

Art Quarterly. The New Renaissance (August 2007), pp. 66-67.

About Shakespeare

Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel will surely be seen as one of the greatest Shakespeare scholars since Harold Bloom, whose biography “Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human” revolutionised for all time the academic image of this literary personality.

Her work has mainly centred on transdisciplinary research into the culture of the Shakespearean age, that of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. She was responsible for producing a lavish three-volume collection of pictures, *Shakespearean Illustrations*, containing over 3000 artistic works based on Shakespeare's plays, and ranging from the Renaissance to the present day.

Just a few weeks after its publication, her richly illustrated Shakespeare biography, *William Shakespeare – Seine Zeit, Sein Leben, Sein Werk* (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare 1564-1616), is already a major standard work on Shakespeare the man and his writings. Hammerschmidt-Hummel demonstrates how closely Shakespeare's literary production is interwoven with the historical events of his time. She illuminates the events of the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, drawing a wealth of interesting and convincing parallels between the action of the plays and contemporary political life, with its religious persecution, tyranny, and court sycophancy. The author also raises some questions that often remain unasked, such as that of the personal relationship between Shakespeare and his long-standing royal patron, Elizabeth I. Thus she examines critically the circumstances that led to the poet's behaviour after the Queen's death on 24 March 1603 when he penned not a single line in her honour. After all, Elizabeth I had helped Shakespeare to achieve great fame, and often protected him on the numerous occasions when this literary rebel went too far. It is well known that Elizabeth lies buried next to her half-sister Mary in Westminster Abbey. The Latin epitaph of the two monarchs translates as: “Partners both in throne and grave, here rest we two sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, in the hope of resurrection.” It is a remarkably dry inscription for the last resting place of a ruler who affected the fortunes of the entire Old World and who, not least, proved to be a great patron of the theatre. And yet, in spite of all this, we have not a syllable from her beloved Will: no ode to her, no drama presenting her life to posterity. Was there some discord between them to account for why Shakespeare failed, in the thirteen remaining years before his death in 1616, to compose a single line in homage to her? Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel does not set out to solve such weighty historical-psychological conundrums once and for all. What she aims to do is to stimulate the reader to immerse himself in the world view of the age; to draw closer not only to Shakespeare the man, but also to the Shakespearean universe. Such an attractively assembled pictorial documentation is a rare treat. The gratitude of millions of Shakespeare-devotees worldwide is assured.

There are some personalities who seem familiar to us on the basis of one or two portraits, just as if we knew them from photographs or newsreels, although they died several centuries before the development of these media. One such great figure is William Shakespeare, whose appearance we all think we can visualize precisely. Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel's painstaking research, published in her ground-breaking academic study *The True Face of William Shakespeare*, has now revealed to us the authentic features of the immortal bard. William Shakespeare, who was born on 23 April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon and died there on 23 April 1616 (at least according to the old Julian calendar in use in England at the time), still presents interested posterity with numerous enigmas. The field is so wide open that some authors have gone so far as to doubt the very existence of a real person called Shakespeare. As this pseudo-academic preoccupation has spiralled, the outlines of the real Shakespeare as an historical human being have become ever more blurred. Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel has pitted herself resolutely against this trend, publishing many research findings that provide proof of Shakespeare's existence. *The True Face of William Shakespeare* is an absolute milestone in Shakespeare research, and a must for all those with a scientific interest in the reconstruction of skulls and facial features.