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### **Label Me a Sceptic, Tentatively, I Think...**

This essay was originally delivered at the conference, "Picturing Shakespeare," organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario and Records of Early English Drama, at the University of Toronto in November 2002. I have altered those parts that were appropriate to its original oral delivery. I wish here to look more closely at the paper label affixed to the back of the 'Sanders' portrait. Shakespeare's only reference to the art of paper-making, in Act 4, Scene 7 of *2 Henry VI*, comes when Jack Cade accuses Lord Say: "thou has caused printing to be used, and, contrary to the King, his crown, and dignity, thou hast built a paper-mill." This suggests that paper was made in England before 1450, but actually this date is out by about one hundred years; the industry only became established around 1550-80. This strikes me as ironic, because the paper label glued to the back of the Sanders portrait raises many questions about its date, and the date of the ink and (barely legible) handwriting on the parts of it that have survived. Discussions of the label in Stephanie Nolen's book, *Shakespeare's Face*, begin from the witty and acute observation by Alexander Leggatt: "a consensus has emerged that the label, like those tight-fitting shorts worn by cyclists, tells us more than we care to know" (322). I propose, in these pages, to try to remove those shorts. My discussion of the label is based on my examination of the original and the computer fluorescence-enhanced reproduction that were expertly exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario with the painting. And I want to range a little more widely into the fascinating field of literary forgery, to discuss the label's features in connection with some indisputable examples of forgeries.

What do various observers say about this scrap of paper? Some unfortunate inferences have crept into the discussion of the label in *Shakespeare's Face*, perhaps because of misunderstandings about the process of paper-making. The material used in the making of the paper of the label (all paper, in fact, before 1780 or so) was linen rags, just as the material used in the making of modern papers is usually softwood chips. These rags were first dampened and piled in heaps to initiate rotting, and then were reduced by pounding in a paper-mill to a slurry or "pulp" (fibres suspended in water). From this pulp the paper was created in a forme, one sheet at a time, pressed to dry between layers of felt, and then 'sized' or made capable of taking ink. In the "Picture Gallery" section of Nolen's *Shakespeare's Face*, the caption for the photo of the label calls it a "linen rag label" (p ix). Professor Tittler in his essay calls it a "linen label" (215); and finally Peter Beal of Sotheby's suggests in his essay that "if the label is made of linen, it might partly account for why the writer is inscribing in a deliberate, rounded print-like hand" (266). This statement implies a belief that the style of the writing has been affected by the surface of the medium, the linen rag paper, upon which it is written. However, linen rag paper is no more "linen" than this piece of paper (on which my essay is written) is "wood". Paper made of linen rags was, until the last part of the eighteenth century, the common material used for writing and book-printing, and it had no effect on handwriting styles.

Because of the process of paper-making from linen rags, I must urge considerable caution about the radiocarbon dating of the label offered by the Canadian Conservation Institute. In the seventeenth century, paper-making was very environmentally friendly because it used recycled materials (linen rags). The radiocarbon date-range which has been suggested seems very broad; from 1475 (before printing began in England) to 1640. Perhaps this broad date-range, a hundred and sixty-five years, results from the fact that it is not the paper *per se* that is being dated, but its raw material, the flax fibres from which the linen was made. That flax, after being woven into linen cloth, had a prior life as table-cloths, bed-sheets, shirts, altar-cloths, sails, and what have you, before those articles wore out and became rags, the raw material for paper. We have to remember (as Susan North showed in her paper at the conference) that linen cloth was not cheap and would be carefully looked after. How long, for example, would a "fair linen altar-cloth" (required in every parish church), last before being discarded as rags? Probably twenty-five to fifty years at least, depending on the care given to it. I can supply a modern example. Because I prefer disposable paper tissues, a small collection of linen handkerchiefs rests in my dresser drawer; originally they belonged to my grandfather, who died fifty-six years ago. (Perhaps I too will pass them to a grandson, in time.) Enquiring after similar experiences turned up one person who still uses, on special occasions, a linen tablecloth over 100 years old that belonged to her great-grandmother. Therefore it would be likely, I think, that any given piece of paper would have been made from rags of different ages, and that any piece of linen rag paper would Carbon-14 "date" as being earlier than its actual date of manufacture.

