



Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife That Turned a Provincial Playwright into the Bard

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Becoming Shakespeare begins where most Shakespeare stories end—with his death in 1616—and relates the fascinating story of his unlikely transformation from provincial playwright to universal Bard. Unlike later literary giants, Shakespeare created no stir when he died. Though he'd once had a string of hit plays, he had been retired in the country for six years, and only his family, friends, and business partners seemed to care that he was gone. Within a few years he was nearly forgotten. And when London's theaters were shut down in 1642, he seemed destined for oblivion.

With the Restoration in 1660, though, the theaters were open once again, and Shakespeare began his long ascent: No longer merely one playwright among many, he became the transcendent genius at the heart of English culture. Fifty years after the Restoration scholars began taking him seriously. Fifty years after that he was considered England's greatest genius. And by 1800 he was practically divine.

Jack Lynch vividly chronicles Shakespeare's afterlife—from the revival of his plays to the decades when his work was co-opted and "improved" by politicians and other playwrights, and culminating with the "Bardolatry" of the Stratford celebration of Shakespeare's three-hundredth birthday in 1864. *Becoming Shakespeare* is not only essential reading for anyone intrigued by Shakespeare, but it also offers a consideration of the vagaries of fame.

Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife That Turned a Provincial Playwright into the Bard Details

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Brian says

“Becoming Shakespeare” is not as good as other books I have read concerning things Shakespeare, but it is the only one I have read on how his work and reputation survived and grew despite the Puritan shutdown of the theatres in the 1640s, which killed off the memory of many of his contemporaries. I give this text kudos for simply being unique in that respect.

The author, Jack Lynch, writes in a colloquial style aimed at connecting with the general reader and I appreciated that approach. He also does not arrange the book chronologically (examining how Shakespeare’s reputation grew over the last four centuries) but rather he examines the phenomenon of Shakespeare’s extraordinary ascent through topic. The text looks at how Shakespeare became the entity he is today by exploring these eight areas: reviving, performing, studying, improving, co-opting, domesticating, forging, and worshipping. Although some of these chapters are more valuable to proving Lynch’s thesis than others, none of them seem out of place in this book. Especially engaging is the chapter titled “Forging Shakespeare”. Another strength of this book is how Mr. Lynch keeps reminding his reader that Shakespeare was not one of us. He was a product of his time, and would not recognize our world. His determination to keep Shakespeare in his own time, and not co-opt him for a modern agenda is something many writers do not do.

The Epilogue of “Becoming Shakespeare” (pages 273-280) is an interesting animal. The first 4.5 pages are just awful. They include a list of languages Shakespeare has been translated into. Seriously? However, the last 3 pages contain some of the best writing in the text, and puts succinctly into words how Shakespeare changed the standards by which we judge greatness. It is a thrilling conclusion.

Eshusdaughter says

This book follows the rise of Shakespeare's popularity in the centuries following the Bard's death. Lynch points out authors, playwrights and political figures who were instrumental in ensuring that Shakespeare would become one of the best known writers of all time.

The research and history presented in the book are interesting and certainly give a deeper understanding of Shakespeare and his popularity through the centuries. The book is a bit dry in places and could have been edited down a bit, but overall it's well written, researched and presented. Definitely worth a read for anyone curious about how Shakespeare became The Bard.

David P says

If you last saw or read a Shakespeare play because it was a required study at high school or college, maybe this is not your book. But for a playgoer, a lover of literature or of history, or for anyone who appreciates the Bard, here is a rare treat. This book traces the rise of Shakespeare's reputation after his death, from a relatively minor figure in Elizabethan society to a cultural icon admired across the world, while also telling about many of the persons who had a hand in the process.

At the time of his death, Shakespeare was viewed as not particularly important. Certainly, he was the most successful playwright in a particularly vibrant era of English drama. But theatre was just public entertainment, not even regarded as high-class. No play in Shakespeare's own hand survives, and though various "Quarto" editions of his plays appeared during his lifetime (differing in many details), they seem to have been assembled from notes given to actors. Anyway, plays in those days were meant to be watched, not read, by a public which was largely illiterate.

