A PORTRAIT BY HOLBEIN

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The portrait on the cover was first noticed by writers on Holbein when it was lent to the Royal Academy in 1907 by Major Charles Palmer of Dorney Court, with the title Portrait of a Lady. By the time it appeared again at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1909 Lionel Cust had identified the sitter by a replica, three times larger, belonging to Viscount Dillon. The subject was known as an ancestress of the Dillon family and listed as "possibly Margaret Wyatt, wife of Sir Anthony Lee."

No other portraits of Margaret Wyatt are known, and when we try to verify the lady's identity by resemblance to unquestioned Wyatt family portraits we are at first stopped short by the portrait of Margaret's father, Sir Henry Wyatt, painted by Holbein during his first stay in England. The old man's face, overlaid with fat, is similar to our portrait only in the reddish complexion. But Sir Henry's son, Sir Thomas Wyatt, was equally unlike him, and he had several features in common with the lady in our portrait. We have a description of Sir Thomas by John Lelands, a profile portrait attributed to Lucas Cornelisz., and the beautiful Holbein drawing of his full face done about 1537. He had the same set of brow, eyes, and cheek bones, the same long, straight nose and auburn hair. We cannot compare the mouth and chin, for his are obscured by the "thick forest of his flowing beard."

Margaret Wyatt's span of life fits well enough the requirements of our portrait. The sitter's age is inscribed on the background: ETATIS SVAE 34. The date of Margaret's birth is uncertain but we know that she was younger than her brother, who was born in 1503. Therefore our portrait could have been painted about 1539—a date which, according to Paul Ganz, agrees with its style and costume. On the whole it seems reasonable to follow Cust's identification of Lady Lee.

Holbein painted our portrait of Lady Lee during his last period, when he was busiest as court painter to Henry VIII. It could not be said that he flattered her, for he gave her a sharp, shrewish look. But he must have pleased her by his meticulous attention to the details of her modish costume. The French hood which almost covers her red hair is trimmed with a band of gold filigree and pearls; the folds of her brown damask sleeves are tied in with gold points. For jewelry she wears two rings, an enamel rose pinned at her neck, and a gold medallion hung on a ribbon.

The Wyatt family experienced the violent changes of fortune common to courtiers of that time. Henry Wyatt, the younger son of a Yorkshire squire, sided with Richmond against Richard III and was imprisoned two years in the Tower for it. He was released by Henry VII, who knighted him and made him Privy Councilor and Treasurer of the King's Chamber. Henry VIII continued the royal favors. As Wyatt was away at court for long periods, Lady Wyatt managed Allington Castle alone. One day, catching the Lord

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Abbot of Boxley at pranks in her house, she commanded him to be laid in stocks at the gatehouse. When complaint was made to the Council Table, Sir Henry admitted that his lady was master at Allington and that if he, or any other lord, had angered her in the same way, she would have done as much for him. Apparently it was from her mother that Lady Lee inherited her temper. Sir Thomas Wyatt had a more evenly fortunate career than his father. A brilliant wit and poet, he traveled all over Europe for the king. He suffered only a short period of disfavor because of his too warm friendship with Anne Boleyn. His son, on the other hand, was executed as a traitor for opposing a Spanish marriage for Queen Mary. History makes no mention of Margaret Wyatt, but a glance at the Lee family tree shows that she was not idle. Her first son was born in 1530 and after him came four brothers and four sisters, all of whom lived to grow up, no mean feat in those days.

Acc. no. 14.40.637; oil on wood; 16 1/4 x 12 7/8 inches. Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913. The painting is said to have been in the possession of the Palmer family from the second quarter of the seventeenth century until the early part of the nineteenth.