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Portraiture and Character in Shakespeare's England[1]

IT HAS BECOME A COMMONPLACE of English literary culture that Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries were pioneers in bringing the study of human character to their plays and to theatre audiences at the end of the sixteenth century. But while attempts to explore the origins of this phenomenon rightly consider literary antecedents, it seems fair to ask whether some of the sources for this sensitivity may also derive from other cultural media of the same era.

Portraiture presents one such possibility. Certainly continental painters of both the Italian and Northern traditions had been engaged in the study of character well before Shakespeare's time (1564–1616) in England. But can we say that their achievement had made its way to England in time for Shakespeare and his contemporaries to have benefited by it, or that Shakespeare would have been familiar with it if it had done so? Portraiture as carried out in England at that time hardly makes a major chapter in the canon of Western art history; those who study it remain thin on the ground. But this relatively obscurity of English Renaissance portraiture merely whets the appetite. What indeed might we learn by such an investigation?

Perhaps the first point to make about the expression of character in English portraits applies to the whole question of English portraiture itself, and not just that issue alone. The fact is that the English were very slow to show their faces on board or canvas compared with most other Western Europeans, and they were also much slower to use portraiture as an expression of individual character. The contrast between the English and some

continental traditions in this regard is striking. Whether we consider the mid-fifteenth-century Flemish and Dutch work of Roger van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes or Jan Van Eyck, or the quite different Italian painters from Massaccio onwards towards Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini and the early Leonardo, it is clear that the English produced nothing remotely comparable for a long time to come. Portrait painting as easel painting, in contrast to, say portraiture in illuminations, funeral sculpture and stained glass, was certainly a minor art in England, or rather a minor craft, right through about the first third of the sixteenth century. Portraiture in those other forms, mostly still done in the late Gothic manner, remained so iconic and stereotypical that it is often difficult to see it as much of an expression of emotional qualities save in the very broadest sense.

Some English royal portraits from the turn of the sixteenth century, including ones of Richard III or of Henry VII, may be said to depict character of a sort. But they were done by visiting foreigners employed for the purpose, and were in any event rather rare exceptions to the general rule. Even at that it is sobering to think that they were being produced at about the same time as Da Vinci's familiar "Mona Lisa" of around 1503–05, or some of Raphael's early masterpieces.

Explanations for the precocity of Italian and other Western Renaissance portraiture—or, to put it another way, the tardiness of the English—are pretty much a dime a dozen. Without meaning to plunge us back into some Burckhardtian image of the Italians as "the first-born sons of the modern world," it is still the case that they were at least *amongst* the first, and certainly amongst the most successful, Europeans to explore the human character on panel, and that the English lagged far behind.

Those Burckhardtian explanations have to do with the earlier formation in the Italian city-states of humanistic studies, with their recognition of the individual virtuoso and with the cultivation of character, amongst their characteristics. We see these elements in the love poetry of Petrarch at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, in the paintings of, say, DaVinci in the middle, or in conduct books like Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano* towards the end. We should not belittle this classic approach, though it may now seem simplistic and uncontextualized in the terms by which Burckhardt expressed it.

There are other explanations, too, for the tardy development of English portraiture, and thus for the expression of character in such works. One has to do with patronage, and with the cultivation of a personal portraiture which legitimized the patron's political power, material wealth or social standing in the eyes of the beholder. Outside the Catholic Church,

Italian Renaissance portraiture mostly came about through the patronage of three distinct but overlapping groups. One was the affluent and ambitious merchant elite seeking to ape their betters and enhance their chances of social acceptance. A second included the petty dukes and princes, often latter-day *condottieri* of boorish manner and little education. They were determined to legitimize their often ill-gotten power through a display of imagery which might link them to their putative Roman forbears. The third was the older aristocracy, both urban and urbane, which maintained close links with both of those types. None of these groups had precise counterparts in England at the same time.

To some considerable extent, all three of these groups remained informed of contemporary philosophical, social and literary developments, or were at least influenced by their application, and they patronized the artisans and intellectuals who could address those ideas. The emphasis throughout this milieu on neo-Platonic thought, with its implications for the perfectibility of the individual and its emphasis on the four temperaments—the Melancholic, Choleric, Phlegmatic, and the Sanguine—seems especially significant. These elements of character especially lent themselves to visual depiction in many parts of Renaissance Europe. They did so with particularly memorable and stunning results in the work of Albrecht Durer and others on the other side of the Alps. I will return to this later on.

English patterns of patronage remained quite different. While it may be true that English monarchs came to patronize portraiture as a form of political legitimation, and the English landed classes came to do so in the hope of social legitimation, neither of these tendencies appeared with any force before about the 1530s or 1540s. The use of portraiture by English merchant or urban interests lagged even a little behind *this* pace, though a very few English merchants had their portraits painted on the continent before it became common to do so in England. In short, and up to the early decades of the sixteenth century, the English monarchy and aristocracy were much more concerned with the rough and tumble of *politics* than with the subtleties of *politesse*.

