

To be or not to be

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The portrait of Sir Thomas Overbury, owned by the Bodleian Library, bears a strong resemblance to Shakespeare

(PhysOrg.com) -- A scholar from Oxford's English Faculty has discovered that a painting lauded as the only known portrait of William Shakespeare painted from life is almost certainly of somebody else.

Professor Katherine Duncan-Jones, who has written a biography of Shakespeare and edited his sonnets, decided to investigate the subject after seeing the 'Cobbe' [portrait](#), and reading that two other experts had identified versions of the picture as portraits of Sir Thomas Overbury.

She said: 'He looks much too young. Shakespeare would have been 46 in

1610. The man portrayed, with his elaborate lace collar and gold embroidered doublet, appears far too grand and courtier-like to be Shakespeare. Though a leading “King’s Man”, Shakespeare was no nobleman, and even his status as “gentleman” was repeatedly called in question.'

Professor Duncan-Jones, of Somerville College, draws attention to evidence that it is a version of a portrait in the Bodleian Library of the lesser-known Elizabethan and Oxford alumnus, Sir Thomas Overbury. She viewed the painting in the Bodleian’s deepest basement, where it is waiting to be restored, and this week published her findings in the Times Literary Supplement.

The portrait claimed as Shakespeare’s has been owned by the Cobbe family since the early 18th century. It is due to go on display at the Shakespeare Centre as part of a special exhibition for the celebrations of Shakespeare’s birth next month in Stratford-upon-Avon.

However an authentic portrait of Sir Thomas Overbury (1581-1613) was bequeathed to the Bodleian Library in Oxford in 1740. Professor Duncan-Jones said: ‘His picture bears a startling resemblance to the “Cobbe” painting and its companions. Features such as a distinctive bushy [hairline](#), and a slightly malformed left ear that may once have borne the weight of a jewelled earring, appear identical. Even the beautifully intricate lace collar, though not identical in pattern, shares overall design with “Cobbe”.’

Sir Thomas Overbury was the ‘King’s minion’s minion’ and has been described as arrogant and stubborn. He offended the King, James I, by opposing Sir Robert Carr’s proposed marriage to Frances, nee Howard, Countess of Essex. He was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he died just over four months later, allegedly as a result of repeated attempts to poison him. Overbury’s horrible death, and the

trials that ensued, made him a ‘celebrity’. Many of his friends are likely to have wanted visual mementos of him, which would explain the large number of high-quality copies.

Professor Duncan-Jones said: ‘With its solid provenance - first with the Overbury family, then with the library - the “Bodleian” Overbury appears to be the “prime” version of which the “Cobbe” portrait and the rest are fine, but smaller, copies.’

Richard Ovenden, Keeper of Special Collections at the Bodleian Library said: ‘The Bodleian has a portrait collection of immense historical significance that deserves to be much better known. We are delighted that this portrait has provided a valuable piece of evidence in the search for the visual identity of the Bard and we welcome scholars wishing to use this extraordinary resource. We also look forward to being able to better display our portrait collection in the refurbished New Bodleian.’

The Overbury portrait was publicly displayed at the Bodleian for many years. It has become increasingly fragile and is now in storage awaiting restoration. Donations for this purpose are welcome.

Provided by Oxford University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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