We know that Shakespeare retired to the "New Place" in Stratford-upon-Avon and that he died there on April 23, 1616. He was buried in a local church, and his epitaph famously ends in "cursed be he who moves my bones." We also have his will, leaving his wife Anne his "second best bed." But of his death and funeral nothing is known, perhaps because chroniclers of the time did not think he was important enough. The house was demolished nearly 200 years after his birth, its owner trying to save on taxes and annoyed by the constant stream of visitors coming to view it (that owner also chopped down the mulberry tree Shakespeare had planted nearby). At the time of his death Shakespeare's plays were scattered, and only 7 years later did two of his acting company, Heminges and Condell, collect them and publish a large "Folio" version to serve (more or less) as an official record.

A second Folio appeared 9 years later, but performances of the plays themselves became fewer and fewer, and ended altogether when the Puritans gained power in 1642 and banned stage performances as vulgar and promoting immorality. Acting companies were disbanded and no new actors were trained until the restoration of monarchy, when in 1660 Charles II reversed the ban and two years later awarded royal charters to two competing companies.

With the restoration, theater thrived again, and Shakespeare's pre-eminence was gradually recognized. Actors often remained baffled by his obscure wording, leaving it to playwrights to guess the proper replacement. Some questions remain to this day--but such is also the case with parts of the bible, another significant document based on fragmented sources. The most scholarly editing was that of Samuel Johnson, whose eight volumes appeared in 1765, with ample footnotes discussing conflicting interpretations.

In the 1700s, the plays and actors who performed in them--David Garrick for instance--reaped public acclaim, but not everything Shakespeare wrote was equally appreciated, and "corrected" versions abounded. One particular target was "King Lear," a downer of a story with a particularly tragic ending: for a long time the public preferred a rewritten version with a happy ending. Other plays attributed Shakespeare were forgeries. His style also aroused controversy, abounding in subplots at a time when accepted doctrine, especially in France, favored a single central plot served by all parts of the play. However since England was often at odds with France (if not at war), viewers there argued subplots in a play were actually a virtue, a view still held.

And then there were the vulgar scenes and raunchy language. Originally Shakespeare's plays were entertainment for the masses, and audiences loved salty language--one reason for the dim view of theatre held by Puritans. More genteel performances later discreetly omitted the sexy innuendos, and even I remember my English teacher, Miss Engel, skipping the porter scene in "Macbeth," arguing it was probably added later, that Shakespeare could never have written it. Thomas Bowdler and his sister Henrietta came up in the early 1800s with a cleaned up version "in which nothing is added to the original text but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family." Their version is now of interest to scholars only, but they enriched the English language by a new word--to "bowdlerize" now means to alter a text by removing its racy passages.

By then English culture had changed tremendously and in particular, literacy became widespread. More

people now read Shakespeare's plays more than watch them performed. Reading is a slower but more thorough process, and through it the genius of Shakespeare became more widely appreciated, as were his poems. For such readers Charles Lamb in 1806 published "Tales from Shakespeare, Designed for the Use of Young Persons." It was mostly the work of his sister Mary, but she could not be mentioned, because in a fit of madness in 1796 she stabbed her mother to death. She was judged insane and placed in her brother's custody.

Such are just a few of the twists and turns in the posthumous elevation of Shakespeare. Read this book to get the fuller account.

Basma Aal says

Great read!

Martin says

One of my favorite books on Shakespeare. Lots of facts, very little conjecture. An interesting afterword is alone worth the price of admission. (Apropos of nothing, I'm still quite certain that Shakespeare's life included some time in the army. The minutiae in Henry V I think shows a firsthand knowledge of battle, and day to day life in a military campaign.