And as for the urban world, which had produced such wonders of Renaissance art in Italy and elsewhere, it seems by contrast barely to have existed as an independent cultural force in England prior to even the mid-sixteenth century. London, whose population hovered around fifty-thousand people by 1500, may have been five times larger than the next most populous English city of that time, but it was still smaller and far less cosmopolitan than several score continental cities at the same time. Not only was English urban life itself *not* the centre of things as it was in Italy, much of what is

now Germany, the Low Countries and so forth; the mainstream of English society regarded it with almost unexcepted scepticism as a morally tenuous, even sinister and avaricious, milieu.

Chaucer may present an exception to this perspective, and an exception as well to the late appearance of lay portraiture in England. His is the earliest easel portrait we find in the National Portrait Gallery and one of the first non-royal easel portraits done anywhere in England. But for the most part, as Lawrence Manley has so aptly put it in reference even to the Elizabethan era, England may have been an *urbanizing* society, but it was not yet even by that time an *urban* one.[2] Its values were still predominantly neo-feudal, courtly and chivalric; its outlook still rural and agrarian.

Though we know that some easel and fresco portraits, almost exclusively of royalty, were produced in England well before the Tudors, these were very few in number and very restricted in circulation. Right up to the Henrician Reformation the predominant English portrait media were the manuscript illumination, stained glass, heraldic illustration, funerary sculpture and even cloth portrait banner. Virtually all of these represented the human face and figure in purely iconic terms and in a purely vernacular or roughly Gothic mode. A mid-fifteenth-century series of pen and wash drawings of London aldermen of this time, including that of the Lord Mayor Simon Eyre, illustrates the point [see Figure 1, opposite].[3] Each and every one of this series has precisely the same cookie-cutter drawing, with variations of color, heraldic devices and names added to distinguish one subject from the other. Like almost all other English "portraits" of this early period—and the term is lightly employed—it showed none of the influence of humanist concerns for character, or even verisimilitude.

Even by Shakespeare's time a century later the tide had not completely turned. London writers like Stow and his contemporaries certainly took an obviously keen interest in their city, writing enthusiastically and authoritatively of its historic leaders, lord mayors and so forth. But this interest in biographical detail did not translate very quickly from the printed word to the pictorial image. John Stow's unique and classic *Survey of London* of 1598 and 1603 was not illustrated at all, and though his contemporary William Jaggard filled his 1601 work, *a View of the Lord Mayors of London*, with

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[2] Lawrence Manley, *Literature and Culture in Early Modern London* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 15.

[3] Corporation of London, Guildhall Art Gallery, catalogue numbers 32132–52, 32170–71, and 32173. See also Kathleen Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490* (2 vols., London: Harvey Miller, 1996) I, plate 333; and *Gothic Art for England*, ed. Richard Marks and Paul Williamson (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2003) 268–69.

Figure 1. Roger Legh, "Simon Eyre, Draper and Lord Mayor of London, 1445–46," Guildhall Library MS. no. 32139. Guildhall Library, Corporation of London.

biographical sketches of London's lord mayors, he used but three woodcuts in rotation, each of them very stereotypical, to represent several score lord mayors [see Figure 2, below]. Perhaps all lord mayors in those days looked just like these three images, but then again, maybe not!

Figure 2. From William Jaggard, "A View of all the Right Honourable the Lord Mayors of London" (London 1601).

Though a small number of English men—merchants and the university-trained especially—traveled widely in the opening decades of the sixteenth century, they seemed not to take much notice of the arts and architecture they saw en route. The big break in this lingering of medieval forms in England came with the reign of Henry VIII, and his attraction to the ideas of a Renaissance form of kingship based on imperial imagery.

Throwing his hat into the ring to succeed Emperor Maximilian on the Imperial throne in 1519, meeting with François I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, exchanging portrait images as gifts with other crowned heads of state, and other such experiences in international affairs must all have convinced Henry of the value of this imagery, and at the same time shown him what it looked like.

His need to legitimize not only the Tudor line itself but also his own break with the Roman church, his dissolution of ecclesiastical properties, and his other decisive domestic policies, surely presented a greater need than ever to develop a visual imagery of legitimation. This need seems to me the real wellspring of true Renaissance portraiture in England. An imagery of political legitimation, with its attendant concerns for verisimilitude and psychological insight, emanated from the Crown and court circle in the 1530s, and worked its way outwards in concentric rings of imitative patronage thereafter.

