The Sanders Portrait

By Jenny Tiramani

In November 2002 I was invited to speak at the ‘Picturing Shakespeare’ Symposium at the University of Toronto, Canada together with Susan North, Curator of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Dress at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The subject of the conference was the Sanders Portrait (Col. Pl. II) and we were asked to give presentations to the conference on the clothing worn by the sitter. We both embraced this opportunity to share our views on the importance of costume in portraits of the Early Modern period and to see whether an analysis of the clothing would help to either confirm or refute the possibility of the sitter being William Shakespeare. It also proved to be an interesting chance to use some of the reconstruction techniques developed to dress actors for performance at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, London since its opening in 1997.

A retired Ottawa engineer named Lloyd Sullivan owns the portrait and, according to his family tradition, it was painted by his ancestor, John Sanders, born 1576 in Worcester. The portrait is painted on a Baltic oak panel with a small linen rag paper label on the back, which included the word ‘Shakspere’ when examined by M. H. Spielmann in 1909, though this part of the label has since been lost. The painting’s date of 1603 has been authenticated by scientific analysis at the Canadian Conservation Institute, although the identity of the sitter has not.1 If it were to transpire that this indeed was a portrait of William Shakespeare, it could be one painted from life and as such it has created much interest.

At first glance there are few clues to the identity or status of the person shown. He is depicted bareheaded, with collar-length hair and a thin beard and moustache. He is wearing a fine linen shirt and a heavily decorated doublet or jerkin. There is no jewellery, a plain background, no motto or coat of arms. In the top right-hand corner is written ‘ANo-1603’. Examining these elements one at a time yielded some interesting possibilities.

The sitter is bareheaded, or ‘uncovered’ as it was called in the period. In a society that conformed to the exclusive wearing of hats and the removal of them in front of superiors, a conscious decision to be shown with headgear on or not was always made for a portrait. In larger depictions the wearer’s hat, crown or helmet was often shown on a table next to the subject. In the case of the portrait of Sir Walter Raleigh and his son, the father is wearing his hat, while his son respectfully holds his hat in his hand.2 Likewise the three Browne brothers, grandsons of Anthony Browne, first Viscount Montague, are depicted wearing hats next to their gentleman servant with his hat in hand in Isaac Olivier’s painting of 1598 (Fig. 1).

The Sanders portrait sitter may be shown uncovered because it was intended to be an intimate, private image. However, another reason should be considered —
that the sitter intended to appear showing deference and respect to the intended viewer; that there is an implied humility and modesty in the decision to appear bareheaded. Portraits showing the aspiring middle classes wearing tall hats to emphasis their rising status demonstrate the converse of this. A portrait of Edward Alleyn, leading actor with the ‘Admiral’s Men’ theatre company, is a good example of this practice.³

The hairstyle sported by the sitter is consistent with the fashion in 1603, the date on the picture, and is evident in many contemporary portraits. It consists of a comb of hair on the top of the head, dressed backwards in a ‘quiff’-like manner, while the hair at the sides of the face is dressed down to the top of the collar. This style not only shows off the high brow of the subject — a desirable feature shared with women’s hairstyles of the period — it also provides a practical style for somebody habitually wearing a hat as the position of the hat-line between
the two areas of hair (top and sides) meant that the style would be relatively undisturbed when the person uncovered. At the Globe we have found this a very effective style for actors playing characters who have to keep uncovering and recovering their heads. The height of the quiff suggests the same status as a tall hat would if it was being worn, and indeed the hair would be squashed if a short crowned hat were put on top of it. Surviving portraits show us that men of all ages wore this hairstyle, and its frequent appearance on the heads of elegant and dignified sitters (Fig. 2) is in sharp contrast to the wild, bushy styles sported by young gallants (Col. Pl. IIIA).

Indeed Shakespeare was thirty-nine years old in 1603 (the same age as Cecil in his portrait), so there is nothing inconsistent with the possibility of this being his picture from the hairstyle — although the facial hair does look sparse, perhaps more suggestive of a younger man.