Nathan Albright says

This book is an interesting piece of history, in that it presupposes the life and writing career of Shakespeare [1] and looks at the afterlife of his career showing how he went from a popular playwright among many to his place at the top of the writers of his age or any age. As the author admits, this is by no means an exhaustive book. The book includes no chapters on illustrating Shakespeare, setting his plays into operas, or the burgeoning industry of snobs who posit other writers besides William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon as the author of his plays. Even without these additional chapters, which would have been quite worthwhile to read, this is a substantial volume that deals thoughtfully with the question of literary immortality and what it means. This is a subject that many people have at least some interest in--even among those who do not harbor vain hopes that their own writings will be remembered fondly, and Shakespeare's life makes a good case study for how relatively obscure people find literary immortality, as was the case for Jane Austen as well.

The contents of this book are organized in both chronological and topical fashion, extending from Shakespeare's death to the 18th and 19th centuries, when Shakespeare's reputation as a "classic" playwright was secure. The first part looks at the period after his death when his career was revived through the publishing of the First Folio and the first rush of interest in Shakespeare as a writer. After this came the period when performances of Shakespeare's plays became more popular in the Restoration when the political context made his plays the best of what was relatively current after a long period when the theaters had been repressed. The author turns his attention to studying Shakespeare and the textual criticism that his work underwent and still undergoes today. After this the author looks at the matter of improving Shakespeare for his various defects, which led to a great many versions of Shakespeare that remained popular for centuries.

The author gives a very thoughtful look at the way that political regimes have long co-opted Shakespeare as an authority to support their own worldviews and agendas. A chapter on the bowdlerization and domestication of Shakespeare for women and children follows, full of intrigue in its own ways, before the author turns his attention to the careers of those who sought to forge Shakespeare writings for a variety of motives. By the time the author has finished talking about the Shakespeare pilgrimages that mark the worship of Shakespeare as an original (if not the original) genius, the author has written a very excellent book of nearly 300 pages of material, and one that features a wide variety of material for further reading for those who are interested.

One thing that separates this book from many like it is that the author neatly sidesteps the contentious issues of Shakespeare's biography, which has very little information and a great deal of supposal and speculation filling the place of the sort of hard textual and data-driven information that we would prefer to have and focuses on Shakespeare's afterlife, for which there is a rich and diverse textual base. Presuppositional apologetics is not something I am unfamiliar with when it comes to biblical studies, but this book is unusual in taking the same approach when it comes to textual studies, and in doing it well. If one wants to make an evidence-based case, and this author certainly does, sometimes we must go where the evidence lies.

Sometimes the evidence leads us away from the shadowy depths where people engage in conflict and towards the place where we cease to argue over a mysterious past and examine our ourselves and what we demand from literature and how we judge it. By the standards of Shakespeare's time, he was a B+/A- kind of writer, and yet he is immortal today, a reminder of a dramatic shift in standards for theater that he was influential in creating, and at least something giving a measure of hope for writers today who ponder the circumstances of what endures beyond an author's own era.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2012...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

Gregg says

I didn't know Mary Lamb was a convicted murderer when she wrote *Tales from Shakespeare* with her brother. I didn't know about the wars between the actors and the hundred-year lapse of Shakespeare performance after Charles I's beheading. I knew quite a bit about Shakespeare being politicized (see Henry V Olivier's version versus Branagh's version), but I didn't know how it was politicized in his own time. I knew nothing about all the fake folios engineered in the eighteenth centuries. A lot here I didn't know about. But now I do. So go read it. And so will you.

Riku Sayuj says

Shakespeare: The Invention of Genius

Shakespeare was not always the unquestionable genius that he has been for the past few centuries. It would surprise most literature students to be told that few people thought highly of Shakespeare back in the 17th C, based on what evidence we have (though we can conjecture that he always had good entertainment value). He might have been the [insert objectionable writer/director] of his age.

Of course, to most literature students that bit of information would be more of a condemnation on the entire time period than any reflection upon Shakespeare.

Despite this obvious dismissal of the idea, wouldn't it be interesting to consider this - if he was not so appreciated back then, how did it come to be that such a Shakespeare eventually became the Shakespeare of today.

His reputation, by some weird alchemy, kept growing throughout the century - though even towards the end of it, he was a crowd favorite but nowhere close to a critics favorite, his reputation lagging behind the likes of Ben Jonson and John Fletcher.