Curiously, although that imperial imagery of Renaissance kingship derived ultimately from Italy and the Roman heritage, and notwithstanding his brief employment of Pietro Torrigiano to complete a striking terracotta bust of his father, Henry VII, it is to the Transalpine and not the Italian Renaissance that Henry VIII turned for his models and his craftsmen. For the triumph in England both of easel portraiture itself and of the full-blown reception of Renaissance notions of how kingship, and kingly character, should be displayed, we must wait for Hans Holbein the younger to arrive on the English scene, first in his brief visit of 1526–28, and then especially in his permanent settlement of 1532 to his death in 1543.

Holbein did more than any other foreign painter to bring England up to the speed of continental portraiture and to ensure its connection with contemporary humanist thought.[4] Having been born in Augsburg, worked widely in German, Swiss, Italian and French venues, been attracted to the aesthetic theories of Andrea del Sarto and Leonardo himself, befriended and been closely associated with Erasmus, and brought to England through connections with Erasmus and Thomas More, Holbein was certainly the man for the job.

Probably through the More connection, many of Holbein's first commissions were from those, intellectuals and churchmen especially, in and around the court circle: people like Sir Henry Wyatt, Archbishop William Wareham, Sir Brian Tuke and More himself: the sort of men who would

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[4] The authoritative work is now Susan Foister, *Holbein in England* (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 2004).

form the backbone of Tudor government right to the end of the dynasty. It didn't take long for Henry to suss this out, and by 1536 Holbein had established his place as Henry's principal painter.

Holbein was not the only foreign painter who enjoyed royal patronage under Henry VIII. A number of others, Italians as well as other Northerners, came for short periods of time. A few, including the miniaturists and illuminators Simon Benninck and both Gerard and his son Lucas Horneboute, came with their families in the 1520s to settle in for good. Lucas Horneboute, who came to England by 1524 and stayed on until his death in 1544, actually held the title of King's Painter by royal patent, with a stipend greater than Holbein's. These men and (with Benninck's daughter Levina Teerlinc) women are by no means inconsequential to the issue, and we will come back to them a little later.[5] But none of them worked in anywhere near so many different visual media, were anywhere near so prolific, or had as great and enduring impact, as Holbein.

Holbein brought a number of things to England beside his skill, and the continental style and techniques which informed that skill. First, he at least held out the availability of portraiture to widening circles of interest and patronage both beyond the court circle and to women as well as to men. A prolific painter to begin with, he portrayed lesser members of the landed classes as well as the greater. At least a few of his surviving portraits of unidentified figures may be wealthy London merchants. The wide dissemination of his work, and its association with the royal court, did more than any other painter's opus to create a fashion for portraiture amongst the better and even middling sorts of people. It is his output as much as any other factor which made portraiture a fashionable object of conspicuous consumption in the English social milieu.

Holbein was also one of the first painters to work for any length of time in England, and certainly the most prominent, to have been formally trained in the ateliers of continental masters and therefore in the polite styles of the day. This placed him in sharp contrast to almost all others, and certainly to native English craftsmen who applied paint to surfaces of one sort or another at that time. These men, to whom we might apply the contemporary term "painter-stainers" often received a training of sorts, but not in the highly specialized art of the portraitist. It would instead have concerned the more general handling of paint and other coverings to

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[5] For a sound introduction to these figures, see Roy Strong and V.J. Murrell, *Artists of the Tudor Court, the Portrait Miniature Rediscovered, 1520–1620* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1983) 34–44; Strong, *The English Renaissance Miniature* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983) 56–66.

a wide range of surfaces and objects, including furniture, inn signs, ships' prows, textiles, and so forth. It would have come through apprenticeship in a painter's or painter-stainer's guild, and it would have lacked any awareness of contemporary polite or formal style.

These native painters did not think of themselves, nor were they thought of by others, as artists in our sense of the term. They remained anonymous craftsmen, and they were no more likely to sign a painting than a brick-maker to sign a brick. Their work bore little resemblance to formal or polite portraiture, much less that of the Renaissance mode to which we might look for signs of character. We are unlikely to see much of their work in, say, the National Portrait Gallery. Yet for all our own relative ignorance of it, it is *this* often crude but well-meant idiom, and not the work of the Holbeins and Nicholas Hilliards, that long predominated amongst at least the middling sorts of people, both urban and landed.

Part of this persistence of portraiture in England as craft rather than art stems from one thing which Holbein was *not* able to do, though we can hardly blame him for it. He did not create a sufficient interest amongst the middling and better sorts of English people to make formal training in the painter's art an acceptable part of their children's education. Though there are isolated examples of English men receiving such training in Holbein's wake (and Shakespeare's time), almost of them went abroad to get it.

The English assumed in this as in many other advanced crafts of the day that they could simply import the right people from abroad rather than to learn to do it themselves. Economic historians have long recognized that this habit of mind delayed the native English manufacture of the more lucrative "new draperies" to the severe detriment of the English cloth trade, and it delayed the development of an English artistic tradition to no less an extent.