Fig. 2. Robert Cecil, first Earl of Salisbury, c. 1602, attributed to John de Critz the Elder
The Marquess of Salisbury, Hatfield House
The clothes visible in the portrait are very precisely depicted with an attention to detail that is characteristic of so many pictures of this period. Men’s shirts of this period were almost exclusively linen and the collar of this fine linen shirt is worn slightly open at the neck. Just visible under the semi-transparent linen are the turned-back edges of his doublet collar. This transparency attests to the fine quality and expensive nature of the fabric, which was probably either holland or cambric.\(^4\) There are numerous surviving examples of linen shirts and women’s linen smocks of this quality, although most of them are embellished with some form of decoration — either the insertion of lace panels, lace edgings or embroidery in silk and metal threads.\(^5\)

Alternatively, such a plain see-through collar might be worn on top of a second, heavier linen collar, as in the 1585 portrait of Christopher Marlowe in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Plain collars comparable to that in the Sanders portrait start to appear in paintings during the mid-1580s, and continue well into the 1640s, but over this period their shape and construction steadily evolves from a straight piece of fabric inserted into the neckband to collars with up to fifty tiny darts all the way around the neckline. The collar on the Sanders sitter shows a transitional stage in this development with only three darts on either side of it which produce a curve, helping to flatten and spread the collar onto the shoulders. It is of course possible that there are more darts at the back, not visible in the picture, but when we made a reconstruction of this shirt at the Globe we found that it looked very elegant with only the side darts because it allowed the collar to lie flat at the back where it was straight and gave the flare at the sides where it was needed.

These darts are the only details of the shirt that have a decorative effect, although their function is as part of the construction. They stand out because, having three layers of linen in them, they appear more opaque than the rest of the collar, as does the neckband which has two layers. The artist has even painted in the stitch marks holding the darts and neckband in place, although they look like running stitches, which is unlikely in reality, where slipstitch or backstitch were more commonly used. He has also omitted to show any fastening on the neckband. Many surviving shirts have worked eyelet-holes on the neck and wristbands through which to thread band-strings, so perhaps there are none on this shirt because it was intended always to be worn open and so would need none to close it.

Other early seventeenth-century theatre portraits showing undecorated collars include three images of Shakespeare, namely the Droeshout engraving,\(^6\) the Chandos portrait\(^7\) and the Janssen memorial bust,\(^8\) as well as those of the playwright Ben Jonson\(^9\) and the actor, Richard Burbage.\(^10\) Only the Droeshout collar is of as fine a quality as the Sanders, although it is of a later fashion, with darts all around the neck and elongated fronts. The collar is held in position by what appears to be a supportasse, perhaps attached to the doublet collar as on the surviving doublet in the Galleria Parmigiani, Reggio Emilia, Italy.\(^11\)

The simplicity of the collar contrasts dramatically with the elaborately decorated doublet — if doublet it is. I say that because the picture ends above the edge of the shoulder wing so it is impossible to see whether or not the sleeves
match. Even if they were of a different design to that of the body, it may be that he is wearing a sleeveless doublet, with contrasting sleeves laced or hooked onto it under the wings. However, the possibility that what we see is a jerkin is remote in that it is unlikely that a jerkin would be fully buttoned up the front, completely obscuring the doublet underneath. One possible version of the complete outfit worn in the Sanders portrait is illustrated in the portrait of the Admiral, Sir John Browne (Col. Pl. IIIb). Here the sitter is clearly wearing a doublet and matching trunk hose with panes — a suit. It is all decorated in an almost identical way to the Sanders doublet, with its gold decorations called laces applied to the orangetawny coloured silk fabric. He is also wearing an embroidered sword harness of the same colour with gilt metalwork. There is another point on which this is a useful portrait for comparison with the Sanders but, first, here is a more detailed study of the nature of the Sanders doublet itself.

The doublet fabric is intensely covered with horizontally applied laces. Where the fabric is visible between these laces it is a very dark grey, which has been described as purple-blue. The pigments identified from paint samples taken by Marie-Claude Corbell at the Canadian Conservation Institute were lead white, charcoal black, red lake, cinnabar and orpiment. Perhaps the artist was following the advice of Edward Norgate in his 1589 'A More Compendious Discourse concerning ye art of Liming the nature and properties of coulers'.