Much later, Shakespeare's curious afterlife gradually converted him into a genius. How? We cannot be sure and to me this book fails to explain it in any meaningful way, because it leaves out the critical phase of Shakespeare being accepted as Great - mainly because there are no clear records that illustrate this. Probably it was too dispersed a process, greatness accreting over decades or centuries.

My conjecture? It was born out of sustained popularity.

There are these popular works that come along sometimes the critics don't really understand - that they feel are just flashes in the pan and explain as mere fickleness of the audience. But once those works remain favorites for 50 odd years the critics have to grudgingly accept them as classics, "Great" becomes an acceptable term to utter in the same breath. And if they refuse to die down in popularity well past a century or so, the term genius has to be dragged out even more grudgingly, but with reservations. Once the genius stays current and happening much longer the reservations disappear - because the rules have to be rewritten to account for this phenomenon, and the work eventually becomes a standard for judging other genius-aspirants.

Shakespearean criticism shows some of the hallmarks of this process:

In the beginning he was considered as just a popular author, but as time wove the cloak of genius around him, the critics were still struggling to "tidy up" Shakespeare because he flew in the face of what they knew about drama. For two centuries thousands of actors, editors, auditors struggled with his unconventional methods and tried to clean them up into "proper" theater, leaving us many versions that feel throughly wrongheaded to us.

His faults were many, and must have seemed like in obvious need of improvement to the editors of the time: Poorly constructed plots, with no respect for the three unities of time, place and action, as laid down by Aristotle. Too many lame puns. No real sense of poetic justice. A poorly adjusted notion of decorum (wink, wink). And on top of everything else the stamp of being poorly educated (by most accounts) to add to the

potential stereotyping that accompanied these faults.

However, the audience reveled in what we today recognize as the true genius of Shakespeare - of being able to go beyond all these rules - and letting his audience look into the depths of the human soul through his amazing characters and plots, somehow weaving a language and imagery that appealed to all levels of society from the royals to the commons, scholarly or unlettered (and secretly perhaps even the critics), making him a perennial favorite everywhere.

For the first two centuries or so of his afterlife the critics struggled with the basics - of Shakespeare ignoring Aristotle's unities, etc. He might be a genius, but he was clearly not perfect - because perfection was defined that way - of abiding by the rules of perfection.

- Back then it was high praise to say that a writer followed classical precedents and rules, and an insult to say he deviated in anyway.

- Eventually it became an insult to say that a writer was bound by rules, and high praise to say he was a natural prodigy to whom rules did not apply.

Thus, somewhere along the way, the concept of a "Natural genius" first become a possibility and then something to be celebrated.

Shakespeare was merely very good by the standards of his own age. He became great only later. . This is not to bring down Shakespeare. This is to add to his legend - he forced us to redefine what we meant by greatness, by Genius!

Eventually, whatever Shakespeare did poorly were dismissed as unimportant, and the things he did well has come to set the standards for artistic excellence. He was not great because of what he did, whatever he did became great because of him - The rules for literary excellence had changed. And the poor critics wrestling with the inadequacies of Shakespeare pitted against his obvious genius perhaps accounted for a good bit of that change.

Something happened during Shakespeare's afterlife, something that changed the way the world thought about Genius. He was there at the dawning of the modern romantic idea of "Genius" and he probably helped define a fair share of it. Truly, the biggest testimony to Shakespeare's greatness is maybe that he changed what it meant to be great.

Austin Murphy says

Even as a Shakespeare lover, I was surprised by how interesting I found this book. History has never been my biggest passion, but the way Jack Lynch writes is very engaging, clear, and filled with interesting tidbits. I find myself slipping his stories into my conversations - did you know that musical theater was invented as a way to get around the fact that only two theaters were allowed to show "plays" after the Restoration? did you know that a forged Shakespeare play actually made it to a London stage, only to be ridiculed by an unbelieving audience? I wonder if modern audiences would be able to tell a real Shakespeare from a fake...

