

# Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy

Sibylle Baumbach

*“...PHYSIOGNOMY, n. The art of determining the character of another by the resemblances and differences between his face and our own, which is the standard of excellence”*

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# **Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy**

**Sibylle Baumbach**

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PHYSIOGNOMY, n. The art of determining the character of another by the resemblances and differences between his face and our own, which is the standard of excellence.

‘There is no art,’ says Shakespeare, foolish man,  
‘To read the mind’s construction in the face.’  
The physiognomists his portrait scan,  
And say: ‘How little wisdom here we trace!  
He knew his face disclosed his mind and heart,  
So, in his own defence, denied our art.’

Lavator Shunk

(Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, 1911)

# 1 Looking for Shakespeare's Face(s)

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‘Searching for Shakespeare’<sup>1</sup> has become a popular discipline as numerous recent publications on the life of the poet and dramatist confirm.<sup>2</sup> Thereby it is especially the mystery of ‘Shakespeare’s face’<sup>3</sup> which takes centre stage. The particular fascination elicited by Shakespeare’s countenance is based on a strong belief in physiognomy, by which it is understood that the human face indicates a person’s character as well as traces of the passions of the mind. Physiognomy, which reaches back into antiquity, was revived towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when numerous physiognomic manuals were published and the art of face-reading became popular again both as a tool for deciphering fellow-beings and as a device for self-fashioning. Taking into consideration the renaissance of physiognomic thought and theory in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the following study will examine physiognomic readings in Shakespeare’s oeuvre. Based on the physiognomic discourse of his time, a physiognomic inventory of his plays will be established before embarking on a close analysis of the ‘art of physiognomy’ (*The Rape of Lucrece* 1394f.) as it is performed in his plays. Thereby, the focus will be set on the construction, translation, and reception of ‘characters’, that is on the production of physiognomic data, its verbalisation or, respectively, visualisation onstage, as well as its reception by physiogno-

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1 Searching for Shakespeare was the title of an exhibition showing Shakespeare’s portraits in the National Portrait Gallery in 2006.

2 See, for instance, A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare: The Thinker* (New Haven et al.: Yale University Press, 2007); Bill Bryson, *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* (New York: Atlas Books / Harper Collins, 2007); Mark Anderson, *Shakespeare by Another Name* (New York: Gotham Books et al., 2005), Peter Ackroyd, *Shakespeare: The Biography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005); Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004); Michael Wood, *In Search of Shakespeare* (London: BBC, 2003).

3 Stephanie Nolen, *Shakespeare’s Face* (London et al.: Piatkus, 2003).

mic readers. The latter use their physiognomic competence not only to decipher their fellowmen but also to fashion their own faces and bodies, to frame their faces to all occasions, and to hide their emotions and passions behind a seemingly natural mask, which is their own face. Thus, in Shakespeare's work, faces are perceived as open books and cryptic documents, they are read, re-read, and misread and subject to manipulative forces. At the same time, the face remains the key medium for communication in Shakespeare's plays: it speaks even when words fail and precedes verbal utterances by its silent but very telling expression. The present study investigates Shakespeare's poetics of the face and his physiognomic scheme. This includes the analysis of the construction and reception of 'characters' both in the literal and metaphorical meaning of the term, as well as the tracing of the progression from characters on the page to characters on the face, which is a frequent topos in Shakespeare's plays.

Given that the limits and the potential of physiognomy are key motifs in his writings, it is almost ironic that Shakespeare's face should have become an object for abundant physiognomic (mis-) readings.<sup>1</sup> His plays and poems constantly tackle the question of the interrelation between seeming and being, between outer and inner man, or, more specifically, between man's physiognomy and his character from numerous different perspectives. Even though it is often suggested that 'there's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face', to quote Duncan in *Macbeth* (1.4.11f.),<sup>2</sup> the face eventually reveals itself as an eloquent and most telling medium for characterisation. Thereby anti-physiognomic axioms such as Duncan's emerge as instances of subversive affirmation as well as a dramatic strategy to sensitise readers and audiences to both the potentialities and the ambivalence of facial rhetoric. Quite frequently in Shakespeare, the art of face-reading is disputed only to be re-established. *Macbeth* is a case in point in that Duncan's remark sets the audience on the wrong track, belying facial eloquence, which especially in this play provides the key to the characters onstage (see Chapter 6.1).