Importing foreign craftsmen, whether portrait painters or Dutch and Flemish woollen cloth weavers or German copper miners, did get the job done, but it famously failed to integrate foreign-honed skills into the English work-force. When Elizabeth allowed a limited number of new-drapery weavers in to provincial cities like Norwich in the 1570s, she insisted that these master craftsmen take on a minimum number of English apprentices as a condition of their immigration.[6] But the foreign trained painters, sculptors and so forth, most of them Dutch or Flemish refugees fleeing the violence of religious wars in their home countries in the mid-1560s and after, were

[6] Francis Blomefield and Charles Parkin, *An Essay Towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (12 vols., London: W. Miller, 1805–10) V, 282, 290–91.

never successfully made to do this. They settled down and succeeded in established permanent workshops in the western fringes London particularly. They trained their own relatives to their craft, intermarried, and produced family artisan dynasties to the third generation.[7] But in all this industrious behaviour, they effectively excluded the native English workforce from their midst.

As early as 1533, in *The Boke of the Governour*, Sir Thomas Elyot had complained of the unwillingness of English men and women to train their children in the visual arts.[8] A few mid-century figures like John Bettes (fl. c. 1531–70) and some later ones like George Gower or Nicholas Hilliard prove exceptions to the rule. But the essential picture changed little for the remainder of the sixteenth century and into the next. This lack of professional training amongst native English painters left the most demanding work of courtly and polite portraiture, in which we might expect more subtlety of expression, pretty much to the foreigners by default, while it fell mostly to the non-professionally-trained, vernacular and native-born artisans who lacked such subtlety to fill the growing demand for portraiture from the less affluent or cultivated people.

This factor of training played an important role in the nature of English portraiture as a whole, making it more dependant on symbol and allegory, which could be more easily depicted, than on the subtleties of facial expression which might reveal emotional depth. Of course, symbol and allegory were no strangers to the portraiture of any European tradition at this time. Yet they appear to have formed an especially vivid component of portraiture on the English scene, both because of the lack of training and skill which might have portrayed emotional qualities directly, and for other reasons as well.

An equally important factor in the privileging of symbol over subtlety lies in the nature of English portrait patronage, and this, too, must be considered. English landed society, for whose needs a substantial proportion of portraiture was produced, was a very fluid thing throughout this time. In contrast to many continental traditions where the ranks of the aristocracy were becoming increasingly rigid—even, as in France or the Venetian Republic, by law—the social standing of English families came and went with

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[7] The definitive description of these complexly inter-connected refugee artisan families in London is Mary Edmond, "Limners and Picturemakers: New Light on the Lives of Miniaturists and Large-Scale Portrait Painters Working in London in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Walpole Society* 47 (1978–80): 60–242.

[8] Sir Thomas Eliot, *The Book Named the Governor* (1531), ed. S.E. Lehmberg (New York: Dutton, 1962) 52.

remarkable frequency. Aspirations for social advancement grew more vivid with the ever-increasing possibility of success; the fear or reality of losing ground in the social hierarchy formed an equally compelling concern. We can see this in the continual jockeying for position in and around the courts of, say, Henry VIII, Elizabeth or James I. We see it sometimes even more intensely at the level of the county community, where lists of the county commissions of the peace—the JPs—actually ranked individual members by number and in order of their local prestige.[9] These rankings were revised every year, providing a precise picture of the social hierarchy in every county and at any given time.

In these circumstances the competition for status and recognition, whether at the court or in the county, remained extremely keen and was often bitterly contested. Families found it especially necessary to stake their claims to status through the conspicuous consumption of material objects. This accounts for the familiar spate of country house building in that era, but portraiture served as an equally important device, and it came a lot more cheaply. As the late Lawrence Stone has put it,

> Noblemen and gentlemen wanted above all formal family portraits, which take their place along with genealogical trees and sumptuous tombs as symptoms of the frenzied status-seeking and ancestor worship of the age. What patrons demanded was evidence of the sitter's position and wealth by opulence of dress, ornament and background ....[10]

The more affluent and insecure amongst the landed classes rose to this need with quite remarkable displays: one thinks of the infamous Bess of Hardwicke and her penchant for building the grandest and most ostentatious country houses of her time. For some of them portrait collecting also became virtually a competitive sport. Men like Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester, amassed collections of several hundred portraits each, and the long galleries constructed for their display sometimes exceeded a hundred feet in length.[11]

You'll notice in Stone's very apt description that evidence of *character* in these works was not required. "*Opulence of dress, ornament and*

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[9] See, for example, A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558–1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) especially chap. 4.

[10] Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965) 712.