Anyway, this is a good read, and I'm actually interested in reading more from this same author. Well done, Mr. Lynch - you've made a non-fiction reader out of me.

Bill Hammack says

I had heard the end of an interview with the author and was intrigued by how he said that Shakespeare wasn't great, but simply defined what it meant to be great. I read the book, carefully listening to the whole argument: I conclude the author to be dead on. Here's the argument in a nutshell (p. 171) "By 1800 Shakespeare was secure in his position at the head of the English literary pantheon. To admit to disliking him was to admit to having no taste. What were once seen as 'flaws' now came to be tolerated, even celebrated. Yes, he violated the dramatic unities -- but mindless adherence to the rules was beneath the great English genius. Yes, he got many historical and geographic details wrong -- but only pedants cared about such things. Yes, his poetic meter was sometimes irregular -- but the Bard was too brilliant to count syllables on his fingers. His sprawling plots, his anachronisms, his puns -- all these things became signs not of his weakness but of his strength." He goes on to say p. 277 that "It's worth ending with a question about the nature of genius. Few people thought highly of Shakespeare in the 1630s and '40s; as his reputation rose in the 1670s and '80s, he still lagged behind Ben Jonson and John Fletcher; and even after he was widely celebrated as a great genius, he was still a genius badly in need of tidying up. It all seems agonizingly wrongheaded to us: how could generation after generation be so foolish? But it's too simplistic to dismiss thousands of editors, actors, critics, readers, and auditors as being stupid and tasteless for two centuries. Something else must have been going on. My argument here is that they were largely right: Shakespeare was merely "very good" by the standards of his own age and the age that followed. He became "great" only later ... On his final report card he might have been a B plus" Indeed. When I read the plays I often find them improbable, sometimes shapeless and loose, but always psychologically insightful. When I read certain critics they seem to reason in a circular way: They assume he's great, then show how every fault is actually greatness.

Loeilecoute says

The history of the concept "Shakespeare" becomes more fascinating with each book about him that I read. This book opens up the historical facts of how Shakespeare became who we know today.

We know that he became a playwright and actor in his adult years. What is not covered so thoroughly in this book is the crucial fact that Elizabethan plays were written quickly, to be produced in rapid sequence for the unquenchable desires for entertainment of their audience, both high and low: those who afforded the balcony seats and those who stood on the penny ground floor (cf. *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* by James Shapiro, and *Shakespeare's England: Life in Elizabethan and Jacobean Times* by RE Pritchard.) There was no thought that the plays would last beyond the immediate present, no expectation that future generations would read or act these plays, nor were they written to be published. They were not considered 'literature', but rather simply entertainment. Only his poetry was published during his lifetime, to be revered as thoughtful and thought-provoking works of art by comparison.

Shakespeare would have been all but unknown to us in the twenty-first century without the concentrated effort of two of his fellow actors, Heminges and Condell. They gathered and collated thirty-six of his plays for publication seven years after his death, which became known as the First Folio. (In 2016, a copy of the First Folio is visiting each state (<http://www.folger.edu/first-folio-tou...>))

There are many interesting books that go into great detail about the various folios that were published over time, and how they differed from one another. There is sustained and ongoing controversy over what was Shakespeare's original intent and final approved script, neither of which is known. Much is speculated about

and argued fiercely in academic circles (cf. *Making Shakespeare* by Tiffany Stern, and *Shakespeare Wars: Clashing Scholars, Public Fiascos, Palace Coups* by Ron Rosenbaum.)

Unlike our present restrictions on how publications can be handled as a result of copyright law, Shakespeare play's often became a jumping off place from which authors created entirely new productions with a different plot, different ending and different characters. As a result, our understanding of who Shakespeare was becomes increasingly confusing, given that the controversy over what was his original writing, and what was a reinterpretation or completely rewritten. These modified plays were performed into the beginning of the twentieth century. When exactly the trend to reestablish the plays as close to the original Folios is not covered in this book. The plays that we see today are to a much larger extent, closer to the original texts. But even today entire scenes are deleted for time constraints, character motives are reinterpreted, and emphasis on how words are expressed in order to change meaning are still open to interpretation by actors, and producers.

