THE LIMNER COMPANY



NICHOLAS HILLIARD (c.1547 - 1619)

Portrait miniature of a Lady, possibly Elizabeth Grey (née Talbot), Countess of Kent (1582-1651), wearing a masque costume of a black and white dress embroidered with gold thread, ribato lace collar, large pearl earrings, pearl necklace and a crown set with pearls and diamonds

Circa: circa 1610

circa 1610

Watercolour, bodycolour, gold and silver paint on vellum laid on a playing card, likely to be a five of spades

Oval, 55 mm (2 ⅛ in) high

The backing card inscribed in ink; 'Elizabeth/ from WhiteKnights/ Collection/ Duke of Marlborough/ Marquis of Blandford/ reframed 1814 (?)/ frames…of/ By Hilliard…'

Gilt-metal frame

The legible remains of the inscription on the reverse of this miniature identify the sitter as 'Elizabeth'; an identity which, with further research, has led to the suggestion that the woman in this portrait could be Elizabeth Grey (*née* Talbot), Countess of Kent. She was not an ancestor of the Duke of Marlborough, however, members of the family, such as George Spencer, 4th Duke of Marlborough (1739-1817), were collectors, and this miniature may have been purchased long after it was painted by Hilliard. Whiteknights was a seat of the 4th Duke's son, the Marquis of Blandford and later the 5th Duke of Marlborough (1766-1840), who assembled there a large library, collection of art, and a renowned garden. In 1819, the estate and its contents were sold following the Duke's bankruptcy, and it is likely that this miniature left the collection at this point.

Aside from the nominal identification, comparisons with other portraits of the Countess of Kent support the suggestion that Hilliard has painted her here. The most well-known of these, painted by Paul van Somer (1577-1621) in 1619, is in Tate Britain's collection (T00398). Both women have very similar noses and facial shapes, and though they have different eye colours, it is common for eyes to be

painted with artistic licence in this period. Hilliard has also painted the sitter wearing a coronet-identifiable for its eight ‘balls’, and recognisable from Isaac Oliver’s (circa 1565-1617) portrait of Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford (1580-1627), in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art (1941.559). Therefore, it is almost certain that the sitter was a Countess.

Elizabeth was the granddaughter of Bess of Hardwick (1527-1608), and became a favourite of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) at a young age, and was appointed as a maid of honour to the Queen in 1600. A letter from Richard Brackenbury to Elizabeth’s father, Lord Talbot (1522-1616), discusses her visit to the Queen when she was around eight years old and compares her grandmother, who had also been a friend of the Queen:

‘Her Matie says (as trewe it ys) that she is very lycke my Lady her grandmother : She behaved her self with suche modestye as I pray God she may posses at 20 years old : My Lady Marques dyd tayk onlye cayre of her.[1]’ [sic]

She later became a favourite of Queen Anne of Denmark (1574-1619), and supported her in Samuel Daniel (1562,1619) and Inigo Jones’ (1573-1652) Thethys’ Festival in 1610, as the ‘Nymph of Medway’, while Anne played Thethys, Goddess of the Sea. It has been suggested that the jewels in Elizbeth’s coronet are lettered, with the letter ‘A’, Anne of Denmark, and this context would support the suggestion. Furthermore, many of Elizabeth’s features are similar to those of Anne (her hair, nose, and use of jewels as accessories), which would point to the sitter being one of her companions.

Nicholas Hilliard was employed as Limner to both Elizabeth I and James VI/I (1566-1625), and retained this title until his death in 1619. He was responsible for the production of numerous portraits of James and Anne in this period, as well as portraits of non-royal sitters, as is the case here. The apparent date of this miniature, 1610, makes this a rare addition to the *oeuvre* of Hillliard, who produced fewer portraits of non-royal sitters towards the end of his life, and even fewer in the traditional oval head-and-shoulders portraits with a plain blue background as he has done here.

Later in her life Elizabeth became a patron of cultural figures, including cooks, poets, and artists, including Samuel Butler (1612-1680) and possibly the miniaturist Samuel Cooper (1609-1672). A posthumous publication *A True Gentlewoman's Delight* (1653) highlights the fact that she was known for her cooking skills, and the same can be said about *A Choice Manual, or Rare Secrets in Physick and Chirurgery Collected and Practised by the Right Honourable the Countess of Kent, lately deceased*, published in the same year, about her medicinal recipes. Elizabeth’s ‘cure-all’ powder, the recipe of which was published in this latter work, was claimed to be one of the best available at the time, to be used against an assortment of diseases.

[1] Reproduced in E. Lodge, *Illustrations of British history, biography, and Manners…*, vol. 3, 1791, p.13.