[11] Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, "Essex House, formerly Leicester House and Exeter Inn," *Archeologia* 73 (1923): 29–47; Elizabeth Goldring, "The Earl of Leicester and Portraits of the duc d'Alençon," *Burlington Magazine* 146 (Feb. 2004): 108–11.

background" were sufficient to the task at hand, and it is these upon which the patron had his painter concentrate his attention. It is *this* need, coupled with lack of technical skill or stylistic sophistication in most contemporary painters, which accounts for the general reliance on imagery over insight in most English portraits of the day. The typical English portrait of this era is more likely to exhibit a profusion of images to *describe* the subject's status than it is to reveal the subject's character by probing his *psyche* with subtlety of gesture or facial expression.

The vocabulary by which these descriptions were commonly expressed included a range of devices which contemporary viewers would easily understand. The appearance of quality furnishings, architectural elements, background landscapes, family members, pets and horses, coats of arms, weapons of combat, particular forms of dress and jewellery and sundry other symbolic objects or props, indicate the valued elements of this still predominantly neo-feudal and landed society. These visual components conveyed notions of their sitters' qualities—loyalty, service, military prowess, courtly manners, family lineage, patrimony, and so forth—but in the end they said very little about character itself.

Parenthetically, one might add that it took a lot of space within the picture frame to include these devices, and this helps account for the fact that portraits tended to become larger as the century progressed, and to move away from the head or head-and-shoulders view and onwards towards showing the full body and its surroundings. At the same time the face itself, the most obvious clue to character, became smaller and less central to the whole.

This emphasis on imagery and context rather than character seems especially pronounced in two sorts of portraits done in this period, each of them rather a special case: civic portraits of mayors, alderman and other civic officials on the one hand, and many of the later portraits of Queen Elizabeth on the other. I have dealt with civic portraiture elsewhere,[12] but as Shakespeare will have seen lots of these paintings in the civic halls of his time, a rapid survey of the type seems in order.

As employed here, the term "civic portraiture" consists of portraits done of civic officials, commissioned by the civic bodies to which they had been associated, and displayed in the spaces of civic buildings: town and

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[12] Tittler, "Civic Portraiture and Political Culture in English Provincial Towns, ca. 1560–1640," *Journal of British Studies* 37. 3, (July 1998): 306–29; "John and Joan Cooke: Civic Portraiture and Urban Identity in Gloucester," in Tittler, *Townspeople and Nation: English Urban Experiences, 1540–1640* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001) 81–99.

guildhall council chambers, courtrooms and mayors' parlours; the halls of livery companies and of colleges and schools; and so forth. These portraits became increasingly common in England only towards the very end of the sixteenth century. Their appearance seems rooted in a number of political and cultural aims relevant to that time: to recognize the accomplishments of past civic leaders, to hold their benefactions and civic role up as models for future generations, to help create a secular and civic imagery, and to enhance of sense of local identity and loyalty to local institutions.

What was most important in this very distinctive genre was not so much the personality or even the literal appearance of the subject, but rather the nature of his or her role in the civic context. Many such portraits were in fact done of sitters long deceased, and whose actual appearance could hardly be known. Some of those done in the seventeenth century, and of still living or only recently deceased figures, did indeed show individual visages with considerable subtlety and insight. These tended to have been commissioned by the wealthy livery companies of London as a means of celebrating former masters, especially those who had become lord mayors of London. And just around the time of Shakespeare's death they came to be done by some of the great and famous professional portrait painters of the century's turn, like Daniel Mytens, Cornelius Jansson and Jan DeCritz. But in the sixteenth century, and especially in the less well-heeled provincial towns and cities, the vernacular image, and the craftsman-painter, held sway for a long time, and crudely wrought symbolic imagery prevailed by a very long chalk over subtleties of character.

Though not all of them are this crude, the portrait of John Falkner [see Figure 3, next page], several times mayor and leading benefactor of the city of Gloucester, provides an apt and striking example. There is no sense of perspective here, or the shading which would have stretched this image from two dimensions to three. His face, for example, is very crudely done, his hands even more so. The flesh is clumsily modeled and shaded, the proportions are often out of whack. Verisimilitude remains out of the question, style equally so, and character is not even a thought in the painter's mind.