I probably would have called this book "Living Shakespeare", because he is still alive and changing with each generation that becomes fascinated with his writings. His work endures not because it is perfect, but because it embodies all the foibles of the human condition, the beautiful and the ugly, and imbues the plots and characters with the enduring archetypal qualities and conflicts that will always be an aspect of the human condition, no matter how our cultural differences vary from the time when these plays were written.

The text is readable and fascinating, touching on obscure topics in a manner that makes the story engaging and interesting.

Definitely a book to be read by those obsessed with Shakespeare, as I am.

Sher says

I love historical books like this one, and the subject of Shakespeare seems particularly interesting to me. Time and circumstances work strange magic on many things and people, but on literature and literary masters, it can make a person a legend or a truly forgettable character. For Shakespeare, the circumstances and the passage of time are what created him and made him a most memorable literary and historical figure. Although successful and well known in his own time, he did not become The Bard until well after his death, much like Bach, who in many people's estimation is the greatest of composers, but who was not widely celebrated until many years after his death. Funny how that happens.

This was a very interesting book and I just might get around to reading it again sometime.

Ron says

This book doesn't quite do exactly what it claims it is going to do. It seems from this book that Shakespeare really became Shakespeare right after the restoration of the crown in 1660, instead of taking until the mid-1800's as the book jacket and introduction purport. I think the biggest problem with the book is how it is structured. Instead of dealing with Shakespeare's growth historically, it deals with different groups in each chapter, and covers the entire period in each chapter. I did enjoy the book, and got a better idea of theatre in the 17th - 19th century, but the basic premise didn't seem to be conveyed very well.

Wm says

Well organized. Written for the general public. Lots of detail but the good kind and not a burdensome amount. Makes nods to other scholars but without getting too deep in to academic debate. Demystifies and clarifies but not a hatchet job. Worth reading for anyone with any sort of interest in Shakespeare, myth-making, cultural studies or just plain good general interest scholarship.

Leir says

An interesting and readily accessible overview on how Shakespeare was elevated to the English canon, with some interesting anecdotes and discussions especially in regards to the Puritan attacks on theatre, Shakespearean forgeries and my personal favourite topic (mainly because it was something one had to contend with in school among a wide variety of editions), a little history of Shakespearean editing.

Also it completely changed my view of the line "Nothing will come of nothing" from King Lear and now I cringe a bit of the thought of my lit class constantly quoting it.

Beth Harper says

About how Shakespeare moved from just one of quite a few 17th-century playwrights to becoming the "immortal bard." That history, as told by Lynch, zigzags quite a bit. It didn't flow together for me exactly, but I certainly learned a lot. His chapters are divided by theme rather than chronology, though you could argue the themes are kinds of stages Shakespeare went through. There are chapters on performing, altering, domesticating, co-opting, and forging Shakespeare, and eventually worshipping him. A few parts made me laugh out loud. I'd recommend it, though it's not what I expected.

Meredith Walker says

This is a well written, interesting journey through Shakespeare's biographical epilogue. As such, it chronicles the unique series of events that made William Shakespear become Shakespeare, about how his genius was only known of after his death and how the biggest testimony to Shakespeare's greatness may be that he changed what it means to be great. If you are into this kind of thing, it is a worthwhile account of the history of Shakespeare's plays and reputation, from how his plays were first staged, through to how and why they were continually staged in later years. Academic but readable.

Carl Rollyson says

Jack Lynch's argument in "Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife That Turned a Provincial

Playwright Into the Bard" is reminiscent of Walter Pater's idea that the greatness of "Mona Lisa" depends on the masses of people who have projected greatness onto the painting. This is not to say that Leonardo's work is not a masterpiece, any more than it is to suggest that Shakespeare is not the immortal bard. On the contrary, the Leonardos and the Shakespeares both create and benefit from our collective impulse to impose an aesthetic order on existence.