To make Sattin
Cherystone and Ivory ard beth to be burned and so ground, the first is a very good black especially for draperies and blake Aparell, but if you make sattin it must be tempered with A Littell India Lake and Indico but only to make it apecer with A more beautifull Glose wich Heightned with a Littell lighter mixtur of more whitish in strong touches and Hard reflections, and deepened with Ivory will show marvellous well.

Perhaps he mixed a little red lake with his black and white to portray black or dark grey satin. This doublet fabric then has small darker spots painted on it at intervals roughly three-quarters of an inch apart. These represent tiny cuts called pinks and are spaced on alternate rows in such a way as to form an overall diamond pattern on the doublet. Slightly larger cuts can be seen in between the laces in Colour Plate IV. The three most common materials used for outer clothing in this period were wool, leather and silk, all of which were pinked for decoration, so to narrow down the most likely material used in this instance, along with the materials used to weave the lace, we made samples to compare the look of each. Julie Rutter, a hand-loom weaver, made the laces, which were then stitched to four sample fabrics as follows:

Sample 1: Wool, with laces woven in wool threads
Sample 2: Leather, with laces woven in linen threads
Sample 3: Silk satin, with laces woven in silk threads
Sample 4: Silk satin, with laces woven in silk and silver threads (Col. Pl. IV).

Only Sample 4 resembled the doublet painted in the Sanders portrait so Karl Robinson made suitable buttons for this sample — covering wooden bases with silk and silver threads to match the doublet laces, as was standard practice in the early seventeenth century. The close spacing of the buttons down the front opening of the doublet is both decorative and practical. These doublets, both
straight-fronted and with the curved ‘peascod’ belly padded shape, were tightly fitted to the body so there could be no significant gaps between the buttons unless unsightly gaping was to occur. The long floating silver threads on the laces and buttons appear as fine highlights in Sample 4 — exactly as they do in the picture. White was commonly used in this period to depict silver, as yellow was to depict gold (as shown in the portrait of Sir John Browne). A similar, though somewhat heavier, trimming has been found on some figures in the set of Heroic Women appliquéd hangings at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire. The composition of this trimming is described by Santina Levey as follows:

Heavy, straight-edged trimming: warp-faced plain weave in blue silk and gold file with a supplementary warp. There are twenty-five warps of which the outer eight on each side are alternately of blue silk, and single gold file. The nine warps in the centre and the weft are of blue silk, and the central area of blue plain weave is entirely hidden by eight supplementary warps of two-ply gold file. These interface with the foundation weft in a regular sequence of under-one, over-three, under-one, over-three, under-one, over-three, under-one, over-eleven, under-one. This closely-packed triple floats form three-dimensional loops above the surface, while the long floats lie flat.

The fashion for decorating doublets in horizontal rows of laces or cords began in the mid-sixteenth century as on the surviving 1562 doublet of Don Garzia de Medici in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence, and pinks or slashes were often seen in between the rows. Given that the Sanders doublet was decorated with silver laces, the most likely fabric used for it would be silk satin, although it could possibly be silk taffeta or even leather. A silk satin doublet with similar pinking and applied silk laces survives in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Germany. Such extremely striking metal laces as those in the Sanders portrait figure heavily in surviving accounts of actors’ clothing. The majority of clothing worn by actors on stage during the early seventeenth century was contemporary street dress, rather than stylized theatre costume and, although most actors were not of the social status permitted by law to wear such items in the street, they needed them to portray the many aristocrats featured in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

A surviving inventory of clothing c. 1602 owned by the actors of the ‘Admiral’s Men’ theatre company includes such items as