Once made, paper is a very durable commodity unless it is allowed to become damp. Hence even if we were to accept an early date for the paper of the label, this does not mean that we have pinpointed the date of writing. Quite aside from the question of intentional fraud, pieces of old paper are, and no doubt were, very easy to come by. We also have to remember that in the era of hand-made paper, it was relatively more expensive than it is now (when we buy it by the case for our supposedly "paperless" offices). So pages would be salvaged, for example from books about to be discarded. James Orchard Halliwell-Phillips, a nineteenth-century antiquarian, provides an example. He notoriously used to buy copies of old books (some of them damaged), scissor out illustrations, blank leaves and other materials that he wanted, and discard what was unusable. Therefore it is easy to construct a simple hypothesis to account for the early date of the paper and the later date of the handwriting – most experts are of the view that the handwriting comes from the latter part of the eighteenth century, and I agree with this view. As well, my hypothesis accounts for the inclusion on the label of details about Shakespeare's birth and death dates that were unknown before 1773. I suggest that some unknown person, acting upon an honest belief that the Sanders portrait is of Shakespeare, labelled it as such in, say, 1775 to 1790. The belief could have arisen from a tradition, handed down over generations through a family.

Pursuing this "honest belief" hypothesis brings me next to consider some opinions about the handwriting, particularly the view that it is "overwritten." Tarnya Cooper writes that the handwriting is from a later period and "it was clear that it partially obscured" another, presumably earlier, hand (232). Andrew Gurr concurs: he calls the label's "apparently overwritten" inscription "undoubtedly late," and suggests that some other message lies under it, which he terms "the scripted words of the original writer"

(304). I cannot see the evidence from which Gurr comes to this conclusion. In my own examination of the label, there do not appear to me to be different earlier letter-forms, or a different text, apparent beneath the few scraps of words and dates that are decipherable. There is over-writing of some of the letters, such as the "B" of "Born" or the "L" of "Likeness"; my guess as to how this happened is that the writer over-wrote letters at points where his/her pen (quill or steel) ran out of ink and needed a dip into the inkwell. Some of the other letters on the label are obscured by what appear to be ink-blots but are really discolorations that occur on various parts of the label, including areas where no writing occurs. The pattern of the discolorations, if you look closely, repeats the grain-pattern of the underlying oak panel – the wood's pattern has leached into the paper, perhaps because of damp.

Earlier, I mentioned Peter Beal's view that the style of the handwriting, "a deliberate, rounded print-like hand" resulted from writing on "linen". Elizabeth Leadham-Green also does not think, to quote her, "that whoever wrote the label was writing in his/her natural hand. The letters are carefully, too carefully, formed. It is the sort of writing that one finds in family Bibles: the very place one looks for examples of earlier handwriting" (265). In her view, somebody has copied an earlier style in an apparent attempt to deceive; however, the style of the letter-forms is that of the late eighteenth century, when most experts agree that the label was probably written. What earlier style has been copied? My own explanation for the care and formality of the lettering is again a simple one; I think the writer was conscious of writing an inscription for the eyes of others, including posterity, and has taken care to be as legible as possible. Nowadays a word processor, with a fancy font, would be the tool of choice when such legibility is desired, but then only a pen was available. In such circumstances one might print or write especially carefully. One would, I expect, expend the same degree of care in penmanship when making an entry in a family Bible, so Elizabeth Leadham-Green's suggestion of similarity in style finds a ready explanation.