Still, the painting does accomplish its intended purpose very effectively in one sense. It depicts a serious man in his mayoral robes of office, one of a long line of Gloucester mayors who will have worn similar robes. The figure is not much more than a dress dummy on which to display the robe, and it is the robe which indicates both his mayoral status and the continuity of that office through the years. To the city fathers who commissioned this portrait, at a time of urban decay and social stress in that particular com-

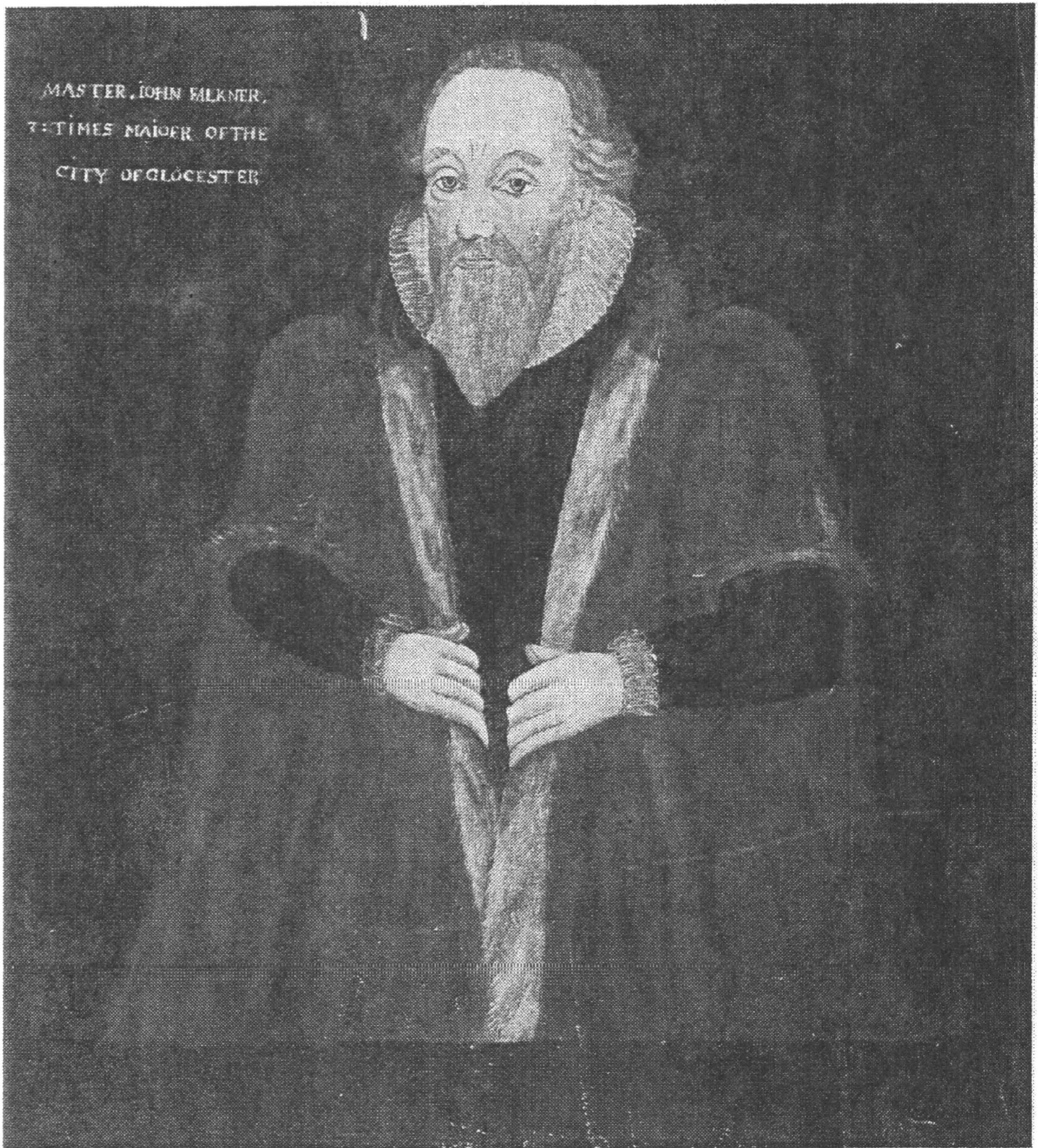MASTER. IOHN FALKNER,
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CITY OFGLOCESTER

Figure 3. Anonymous, John Falkner of Gloucester (c. 1590–1600). Gloucester City Museum and Art Gallery.

munity, it is that which mattered in the end. Just as placing the crown and royal mantle marked the coronation of the monarch, so did the wearing of civic livery bear the symbolic power to transform the layman into the civic official, and thus to invoke the mystery and memory—certainly the identity—of the institution.

As the London writer John Earle remarked about a London alderman in 1628, "He is venerable in his gowne,… wherein he setts forth *not his owne* so much as the face of a *City* … his scarlet gowne is a monument,

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[13] John Earle, *Microcosmography, or a Piece of the World Discovered in Essays and Characters* (1628), ed. Edward Arber (London: Alex. Murray & Son, 1895) 26–27.

and it lasts from generation to generation."[13] In portraits like this the notion of character has been transferred from the potential subtleties of expression and pose to the raiment itself, a symbolic but effective communication of the portrait's intent.