A scarlet c hose wth ij brode gould Laces: w’ gould buttens of the sam downe the sids
A scarlett c hose Layd downe w’ silver Lace and silver buttens
A velvet dublett cut dimond lact w’ gould lace and spang
Frenchcose with silver paynes lact w’ carnation satins lact over w’ silver

and there are many recorded transactions between the actors and the ‘cope lace man’ from whom they bought large quantities of metal laces to decorate both new and second-hand clothes. These valuable clothes were also owned privately and bequeathed by actors, as in this will made by William Bird, a leading member of the Admiral’s Men on 30 January 1623:

I do bequeath vnto my eldest sonne William Byrd my Ash cullor suite and cloake of cloth laced with satin lace . . . I give and bequeath vnto my third sonne Thomas Burde my Ashe cullor suite and cloake trimmed with greene silke and siluer lace.
COL. PL. I. Moss crêpe coat, 1931–34, designed by Stella Mary Pearce. Accession no. 77.143

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COL. PL. II. The Sanders Portrait

Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo: Carlo Catenaazzi
COL. PL. IIIA. Sir Thomas Wodehouse, second Baronet of Kimberley, Norfolk, unknown artist, English school, 1605

COL. PL. IIIB. Admiral Sir John Browne, 1604 (1559–1627, knighted 1603), English school, oil on canvas, 875 by 710 mm
The Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society at the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester; 1974.99.4
1) Wool, with laces woven in wool threads

2) Leather, with laces woven in linen threads

3) Silk satin, with laces woven in silk threads

4) Silk satin, with laces woven in silk and silver threads

5) Close-up of Sanders portrait

Col. Pl. IV. Lace samples, 2002
In 2003 we used the Sanders sample silver lace pattern to decorate the green/black silk doublet made for John McEnery to play John of Gaunt in Richard II (Fig. 3) and found that the effect was extremely bold. We only outlined the doublet with it, but a whole outfit decorated in this way would have been dazzling.

Looking at the portrait again, the most significant aspect of the clothing appears to be the extremely closely spaced silver laces of the doublet, set off as they are by the dark colour of the doublet and the simplicity of the shirt collar. As this was the case, I looked up the place of such laces in ‘A proclamation against excess in Apparell, 6 July 1597’ made by Elizabeth I only six years before the picture was painted. These dress laws, which had been issued at various times since the fourteenth century, had several functions including the control of foreign imported goods, the protection of British crafts, and restriction of luxury materials to members of the aristocracy, who are named in strict ascending

Fig. 3. John McEnery playing the character of John of Gaunt in Shakespeare’s Globe production of Richard II at Middle Temple Hall, 2003

Photo: John Tramper
order from the ranks of gentlemen through knights, barons, earls and up to the monarch. James I repealed these laws in 1604, so at the time of the Sanders portrait they were still in place. Much has been written about the frequent breaking of these edicts (particularly by the aspirational merchant classes) but the evidence of inventories, wills, portraits and diaries strongly supports the view that anyone above the rank of gentleman endeavoured to dress to the limit of their dress classification as much as possible, thus demonstrating their status to the world.

The 1597 ‘Proclamation against excess in Apparell’ was mainly concerned with the use of silks and precious metal threads. To recycle the metal woven into the fabric of Cloth of Gold or Silver would necessitate the destruction of the cloth;¹⁹ these materials were therefore reserved for wearers of the highest status. Next came embroidery, because it was sewn into the fabric, and below that were laces, which were merely sewn on top of the fabric making them easily removable and recyclable. The following table shows the top categories for ‘Mens Apparell’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cloth of gold, or silver tissue.</th>
<th>under the degree of an Earle</th>
<th>except</th>
<th>Knights of the Garter in their purple Mantels onlyy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silke of colour purple</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth of gold or silver. Tincelled Sattin. Silke or cloth mixed or imbrodered with Pearle, Gold or Silver, woollie Cloth made out of the Realme.</td>
<td>under the degree of a Baron</td>
<td>except</td>
<td>Knights of the Garter, privye Cousellors to y Queenes Majestie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passemaine lace, or any other lace</td>
<td>Of gold of silver, or mixed with gold &amp; silver, with gold and silke, with silver and silke.</td>
<td>Under the degree of a Barons sonne.</td>
<td>Except</td>
<td>Gentlemen in ordinarie Office, attending upon her Majestie in her house or chamber: Such as have bin inployed in Ambassage to forren Prince; Such as may dispand u.C marks by the yeere, jor terme of life in possession above all charges. And Knights for wearing onely of Spurres, Swordes, Rapiers and Daggers, and those other things there with ensuing, And likewise Captaines being in her Majesties pay.</td>
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The section relevant to the Sanders sitter is that which states that none shall wear gold or silver lace under the degree of a baron’s son, except gentlemen in ordinary Office, attending upon Her Majesty in her house or chamber. I would therefore expect that the Sanders sitter would fall into one of these groups. By comparison it is quite possible that Sir John Browne was painted wearing gold lace and gilt weaponry in his portrait of 1604, the year in which the sumptuary laws were repealed, to celebrate being knighted by James I. If so, could it also be possible that the Sanders sitter was celebrating a rise in status by his dress?