The REED team, in "The Conundrum of the Label," has linked the apparent lack of fluency of the hand to the idea that the words are over-written. In my comments about this I will disagree with friends and colleagues at the REED project, demonstrating that we do not all follow a "party line," and that friends can disagree in a spirit of scholarly pursuit of the truth. REED's suggested dating of the handwriting is at least a hundred years earlier than the consensus of other experts. In REED's view, the label was first composed sometime after 1650 and had become worn and faded to the point of near illegibility in the late eighteenth century. At that time it was traced over, "in order to keep the family tradition alive" (277). They suggest, as well, that the problem of the inclusion of the birth date, knowledge of which was not common before 1773, is explained if one posits that the "23" in the birth date was added, by the over-writer, to the original "April 1564" found on the mid-seventeenth-century original label. I must put forward three questions about this analysis. First, how can we know that the original writer left a space for the supposed later over-writer to include the "23" between the "April" and the "1564" in Shakespeare's birth date? This seems too convenient to me. Second, how could a writer shortly after 1650 have known that Shakespeare was born in April of 1564, or indeed that he was born in 1564 at all? According to Samuel Schoenbaum, in his monumental *Shakespeare's Lives*, Thomas Fuller was the bard's first biographer. Fuller supplied neither birth date nor death date in his *Worthies of England* (1661). In 1691 the

next biographer, Gerard Langbaine, published the death date and printed the monumental inscription, but said only that Shakespeare “was born at Stratford upon Avon in Warwickshire.” It was Nicholas Rowe, in 1709, who first announced that Shakespeare was “born in April 1564;” the parish registers, Rowe states (and there is no reason to doubt his word) were surveyed for him in 1708 by the aged actor, Thomas Betterton, the first person to make this investigation. It was George Steevens, in 1773, who first published the baptism record (26 April 1564) from the Stratford parish register and inferred from it 23 April 1564 as Shakespeare’s birth date (Schoenbaum 94). Third, I wish to ask why, in 1780 or so, would somebody have felt it necessary to overwrite a faded, worn earlier label to keep a family tradition alive? Why not simply copy a nice new label, and replace the faded original? Therefore, if the label is the result of honest belief, I prefer the simplicity of my hypothesis, which fits all the facts: perhaps some unknown person, acting upon an honest belief that the Sanders portrait is of Shakespeare, labelled it as such in, say, 1780. The belief could have arisen from a tradition, handed down over generations through a family, or perhaps even recorded on an earlier version of a label, now lost.

The variance between the apparently early date of the paper and the later date of the handwriting has aroused suspicions of intentional fraud (it is perhaps mistaken to term this “forgery” because nothing has been miscopied here and there is no attempt to impersonate an earlier handwriting.). Perhaps somebody, who wished others to believe that this portrait is of Shakespeare, obtained a piece of old paper and crafted this label, unaware of the anachronisms it contains. The REED team object that “any forger worth his craft would have produced a more credible script” (267), and point out that forgers such as John Payne Collier ably recreated the secretary hand of Shakespeare’s period. But Collier, a leading Shakespearian who founded the Shakespeare Society, was not your typical forger! There were plenty of other, less able, candidates. The eighteenth century was the great age of literary forgery – among non-Shakespearian examples we could consider the Chatterton forgeries or the poems of Ossian, both of which recreated the distant past, or at least attempted to. The Society of Antiquaries, founded in 1707, responded to a desire to recuperate and interpret the artefacts of the past, and it fed (or fed upon) a passion for relics of the past. The passion for bits of Shakespeariana led one enthusiast, Samuel Ireland, to display in his home a piece of the mulberry tree from the garden of New Place, a “bugle purse” that William Shakespeare had given his wife Anne, and an oak chair described as Shakespeare’s courting chair. These had all been acquired in 1793 through the offices of John Jordan of Stratford, a carpenter and part-time confidence-man who made quite a career out of fleecing the tourists. (As a side-note, that old oak chair is still preserved, here in Ontario, at the archives of the Stratford Festival). Samuel’s passion to own some original Shakespearian manuscripts led his son, William Henry Ireland, to become the most industrious, and perhaps the least skilful, forger of such documents. I’m not, I emphasise, trying to suggest that William Henry Ireland wrote the label on the Sanders Portrait, but I wish only to glance briefly at his methods and to make a suggestion about what his success shows us. An industrious youth of eighteen, William Henry Ireland obtained ink of the required colour from a bookbinder, filched parchment from old deeds in the solicitor’s office where he worked, and obtained old paper from a bookseller in the Strand who, for five shillings, allowed Ireland to snip out all the flyleaves from the old quartos and folios for sale in the shop.

