

# *Stalking Shakespeare: A Memoir of Madness, Murder and My Search for the Poet Beneath the Paint*

Reviewed by Elisabeth Waugaman

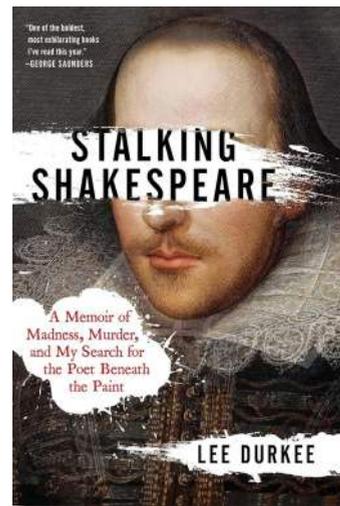
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*Stalking Shakespeare: A Memoir of Madness, Murder and My Search for the Poet Beneath the Paint.* By Lee Durkee. Scribners, 2023, 263 pages, (hardcover \$17.79 or Kindle \$14.99).

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Questioning Shakespeare's identity has recently taken on a refreshing new turn with authors adopting humor and a personal tone to lighten academic reading for non-academic readers. In *Stalking Shakespeare*, author Lee Durkee, a fiction writer, investigates Shakespeare's portraits, interviewing a variety of curators. The book forms a perfect mirror into the intellectual and artistic history of the Shakespeare authorship question.

Durkee succeeds in writing an academic book that appeals to the general public because the stories he tells are so personal. This personal approach forces open the rusty gates of academia to the general public—there is no impenetrable academic curtain of unexplained, esoteric code words, just personal experience. Bypassing academic theories upholding the status quo, the fantasies of scholars who seek to make sense of the nonsensical, the public can ponder what we know and decide what seems reasonable and what doesn't. How is it that a man with no known education, no travel abroad—in fact, a man for whom no words of praise are written at his death despite his reputation as “the soul of the age”—how such a candidate wrote the greatest works of the English language replete with knowledge of English, French, Latin, Greek



and Anglo-Saxon as well as a knowledge of the law, international political intrigues, French courtiers, astrology, astronomy, and pharmacology, defies the imagination as well as common sense.

The unwillingness of academics to question the accuracy of their assumptions is not unique to the Shakespeare authorship question. The work of Gregor Mendel, an Augustinian monk, the father of genetics, was criticized and basically ignored until after his death. Francis Peyton Reus' work on the transmission of cancer by a virus was ignored for years because he was an MD, not a physiologist. Geologists denied Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift until after his death. Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar's theory on Black Holes was so denigrated he was forced to leave England. Crick and Watson were ordered to stop their research on DNA. The implications of repressive groupthink are painfully evident in hindsight (Waugaman). Unfortunately, the same is true for Shakespeare studies.

Durkee has much to offer Oxfordian scholars seeking a wider, more open-minded readership. First, he makes himself a sympathetic character: he reveals he is an imperfect human being—a divorced, depressed father living in a place he hates for the sake of his son. He also depicts himself as an alcoholic writer in the august, Southern, Faulknerian tradition. He adds an addiction to Adderall. The alcohol, the Adderall, the link to Faulkner, all serve as the Fool's motley cap of yore: only the fool can tell the truth because he is safe from the king's (i.e., the establishment's) rage: he is, after all, only a fool with no assets. Durkee spells out this freedom when he describes himself as “a dilettante,” an outsider looking in. Because he is an outsider looking in, he is not blinded by the system. He is free to ask questions—“with no tenure at risk” as he points out (Durkee 39). He begins his quest with no authorship candidate in mind.

Durkee notes that he has mastered software capable of examining facial anomalies and by using multiple scientific methods for examining portraits: spectral technology, infrared reflectography, x-ray examination, dendrochronology (determining the age of a painting on wood by determining the age of the wood), pigment analysis, raking light, and ultraviolet examination over many, many years—“just as museums were beginning to put their collections on line,” which dates back to the 1990s (Povroznik 3). Durkee has a collection of more than 40 folders, with folders within folders. After detailing both

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the psychological and the scientific dimensions of his quest, he concludes by linking multiple interpretations: “In the end, it [the search for a portrait of the real Shakespeare] changed the way I look at history, art, politics, and myself. It certainly changed the way I look at William Shakespeare” (Durkee 5). Durkee artfully captures the reader’s curiosity with an existential question. What did he discover that changed how he sees, not just Shakespeare, but himself and the world? Thus, Durkee uses allegory—an Elizabethan trope—to snare 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers.

Durkee presents a parade of Shakespeare portraits—some that may be Shakespeare that are not identified as such, others that are identified as such that are not, and still others that are not, but have been vainly altered to morph them into a portrait of Shakespeare. In the world of Shakespeare portraits, things get messy very fast as portraits are “restored.” What becomes crystal clear is that once a painting exhibits potential for becoming “a Shakespeare portrait,” strange things begin to happen. As these paintings are restored, there are many alternations that may include the background, the clothing, the hairline, any or all of which are “restored”—i.e., altered. Portraits owned by private individuals, the Royal Shakespeare Company, or even the Folger Shakespeare Library have all undergone “restorations” that significantly altered the original portrait or failed to reveal alterations to the original portrait. As the reader follows Durkee into this restoration morass, a sense of intellectual nausea rapidly ensues. “How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable, Seem to me all the uses of this world! Fie on’t! ah fie! ’tis an unweeded garden, That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature Possess it merely” (*Hamlet*, 1.2.133–37). Shakespeare “portraits” are very profitable.