As I was considering whether the subject of this portrait could possibly be Shakespeare, I turned to his situation in 1603. In 1601 his father had died and Shakespeare’s social status had risen to that of gentleman, with a coat of arms and therefore the right to bear weapons. Neither of these is present in the picture. However another important rise in status occurred for him along with the other eight actors who were sharers in the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the theatre company of which he was a member.

James I issued a letters patent on 19 May 1603 authorizing Shakespeare and his fellows to perform plays throughout the realm.

Wee . . . licence and auuthorize theise our servaunts Lawrence Fletcher William Shakespeare Richard Burbage Augustyne Phillipes John Hemings Henrie Condell William Sly Robert Armn Richard Cowly and the rest of theire Associates freely to use and exercise the Arte and faculty of playinge Comedies Tragedies Histories Enterludes Moralls pastoralls Stageplayes and suche others like as theie have alreadie studied or hereafter shall use or studie aswell for the recreation of our lovinge Subiects as for our Solace and pleasure when wee shall thincke good to see them duringe our pleasure . . . aswell within theire nowe usuall howse called the Globe within our County of Surrey as alsoe within anie towne halls or moute halls or other conveniente places within the libertyes and freedeome of anie other Cittie universitie towne or Boroughhe whatsoeuer.20

He was the first monarch to personally patronize a theatre company, and in doing so he made the named actors his servants. From then onwards they were called ‘The King’s Men’. It is surely possible that as such Shakespeare would have the right as a ‘gentleman in ordinarie Office attending on her (his) Majestie in her house or chamber’ to wear lace of gold or silver.

On 15 March 1604 the Master of the Great Wardrobe, Sir George Hume, granted Shakespeare and his fellow actors lengths of scarlet cloth to make royal liveries, which they wore at James’s formal entry into London in April.21 They wore them again for eighteen days in August of that year to attend on the Spanish grandees who were present for the peace conference at Somerset House, and this time they were also paid for their attendance. However, this was the year after the King’s Men patent, so no such clothes yet existed for inclusion in a portrait of 1603.

It would seem, then, that if Shakespeare did indeed want to commemorate his rise in social position in 1603, to be painted wearing a doublet smothered in silver laces would be a good choice. Indeed, he may not have actually owned such a doublet, so splendidly decorated. As previously mentioned, the Admiral’s men owned a similar doublet ‘cut diamond lacht wit gould lace’. Could Shakespeare
have borrowed a doublet from the clothing stock of the newly created King’s Men and worn it for a portrait sitting? It is even possible that the other sharer actors commissioned similar commemorative paintings, which have not survived.

This may of course be no more than a coincidence, but it certainly is a possible link between the portrait and Shakespeare. The portrait shows a man who could have been Shakespeare’s age, recording 1603 as an important year in his life, and with the status symbols of a tall hairstyle, fine quality linen and the specific new privilege of wearing silver lace, but bare-headed to show deference to his new master, King James I. The Sanders Portrait certainly shows a man appearing exactly as Shakespeare might have chosen to be painted to mark the occasion of becoming a royal servant, and as such presents us with an intriguing possibility.

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