1 Compare Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, *The True Face of Shakespeare* (London: Chaucer Press, 2006).

2 Unless indicated otherwise, quotations follow *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York/London: Norton, 1997).



Before starting our investigation of Shakespeare's physiognomic scheme, however, let us first reconsider the portrayals and readings of Shakespeare's manifold physiognomies, especially as some of these (first and foremost the Droeshout engraving) might hold the key to the way his plays should be read. Facing Shakespeare's monument in the Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-upon-Avon, the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, almost immediately embarks on a physiognomic-phrenologic<sup>1</sup> reading:

I know not what the phrenologists say to the bust. The forehead is but moderately developed, and retreats somewhat, the upper part of the skull rising pyramidally; the eyes are prominent almost beyond the penthouse of the brow; the upper lip is so long that it must have been almost a deformity, unless the sculptor artistically exaggerated its length, in consideration, that, on the pedestal, it must be foreshortened by being looked at from below. On the whole, Shakespeare must have had a singular rather than a prepossessing face; and it is wonderful how, with this bust before its eyes, the world has persisted in maintaining an erroneous notion of his appearance, allowing painters and sculptors to foist their idealized nonsense on its all, instead of the genuine man. For my part, the Shakespeare of my mind's eye is henceforth to be a personage of a ruddy English complexion, with a reasonably capacious brow, intelligent and quickly observant eyes, a nose curved slightly outward, a long, queer upper lip, with the mouth a little unclosed beneath it, and cheeks considerably developed in the lower part and beneath the chin. But when Shakespeare was himself (for nine tenths of the time, according to all appearances, he was but the burgher of Stratford), he doubtless shone through this dull mask and transfigured it into the face of an angel.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Phrenology is based on the belief that the form of the cranial bone reflects a person's character and that the development of certain areas of the brain can be felt in bumps and fissures of the skull. The term *phrenology*, however, was not coined until around 1800 when the German neuroanatomist Franz Joseph Gall introduced the study of the localisation of mental development in the form of the cranium. Therefore *phrenology*, in this study, will be categorised as being part of *physiognomy*.
  - 2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Recollection of a Gifted Woman', in George P. Lathrop ed., *The Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston et al.: Houghton, Mifflin, 1887) Vol. 7, 113–47.

Deeply impressed by Shakespeare's portrait, Hawthorne chose to clear his mental gallery of all those flattering pictures and portraits, which dominated his image of the dramatist up to that time. The first to go might have been the Chandos portrait, 'the favourite likeness of Shakespeare',<sup>1</sup> which shows a Mediterranean, or, as J. Hain Friswell claimed, 'a decidedly Jewish physiognomy'<sup>2</sup>—a swarthy full-bearded man with curly hair and a golden earring. The Flower and the Droeshout portraits would have been the next to be dismissed. Both of these portraits had a great impact on the ways in which Shakespeare was perceived over the centuries even though the Flower portrait turned out to be a complete fake, or more precisely, a coloured copy of the Droeshout engraving. The most prominent feature in all of these images of Shakespeare is his broad, lofty forehead that was to become one of his main characteristics. Not only does it indicate greatness of mind but it also strengthens a possible connection to the 'genio Socratem',<sup>3</sup> which is implied in the epitaph engraved below the bust in the Holy Trinity Church. There are no records indicating how phrenologists or physiognomists would have judged Shakespeare's face. However, it does not seem unlikely that the bard would have met a similar fate as Socrates when it came to physiognomic readings. It is told that Zopyros, for instance, a renowned physiognomist of the time, classified the sophist as *stupidum et bardum*, as dull and imbecile by the mere look at Socrates' face, being unaware of his identity.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 203.

2 Ibidem, *William Shakespeare: Records and Images* (London: Scolar Press, 1981) 175.

3 The Greek philosopher is also said to have had an exceptionally roomy forehead, which the physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater regards as a key indicator of an intelligent, strong-minded person. Referring to Socrates, Lavater writes, '[i]n these high and roomy arches, undoubtedly, the spirit dwells which will penetrate clouds of difficulties, and vanquish hosts of impediments.' (Cf. Johann C. Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. by Thomas Holcroft [London: J. Robinson, 1844] 4th ed., 177f.)

