Review Essay

A Question of Authenticity

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In reviewing Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel’s Die Verborgene Existenz des William Shakespeare (Religion and the Arts 7 [2003]: 173), I looked forward to reading the book which has now been translated as The True Face of William Shakespeare. This lavishly illustrated volume presents the case for the Shakespearean authenticity and importance of the plaster of Paris death mask in Darmstadt, thought to have been taken to Germany in 1775 by Count Franz Ludwig von Kesselstatt.\(^1\) The death mask displays

\(^1\) On the back of the mask there is inscribed the date “+A’Dm 1616.” For about one hundred and fifty years scholars have speculated when and how the mask could have come to Germany (cf. Thoms 227–228). The British anatomist, Professor Richard Owen (1804–1892) of the British Museum, who had the mask in safe-keeping at the BM for about a decade, examined it thoroughly and concluded that it must be authentic (cf. Schaffhausen 26–49, 41, quoted H-H 32–34). [Here and hereafter all parenthetical page references to H-H are to The True Face under review here, not to the other texts by Hammerschmidt-Hummel listed below in Works Cited.] Owen would have purchased it for the Museum, if it could have been proven that any member of the Kesselstatt family had been in London (cf. Elze 308–326, 313, quoted H-H 34). Owen advised Dr. Ernst Becker, secretary to
an enlarged and protuding left eye-lid (H-H 73), which Professor Hammerschmidt-Hummel sees as one of a number of developing medical symptoms in three other representations of Shakespeare: the Chandos portrait in the National Portrait Gallery in London (26 and 79), the Flower portrait as restored by Nancy Stocker in 1979 (29, 144, and 146 left), and, more controversially, the bust of Shakespeare known as the Davenant bust in the Garrick Club of London (31).

The first pillar of the author’s argument is the comparative forensic examination of the four contenders for authenticity—the death mask (1616), the painted Chandos portrait (conventionally dated 1600–1610), the painted Flower portrait (1609), and Davenant terra cotta bust (unknown date)—by Reinhardt Altmann and his associates of the Federal Criminal Police Office of Germany (BKA) in Wiesbaden (1995–1998). The Droeshout First Folio engraving (1623) and the funerary bust of Shakespeare in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon (most probably sculpted not later than a year after the poet’s death), both serving as the basis for these tests, were critically examined by the author against the background of their cultural historical context. They proved to be credible images of the poet made from likenesses created during his lifetime, or immediately after his death.

It should be noted that current thinking regards the death mask, pursuant to Marion Spielmann’s 1911 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article, as spurious; the Chandos portrait as possibly authentic, despite Spielmann’s disagreement; the Flower portrait as a nineteenth-century copy of the Droeshout engraving; the Droeshout as an approximate representation of Shakespeare, passively confirmed as a likeness by Ben Jonson, John Heminge, and Henry Condell several years after his death; and the Davenant bust as an idealized portrait by Roubiliac in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the forensic techniques used by Altmann might be expected to associate the Chandos portrait, the Droeshout engraving, and the Flower portrait for reasons given, but exclude the death mask and the Davenant bust.

Prince Albert and brother of the late Ludwig Becker (Ludwig had found the mask in Mainz in 1849, years after the late Count Kesselstatt’s art collection had been auctioned), to search for the “missing link,” i.e., “to inquire whether any Count Kesselstadt [sic] had ever stayed in England” (Schaaffhausen 42). In June 1995, Hammerschmidt-Hummel presented documentary evidence for the missing link. In a manuscript history of the Imperial Counts von Kesselstatt at Kesselstatt Castle near Trier (Germany) she discovered the relevant entry, indicating that Count Franz Ludwig von Kesselstatt (1753–1841), the first known owner of the mask, had himself traveled to England in 1775 (see H-H 117, fig. 098).