William Henry's "cover story" was that one Mr H., who did not wish to be known, kept a great quantity of old manuscripts at his country house and had allowed William Henry to sift through them. The eagerness with which the father devoured and displayed the productions of his son is evidence of the degree to which desire produces credulity. William Henry's first production, a deed signed by Shakespeare, has the bard misspelling the name of his home town ("Statford") and alluding, in a deed dated 1589, to the Globe Theatre! Equally egregious was a letter from Queen Elizabeth asking Shakespeare to attend her at "Hampstowne" to play before her and the Lord Leicester – a difficult feat, since Leicester died on 4 September 1588. My personal favourite is a love-letter from "Willy" addressed to Anna Hatherrewaye, enclosing a lock of Shakespeare's hair and a love-lyric touchingly addressed to her. Here is the first stanza:

Is there inne heavenne aught more rare  
 Thanne thou sweete Nymph of Avon fayre  
 Is there onne Earthe a Manne more trewe  
 Thanne Willy Shakspeare is toe you.

Wow! That makes "Shall I Die" or "A Funeral Elegy" (poems that are recent, and totally discredited, claimants for Shakespeare's authorship) look like Sonnet 18! The example displays Ireland's execrable attempt to approximate Elizabethan spelling, by doubling final consonants and adding lots of final "e"s. Only a facsimile could display his truly appalling attempt to imitate earlier handwriting. But William Henry Ireland was a success, for a time, until brought down by Edmond Malone. His success shows us how inexpert were the literary men of the day, who flocked to Samuel Ireland's house (admission was by ticket only) and pronounced the documents genuine. James Boswell went so far as to kiss them, reverently kneeling on his knees. After all, most people didn't know what secretary hand looked like (facsimiles had not been invented), and details of dates had faded with time. The Ireland documents were never made publicly available, on neutral ground, for examination; William Henry Ireland's exposure followed their publication by his father, at which point Malone was able to pounce upon their many anachronisms and errors. Ireland's career shows us, I think, that a fabricator in the late eighteenth century could have produced a label, and could have had it pass muster as coming from shortly after the lifetime of Shakespeare. Beyond that we cannot penetrate. But I must say that such falsification seems unlikely, if only because there is no record of an attempt to profit or gain fame from it, as the Irelands attempted to profit from William Henry's forgeries.

I want to close by contrasting Samuel Ireland's sly secretiveness with Lloyd Sullivan's open and honest efforts to investigate this intriguing painting, which led, among many other things, to its careful authentication and to the conference at which this paper was originally delivered. There can be no doubt that the painting is a genuine and unaltered production, and no reason to doubt the date in the upper right corner. Sullivan's own belief is that the label was written by John Sanders or one of his children, and was not part of any attempt at fakery because the painting was not sold but kept in the Sanders/Sullivan family for 400 years (269). It is impossible to authenticate this claim because no documentary evidence for the ownership of the painting exists from before 1825. For the reasons I have outlined, it is difficult to accept an early date for the writing on the label (but not, perhaps, for the paper on which it is written). I prefer my own simple hypothesis, that the label results from an honest belief, perhaps resulting

from a tradition, arising in the period between 1775 and 1790, that the Sanders Portrait is a portrait of William Shakespeare.

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### **Works Cited**

- Nolen, Stephanie. *Shakespeare's Face*. Toronto: Knopf, 1992. (Reference is made in this essay to various of the essays, by various contributors, in this volume).
- Schoenbaum, Samuel. *Shakespeare's Lives*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.