4 Compare Cicero, *De Fato* 10. The Zopyros episode is frequently referred to in Early Modern physiognomic treatises. See also Thomas Hill, *The Contemplation of Mankind* (London: Seres, 1571) fol. x–xi, and Richard Saunders, *Physiognomie and Chiromancie, Metoposcopia* (London: Brooke, 1653) 144.

Which of the well-known Shakespeare portraits does most justice to the dramatist's physiognomy remains an open question. While some critics make a case for the authenticity of the Chandos portrait,<sup>1</sup> there is evidence suggesting that it is Gheerart Jannssen's bust gracing the monument at Stratford which bears the greatest resemblance to Shakespeare. Not only was it erected shortly after Shakespeare's death but it was probably also commissioned by his family. The question remains, however, why Shakespeare's relatives would have approved of a likeness that shows the dramatist with a rather unflattering podgy face with a small nose, thin moustache, 'goggle eyes and gaping mouth'<sup>2</sup>. The man presiding over what is assumed to be Shakespeare's grave, who overlooks his beholders with a vacuous gaze, opposes the notion of poetic grandeur and intellectual refinement. With his mouth half-opened as if awaiting some brainwave to enter the mind and guide the hand across the yet empty parchment, the bust appears more like a persiflage on divine inspiration than a homage to an exceptionally gifted writer.

'Read if thou canst': against the background of these observations, the mocking tone of the appeal engraved beneath the bust can hardly be missed. Did we misread the features on this, to speak with Hawthorne, 'singular' face and misjudge their implication? Or are these words designed to urge us to disregard the bust and move on from the face to the page and to progress from the character Shakespeare to Shakespeare's characters? There can be no doubt that Shakespeare's writings are far more revealing than his countenance, provided that we know how to read them. It is precisely the capability of interpreting these tokens correctly, however, which is disputed in the derisive dare which confronts the beholder contemplating the bust. And yet, the contemptuous tone of the phrase 'read if thou canst' fits the scintillating wit which pervades Shakespeare's work. Hence, even though the bust and the epitaph might not display the physiognomy

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1 See Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, 'What did Shakespeare Look Like? Authentic Portraits and the Death Mask. Methods and Results of the Tests of Authenticity,' *Symbolism* 1 (2000) 41–79.

2 Clement M. Ingleby, *Shakespeare, the Man and the Book: Being a Collection of Occasional Papers on the Bard and his Writings* (London: J. Allen, 1877) Vol. 1, 79.

of a genius, they succeed in conveying Shakespeare's character.

Challenging the reading skills of its beholders, the monument not only distracts the view from its imperfections and denies its potential misapprehension of the man 'Shakespeare'. It urges the beholders to reconsider their interpretation of these hideous features which seem irreconcilable with their preconceived image of his face. Are we, like Hawthorne, willing to replace 'our' Shakespeare with a portrait that undermines our notion of a man of genius? Due to human curiosity, the search for Shakespeare's true face will in all probability never come to a close. This is all the more remarkable as Jannssen's bust continues to serve as a gentle pointer to Shakespeare's work rather than his physiognomy. In its respect, it is in line with the preface of the first Folio edition and Ben Jonson's poem, which asks the reader 'to look not at his picture but the book'<sup>1</sup> before allowing him to begin the collected works.

The picture Jonson refers to, and which he bids the reader to neglect in favour of Shakespeare's oeuvre, is the Droeshout engraving, which adorns the edition. In contrast to Jannssen's bust that seems to depict Shakespeare as a writer, which is indicated by the blank parchment he is clinging to, the Droeshout image portrays the actor Shakespeare. In addition to the characteristic enlarged, almost colossal forehead, the visage depicted in the Droeshout engraving appears somewhat detachable, almost mask-like, as if it could be swapped at any moment for another persona and one of those characters that the reader is about to encounter. Furthermore, it emphasises the fact that the plays printed in the edition are but scripts and blueprints that are meant to be performed, translated, and viewed in a theatre. It is onstage that the mask falls, and is recreated in a more natural but not necessarily less deceptive appearance as is suggested by Mercutio's remark 'a visor for a visor' (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.4.30). Ever since the static visor disappeared from the theatre,<sup>2</sup> the face is at the centre of a play. Considering the extensive mobility of facial features and their volatility in expression, the human countenance could be regarded as

1 Ben Jonson, 'To the Reader', *William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories & Tragedies* (London: Isaac Iaggard and Ed. Blount, 1623).

