out in slight relief above the rest of the painting were correct. "Whether or not it (the inscription) is a later addition is an open question; but the fact must not be lost sight of that the colour of it corresponds to that of the book-cover gold and that of the thumb-ring and is in sharp contrast to that on the belt and glove."³² Spielmann maintained the Jacobean dating in spite of contrary evidence, but he added later that, "The picture is pretty clearly an original and no copy; and obviously represents a gentleman of the early years of Jacobean rule, who, if the 'AETATIS SUAE 47' is to be trusted, *looked young for his age*"³³ (emphasis added). Oxford in 1580 would have been around 30 years of age, not age 47, as in the inscription on the painting, which fit the age of the man from Stratford in 1611. Clearly the overpainting of the full head of hair above the forehead was intended to make the sitter look older to fit the inscription age.

The point is that inscription dates and names on portraits can be and have at times

been wrong either by mistake or by design. The fact that the St. Alban's has the name Edward de Vere blazoned across it does not counter the primary costume evidence that Sir Roy Strong used to date this painting circa 1565. The costume proves that the inscription is wrong in the St. Alban's portrait. Using the same costume dating methods and evidence for the Ashbourne, the 1611 date on the inscription, as Spielmann suspected and Barrell confirmed with X-rays, is wrong: it is not the original inscription. The 1611 date is a false date added later. Additionally, Barrell's X-rays confirmed that the original inscription in the Ashbourne portrait had been rubbed out so vigorously that holes were made in the canvas, although ghostly remnants of letters could still be seen.

Spielmann stuck with the 1600s time period for the Ashbourne despite all the evidence he observed to the contrary. Other experts called upon by the Folger have also gone along with the charade about this painting. Such is the power of an entrenched

viewpoint and the power of institutions that promote that viewpoint to intimidate and influence even trained experts perceptions and reporting of the facts before their eyes. Like the Counselors around the emperor who were questioned about the emperor's "clothes" the experts have not been willing to report what they see and what is really there in this painting.

In conclusion, the circa 1579-80 costume in the Ashbourne Shakespeare portrait eliminates as subjects both the Stratford man and Hugh Hamersley, who would have been 14 and 15 years old respectively in 1580. The costume is that of a nobleman. Looney discovered in 1920 that the nobleman poet playwright Edward de Vere was the author behind the Shakespeare mask. The Dutch painter Cornelius Ketel, whose initials Barrell found in the painting through X-rays, was in England from 1573 to 1581. Hatton introduced Ketel as a painter to Elizabeth's Court in 1578. Van Mander notes Ketel painted a portrait of Oxford. In 1580 Harvey mocked Oxford's wearing of large French Camerick ruffs. Barrell's X-ray examination revealed a large circular ruff under the visible ruff. Lord Russell's 1580 French ruff fits perfectly over the outlines of this hidden ruff. Thus more evidence accumulates to confirm that the Ashbourne portrait of "Shakespeare" is the nobleman poet and playwright Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford.

The next articles in the series on the Ashbourne portrait will examine the purported restoration of the painting begun in 1979 and the deceptions of past Folger administrations in their claims regarding the inscription and the spurious Hamersley "coat of arms." In addition I will provide new evidence linking the crest on the painting with a 1599 crest used by Edward de Vere. A separate article in the future will delve into who, when and why the portraits were changed and what the portrait changes reveal about the implementation of the Shakespeare fraud.

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- 3) Charles Wisner Barrell, "Identifying 'Shakespeare'" (*Scientific American*,

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- 7) Hearn, Karen, Editor, *Dynasties, Painting in Tudor and Jacobean England 1530-1630* (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), 57.
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- 10) *Ibid.*, Part I, 250.
- 11) Ruth Loyd Miller, "Lord Oxford and the 'Shakespeare' Portraits, Part I," in *Shakespeare Identified*, Vol. II. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), 406.
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- 13) *Ibid.*, 406.
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- 15) Sir Roy Strong, *The English Icon, Elizabethan and Jacobean Portraiture* (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1969), in *Attributed and Undated Works*, #94.
- 16) Spielmann, "The Ashbourne, Part I," 249.
- 17) *Ibid.*, 249.
- 18) Strong, *Icon*, #241.
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- 20) *Ibid.*
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- 22) Jane Ashelford, *A Visual History of the Costume of the Sixteenth Century* (N.Y.: Drama Book Pub., 1983), #110.
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- 25) *Ibid.*, #123.
- 26) Gabriel Harvey, in Charlton Ogburn's, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare, The Myth and the Reality*, (McLean, Virginia: EPM Publications, Inc. 1984), 630.
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- 33) *Ibid.*, Part II, 41.

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