The second kind of portrait which particularly demonstrates the role of symbol and imagery over character consists of most of the later portraits of Queen Elizabeth herself, especially from the mid-1580s to the late 1590s. Images of Elizabeth have of course received a great deal of attention from both art historians and from scholars intrigued by the challenge which her gender placed on a ruling queen of the sixteenth century. Many of those portraits, especially of the early decades of her reign, constitute some of the more engaging examples of English formal and polite portraiture of their time. Yet given the challenges of legitimizing a female monarch on the throne, they already draw heavily on allegorical content, drawn from familiar mythological or Biblical themes.

Lucas de Heere's highly allegorical "Family of Henry VIII" of 1572 has Elizabeth ushered into her father's presence by goddesses of Peace and Plenty, while Mars, the god of War, ushers Mary and her consort Philip of Spain into the opposite side of the scene. "Elizabeth and the Three Goddesses" of 1569, possibly by the Dutchman Hans Eworth, places Elizabeth in the company of Juno, Pallas and Venus. And the "Sieve Portrait" series by Gower and Quentin Metsys, still finely modeled in the polite fashion of the Northern Renaissance, identifies Elizabeth with Petrarch's vestal virgin Tuccia, who proved her virginity by carrying a sieve full of water without it leaking through. Other images included the Biblical Deborah, Spencer's chaste huntress Belphoebe, and Ovid's (and others') Astraea the Virgin. We do see *some* insight into the Queen's character in all these works, especially perhaps in Gower's "Sieve Portrait," though one might well have guessed even then that allegory in Elizabeth's portraits would triumph over reality in years to come. And so, of course, it did.

For the first twenty years or so of her reign, most portraits of the Queen remained fairly conventional in their composition and aesthetic qualities. They still relied heavily on foreign painters trained in the Northern Renaissance tradition, but they also including a very small number of English craftsmen like Gower and Hilliard who often learned from the former.

But with works like Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder's full length portrait of c. 1580–85, portraits of the Queen begin to leave the mainstream of contemporary European conventions of polite portraiture to reach out in several quite new, complexly allegorical, anatomically distorted, and otherwise wildly unconventional and downright bizarre directions. Along

this short-lived but fascinating side-track in the history of English portraiture we find, for example, the anatomically-distorted extremes of Elizabeth with the Cardinal and Theological Virtues of 1598, the "Armada" portrait series of c. 1588, and the largest and most imposingly surrealistic of all, the Younger Gheeraerts's huge and striking "Ditchley Portrait" of c. 1592 [see Figure 4, opposite]. Imagery is everything in these works, while the Queen's face recedes to a pearly and powdered mask, revealing nothing at all of her inner self. In this huge (95" x 60") tableau, the Queen stands surrealistically on that part of the globe which corresponds to Oxfordshire, referring to its patron, Sir Henry Lee's house at Ditchley. With the storms of Europe behind her, and with a celestial sphere pendant hanging from her right ear, she looks westwards across the Atlantic where the clouds disappear before her gaze.

They are extremely stylized, two-dimensional, crudely modeled and highly allegorical works, essentially vernacular in their way without precisely becoming "naive," and not by any means carried out by painters who knew no better. Obviously such depictions were no mere accidents, nor did they represent a sudden collapse of available artistic skill. By a royal proclamation of 1563 and by other devices, Elizabeth closely controlled her portrait imagery. She forbad unauthorized portraits to be done, and in 1596 she prompted the Privy Council's confiscation and destruction of such work.[14] We must see these "distorted" views as part and parcel of that quite remarkable outpouring of imagery, more familiarly in the highly allegorical and virtually devotional literature which we think of as comprising "the cult of Elizabeth." They followed, too, from the self-imposed cultural isolation of Protestant England from the mainstream traditions of Renaissance neo-classicism best exemplified in the Catholic states of the day. Along with some of the brilliant literary efforts of that cultural golden age, these strident and bizarre images reflect the tension-ridden and wholly insecure tenor of Elizabeth's latter years—and Shakespeare's time. They are driven by the realities of the Spanish Armada and the continuing struggles with Spain, by the Irish War, by Essex's revolt, by the economic calamities of the 1590s, and by an aging, isolated and childless Queen who had outlived her time, and knew it!

Above all for our purposes here and now, these odd pictures loudly raise the question of whether the portraiture of Shakespeare's time, and after the age of Holbein, could (and at least sometimes did) depict personal

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[14] Dated December 1563, from Westminster; *Tudor Royal Proclamations* II, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (London and New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) item 516.

Figure 4. Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, "Elizabeth I, the Ditchley Portrait" (1592). National Portrait Gallery, London.

character in more direct and literal ways: by a more sensitive and revealing modeling of the faces and figures themselves without all the devices, distortions, and other contrivances which we see here, and in ways which would have found their place amongst the finest and most insightful of Renaissance portraiture done elsewhere at the time.