2 Compare Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

a stage within a stage, upon which temporary states of mind, moods, and emotions can be communicated without delay.

Especially in the Globe theatre, the spectators had a full view of the actors. They could peruse their faces and were highly susceptible to non-verbal communication, through which the actors succeeded in steering their audience's emotion. Following a performance of *Othello* in September 1610, a spectator recalls the gripping effect of Desdemona's silent play:

They had tragedies (too) which they acted with skill and decorum and in which some things, both speech and action, brought forth tears. – Moreover, that famous Desdemona killed before us by her husband, although she always acted her whole part supremely well, yet when she was killed she was even more moving, for when she fell back upon the bed she implored the pity of the spectators by her very face.<sup>1</sup>

Just as the spectators were able to read the actors' faces, the actors could peruse the countenances of their audience. Thus, they could anticipate the success of their performance and possibly adjust their play to the facial feedback they received. Considering that actors did not receive the full script of the play and probably used the script of their parts as a guideline, the play itself might have changed quite dramatically between the processes of rehearsal and enactment. Due to the lack of sufficient records that might provide substantial evidence of schemes of non-verbal communication in Early Modern theatre, however, we are obliged to return to the book and, complying with Jonson's appeal, consult the written script, which holds numerous clues pointing to a complex, multi-layered, and multi-faceted physiognomic sub- or paratext, whose implications for the reading of Shakespeare's work have not yet been explored.

Despite the body-boom and the 'corporeal turn',<sup>2</sup> which has pervaded literary research over the past decade and has become very

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1 Gamini Salgado, *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare: First Hand Accounts of Performances 1590–1890* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975) 30.

2 Keir Elam, "In What Chapter of His Bosom?": Reading Shakespeare's Bodies', in Terence Hawkes ed., *Alternative Shakespeares* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996) Vol. 2, 140–63, 143.

notable especially in Shakespeare studies,<sup>1</sup> the poetics of the human face have remained largely untouched. This is all the more astonishing since physiognomic thought and theories experienced a renaissance towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and thus can be assumed to have had a considerable impact on early modern drama. Considering the rise of portraiture and autobiographical writings,<sup>2</sup> the advent of anatomic theatre<sup>3</sup> and a growing awareness of individuality towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, physiognomy emerges as a key concept in the Early Modern era. In the increasing desire for self-fashioning, it becomes a central device for the art of simulation and dissimulation. While the former is concerned with the enactment of something that does not exist, the latter aims at hiding certain features whose existence are to be concealed. In both cases, physiognomy becomes an indispensable tool in that it provides the means to ‘frame [the] face to all occasions’ (*3 Henry VI* 3.2.185) and suggests ways to ‘look like the innocent flower / But be the serpent under’t’ (*Macbeth* 1.5.63f.).

Supporting the presentation of the self<sup>4</sup> as well as assisting the deciphering of fellow-beings, physiognomy can be seen as central to the early modern era in which concepts of individuality and the presentation of the self take centre stage to be continually questioned and contested. Even though the claim by the historian Jacob Burckhardt

1 See Maurizio Calbi, *Approximate Bodies: Gender and Power in Early Modern Drama and Anatomy* (London/New York: Routledge, 2005); Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002); Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001); Lynn Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

2 Compare Karl Enekel et al. ed., *Modelling the Individual: Biography and Portrait in the Renaissance* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998) as well as Nicholas Mann and Luke Syson ed., *The Image of the Individual: Portraits in the Renaissance* (London: British Museum Press, 1998).

3 Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995) esp. 129–40.

4 For concepts of the self and the notion of inwardness in early modern theatre and literature see esp. Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theatre in the English Renaissance* (Chicago et al.: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Anne Ferry, *The Inward Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago et al.: University of Chicago Press, 1983); for the notion of the self in Shakespeare see esp. John Lee, *Shakespeare’s Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford et al.: Clarendon Press, 2000).