For the average reader, it will come as a shock that two of the world’s most idealized Shakespeare organizations, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Folger Shakespeare Library, have “portraits of Shakespeare” whose histories are problematic. The RSC and the Folger have both been accused of failing to fulfill their caretaker mandate for their “Shakespeare portraits.” The Royal Shakespeare Company has “the Flower original,” long thought to be either the portrait, or a copy of the portrait used for the Droeshout engraving. The RSC had the portrait repaired and repainted—“restored”—in such a manner that the respected German scholar Hildegard Hammerschmidt-Hummel, who had studied the portrait before it was “restored,” declared that it was not a restoration but a forgery. Her accusation was either belittled or ignored, a common academic practice for dealing with inconvenient truths.

The Folger has the largest collection of Shakespeare portraits in the world. Durkee’s greatest frustration is the repeated failure to examine supposed Shakespeare portraits based on science—especially considering the incredible advances that have been made in the field since the 1940s. A Folger trustee statement forbids the x-ray of Shakespeare portraits “unless there is a public

out-cry” (33). Durkee then proceeds to reveal the clash between the Oxfordians and the Folger over the Ashbourne portrait in the 1940s. He tells just enough of this decades-long story to avoid asphyxiating the reader. Durkee wonders why the Folger continues to exhibit the Ashbourne painting after “identifying” it as a mayor of London. At the end of the book, Durkee enters the Folger and looks at the Ashbourne. I will not reveal what he sees, but it is chilling and a mirror of the history he has so thoroughly studied. This seems to be the perfect time for “for a public outcry” for a detailed analysis of the Ashbourne with all the new technology now available. The Oxfordian community needs to do this now while Durkee’s and Elizabeth Winkler’s books are stirring up interest in the Shakespeare authorship question.

By now, anyone familiar with the evolution of Shakespeare “biographies” over the centuries sees the history of Shakespeare biographies and Shakespeare “portraits” sadly mirroring each other. Whereas Shakespeare biographies keep adding more “could have’s,” “might have’s,” “probably’s,” and “certainly’s,” until we literally attain in pages the equivalence of Mark Twain’s infamous 600 barrels of plaster to cover nine bones, portraits thought possibly to be Shakespeare suffer the same assault—with removal of anything that is not “Shakespeare.” Alterations include scraping and repainting, the alteration of clothing to fit the fashion, the removal of hair and anything else that might identify a portrait as not Shakespeare. In one case, Durkee observes the painter’s signature moved around the portrait with each restoration. In short, nothing is off limits as far as “restoration” goes, just as nothing is off limits as far as imagining a Shakespeare biography. Durkee makes it quite clear that anybody who questions a portrait’s restoration, or even worse, anybody who questions an iconic Shakespeare portrait, is subject to ridicule. Ridicule and *ad hominem* attacks have been the *modus operandi* of Stratfordians for more than a century, not only in academia but also in the world of portraiture: kill the messenger.

With an unknown biography, authors can enrich it with a plethora of conditionals and subjunctives, but with a painting, changes leave scars that are now discernible with modern technology and more so with every passing year. The history of the defacement of “Shakespeare’s portraits” is concrete evidence that they have been manipulated: there are no conditionals or subjunctives that can hide the scars. Unlike a biography for which there is no evidence and for which the argument is “We don’t know, so you can’t prove it’s not true,” or “He was a genius so anything is possible,” with a portrait you can now no longer get away with “restoration” that includes changes to the portrait. If changes are made, they are visible via technology. As Durkee reveals, the history of Shakespeare’s portraits is one of mistaken identity at best and knowing falsification of identity at worst, with the latter being frequently utilized because a portrait becomes invaluable once it is possibly an authentic painting of the Bard.

Durkee leaves us feeling like we just fell into the cesspool one time too many. Like Diogenes, we are left to wonder if an honest man can be found. Well, yes he can be—Durkee is an honest man, but he pays a terrible price. He makes it very clear what it's like to keep banging on a locked door to the castle keep. Understanding what he is up against, Durkee chooses the same path as Elizabeth Winkler does in *Shakespeare Was a Woman and Other Heresies*: he takes his discoveries to the general public with the hope that, eventually, sheer numbers will make a difference. When the establishment is corrupt, the only way to win the struggle is to take it to the people.

In 2023, Nathan Heller ignited a firestorm with his article, “The End of the English Major” in *The New Yorker* (Feb. 27, 2023). Trying to cast the blame for the death of English studies on a lack of government spending, the new age of computers, etc., English professors have failed to consider that layers of literary theory and esoteric vocabulary have fossilized the study of English literature, taking the life out of it. If we are going to save the study of English literature, we need to make it relevant to our everyday lives once again: the theory du jour is not going to save it. We need to bring back psychology and the life of the author to understand the literary work on a human level. With that understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, literature prepares us for the real world and how to deal with it. For Shakespeare studies to regain their viability, censorship of the authorship question must stop so that students can ponder what these great works of literature mean without the shackles of what Shaksper of Stratford could or could not have known.

Durkee's book leaves us with a challenge. It is time for “a public hue and cry” (which is what the Folger requires) for a new examination of the Ashbourne portrait with all the new technology available since it was last studied in the 1940s. We don't want it to meet the same fate as “the Flower Portrait.” Hopefully, it's not already too late.

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