8.4: What Was Shakespeare?

For theatre practitioners, the ideal Shakespeare encountered in the dynamic, heightened performance in some of today's theatres can be at odds with the educational or academic Shakespeares whose treatment can be comparatively static. Our first engagement with Shakespeare is likely to be reading the play as a literary object rather than a text for performance. For some potential audiences, this notion of Shakespeare as a bookish enterprise—a static, printed thing rather than an enacted, embodied thing—can be intimidating and off-putting. At the same time, some readers who like Shakespeare as something to be read and closely studied might find the theatrical Shakespeare too loud, too garish, or, as with many film adaptations we see today, not as good as the book.

Our responses to Shakespeare can often fall along cultural lines. Shakespeare's identity, his style, the cultural changes that have passed since his career in London theatre, and the role he plays and has played in the culture each allow for different responses based on who we are and what role we occupy in the culture. In some sense, this means that Shakespeare, no matter how ideal, must always answer for the agendas and traditions that have appropriated the playwright and his work over time. If Shakespeare can be identified as a heady poet, a bawdy writer, a male, a symbol of colonial power, an English speaker, a white person, a Catholic or Protestant, a member of the middle class, or any other thing that Shakespeare was in his own day or has become since, our responses will be vastly different depending on who we are. These responses enable our exchange with Shakespeare and ultimately put us into conversation with and about Shakespeare's work. Common critical responses—lenses for looking at Shakespeare in close study—include feminist criticism, performance criticism, and consideration of the historical contexts that influenced Shakespeare's work.

The presence of the many traditions, responses, and understandings of seeing, reading, studying, and performing Shakespeare—and it can be argued easily that there are more to consider—signal how we would think of him in the twentieth century and how we continue to consider the playwright-poet and his work today. Each Shakespearean tradition—theatrical, literary, educational, cultural—is a way of appropriating Shakespeare and aligning the ideals of that tradition with perceived ideals of Shakespeare. For the scholar of English, Shakespeare can be the master poet or
the timeless, even universal, artist. For the schoolteacher, Shakespeare can be the “safe,” “proper,” or “authorized” subject of study. For those in society, literacy in Shakespearean plays and poems can serve as a badge of cultural achievement, a ticket to sophistication. In the theatre, Shakespeare can be an ideal mode of performance—a heightened way of approaching the theatre craft that carries with it a sense of seriousness, authenticity, elastieality, or heightened expression.