Thus far there is little to suggest an optimistic answer to this question. We can see a number of reasons for the absence of character analysis in English portraiture right up to the time of Shakespeare: the cultural isolation from the mainstream of continental style; the lack of an established urbanism to set the tone and pace; the absence of training which would have allowed more native-born artists to produce such work; the remarkably competitive social world of the potential patron, who demanded image over insight; and so forth. Yet from about the middle of Shakespeare's lifetime things began rapidly to change, and there is after all some optimism to propose.

There are two considerations here, one practical and one theoretical. First, the practical, which leads us to the highly circumscribed and still under-valued form of the portrait miniature. Introduced to the English scene by those manuscript illuminators, Simon Benninck, and Gerard and Lucas Horneboute, both contemporaries of Holbein, this idiom continued to be developed by a small group of practitioners, including Holbein, thereafter. Though the very particular and demanding skills of their production kept this number of practicing miniaturists down to half dozen or so at any one time, the miniature portrait form lasted longer in England than elsewhere and became particularly associated with the English scene. One might well propose that the skill levels of the best English miniaturists of Shakespeare's time, Nicholas Hilliard and his pupil Isaac Oliver, actually exceeded those of almost all conventional portrait painters working in England at the same time.

Miniatures were *not* produced to project the usual images of social status, or designed to proclaim that status to myriad visitors of country houses. They were instead very small and intimate works meant as tokens of affection or remembrance, often given as gifts to prospective suitors amongst royalty or the very well-heeled. They were conventionally enclosed in lockets or similar containers, often heavily jewelled or delicately carved, and they revealed, both consistently and more than any other form of portrait, images of the sitter which were both physically and emotionally accurate. They show the private and intimate face, and rarely more than the face; they do so for the exclusive pleasure and appreciation of their intended recipients.

Miniatures offered the one occasion on which sitters were willing to be seen as they really were, and not as they felt they had to be viewed

by the broader audience of those who trooped through their long galleries on rainy days. We know how Henry VIII wanted Holbein to show him in this quasi-official depiction which has endured through the ages, but a miniature by Lucas Horneboute, shows what Henry VIII—not quite so intimidating but perhaps more emotionally complex—really looked like at the same time [see Figure 5, below]. Hilliard's miniatures of Elizabeth are probably as close to Elizabeth's real appearance as we are likely to see, and as far removed from the Armada image as we are likely to get. And the charming, intimate, probing and delicate visages of some of Isaac Oliver's miniature portraits extend the emotional range yet further. His work seems more delicately wrought and psychologically complex than Hilliard's, and he

Figure 5. Lucas Horneboute, "Miniature of Henry VIII." The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

acclimated more successfully than Hilliard to the shifting winds of fashion ushered in at the accession of James I.

The second and more theoretical consideration comes in the form of Giovanni Lomazzo's *Tracte Containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge, and Buildinge*, which became widely known in England only after its translation by Richard Haydocke in 1598. Lomazzo's failing eyesight had forced him to abandon a career as a middle-rank Milanese painter around 1571, but it not deter him in his reading of neo-Platonic philosophy, or from writing about its implications for portraiture and other visual arts. These writings articulated in fine detail the importance of what he called "actions and gestures" in painting, and in which he included such "passions of the mind," in Haydocke's words, as "melancholie, fearfulness, maliciousness, covetousnesse, slownesse, envie, bashfulnesse, and anxietie": elements of character all.

Haydocke's edition of 1598 caught the English ruling elites towards the end of the most perilous and dangerous decade of the century, and very close to the end of the Elizabethan era itself. Perhaps this was also a time when the expression of true emotion, and the receptivity to continental culture, could be withheld no longer. But whatever circumstances may explain it, Lomazzo's writing and the work of miniaturists like Hilliard and Oliver helped open the door to the more refined and formal traditions of true art, rather than craftsmanship, and to the more relaxed, tolerant and receptive world of early Stuart rule. Interestingly, both Lomazzo and Hilliard—the latter in his own manuscript treatise on painting—freely acknowledged their admiration for Durer's study of the four temperaments: the choleric, the sanguine, the phlegmatic and the melancholy. Durer does indeed seem an inspiration for the revival of character in the portraits of this time.

That post-Elizabethan scene was quite different in many ways. The broader and more tolerant religious outlook of the Jacobean court, including the important and little recognized role of Queen Henrietta Maria in connecting with the French cultural milieu on the one hand and the deep appreciation of the visual arts by the duke of Buckingham, the earl of Arundel and the future Charles I on the other, quickly led to a much more open approach to the arts. In engaging the likes of Inigo Jones, Pier Paul Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck these courtly patrons inaugurated a new era of cultural expression, and one which is beyond the scope of this essay to pursue.