

German professor catches Shakespeare fever after reading Macbeth at school

Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel pursues her quarry with the endurance of a long-distance runner. This German professor of English has been able to clear up several mysteries surrounding Shakespeare's life.

Her interest was first sparked when she studied Shakespeare's Macbeth at school. England's greatest playwright was to become the life work of Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, a professor at Mainz University in Germany. For more than 10 years Hammerschmidt-Hummel has been researching Shakespeare's life, in the process disproving several theories of her colleagues that had long been regarded as established.

Her biography of Shakespeare reads «almost like a detective story.» It is little wonder that she uses the methods of a detective. Even the initially sceptical officers in Germany's federal crime investigation (BKA) agency have now caught Shakespeare fever. Using their assistance Hammerschmidt-Hummel has been able to prove genuine two portraits and the death mask that had previously been regarded as fakes, by means of picture comparison techniques used by the detectives. «Using the objective methods of the BKA's experts we were able to determine Shakespeare's true appearance,» Hammerschmidt-Hummel says. As a result of the interest her work has aroused, she scarcely has time for teaching in Mainz between her public lectures, exhibitions and research trips.

The astonishing revelations presented for the first time at a press conference in Darmstadt in 2006 drew an immediate response from England. The main British newspapers all wanted to know more about her book, «Die authentischen Gesichtszüge William Shakespeares» (The authentic features of William Shakespeare). A translation into English is due out in the autumn.

This was not Hammerschmidt-Hummel's first success. She began her study of English literature in Marburg in 1967 under the renowned Shakespeare expert Horst Oppel. Following his sudden death she took over as head of the Shakespeare picture archive in 1982.

This comprehensive collection of pictures, etchings and sculptures is held in Mainz, where the playwright's death mask was found in the middle of the 19th century. Hammerschmidt-Hummel discovered that the nobleman Franz Ludwig von Kesselstadt, later canon of Mainz cathedral, had returned in 1775 from a study trip to England with the mask, which is now kept in Darmstadt.

There was an even greater uproar in England in 2001 when Hammerschmidt-Hummel offered her explanation for the «seven lost years» of Shakespeare's life. This period, from 1585 to 1592, had, like so much of his life, presented a puzzle to Shakespeare researchers because nothing was known of his whereabouts. On the basis of recently-discovered text and picture material, Hammerschmidt-Hummel showed that Shakespeare, a devout Catholic by upbringing, had fled England for the continent of Europe during the persecution of Catholics and had studied at a Catholic college in Reims. Shortly before his death in 1616, Shakespeare bought a house in London that served as a secret hide-out for persecuted Catholic priests.

Was England's national poet a secret Catholic and a man of the underground resistance? «Many documents that attest to this have been lost for years, and earlier references were simply not taken seriously,» Hammerschmidt-Hummel says. She has long since become used to the controversy her work has generated.

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