If Shakespeare is the superlative object of our search for artistic perfection, this is because he is so elusive, so Mona Lisa-like. Or as Matthew Arnold put it in "Shakespeare":

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask: Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge.

Mr. Lynch quotes Paul Fussell's remark that what is known about Shakespeare would probably fit on a 3-inch-by-five-inch index card.

While Mr. Fussell may exaggerate, most of what we know about Shakespeare derives from legal documents and the stray observations by the bard's contemporaries. No manuscript written in his hand exists, and he never published his plays. Nothing found in his will even acknowledges he was a writer — a fact that had led to much speculation that Shakespeare was not Shakespeare but rather Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, or even Christopher Marlowe, who faked his death so that he would go on writing as Shakespeare.

Mr. Lynch has no patience for such speculations, though he might concede that they, too, are part of the biography of Shakespeare's afterlife. But Mr. Lynch is more concerned with how Shakespeare became more alive after his death than during his lifetime. A keen literary historian, writing in pellucid prose, Mr. Lynch re-creates the truly extraordinary trajectory of a B+ writer (this is the grade his contemporaries would have given him) who suffered obscurity immediately after his demise and then virtual extinction after the Puritans successfully shut down the English theater.

Not until the restoration of the monarchy and the play-loving Charles II did Shakespeare's fortunes revive. Even then, though, he took second place to Ben Jonson, a classical author who, unlike Shakespeare, observed the unities of place and time and seemed less vulgar (the raunchy Porter scene in "Macbeth," for example, was routinely excised in performance).

But 17th-century and 18th-century objections to Shakespeare's faults, including his obsession with punning and mixing comic and tragic scenes in a most ungodly way, gave way to fascination with his characters and the desire to improve upon them. Surely King Lear, for instance, did not have to come to such a miserable end. The happy ending version of the play was popular right up to the end of the 19th century. As the critic Michael Dobson explains, "Shakespeare's plays belonged to the theatre more significantly than they belonged to Shakespeare." And, adds Mr. Lynch, "All were fair game for rewriting."

Mr. Lynch might have made more of Shakespeare's stagecraft and verbal vivacity. As any actor knows, he is marvelously playable and much fun to parody — as Mark Twain demonstrated in "Huckleberry Finn." Shakespeare's wonderfully quotable words positively cavort and are easily susceptible to memorization.

"Becoming Shakespeare" focuses, instead, on the scholars who set about restoring the playwright's corrupted texts and the forgers who fed the public appetite for documents authenticating the bard's existence. Mr. Lynch spends much of a chapter on the story of a young scamp who tried to impress his Shakespeare-besotted father with a tale about a lost play he had uncovered among some old papers. This play even got

produced in London, and though it was howled off the stage, the father refused to believe it was a fake because he believed his son was not clever enough to imitate Shakespeare.

Mr. Lynch does not deplore any of the Shakespeare travesties — not even one by an eminent scholar who made major discoveries but also inserted fake findings right alongside his legitimate aperçus. To this day, scholars can be fooled by seemingly reliable emendations.

Missing from this entertaining survey is a chapter on Shakespeare biography, though Mr. Lynch does include a few comments on it in his "further reading section." He notes, for example, that Stephen Greenblatt's "Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare" (2004) is too speculative. Quite so. But surely Mr. Greenblatt's flights of imagination are just the kind of stuff that has contributed to Shakespeare's robust afterlife.

Quibbles aside, this is a very impressive, accessible book that synthesizes and clarifies hundreds of years of scholarship, and as such belongs on every Shakespeare shelf.

Becky says

I'm so glad whimsy led me to *Becoming Shakespeare*! This is a little book about how Shakespeare became SHAKESPEARE, the one and only. After all, in his lifetime, he was one of many successful playwrights in Elizabethan England. But he wasn't recognized as THE BARD during his life. His universal genius was far from recognized. In chapter one, "Reviving Shakespeare" Lynch discusses how Shakespeare's resurrection was due in part to the restoration of the monarchy. Before Charles II was restored to the throne, plays were banned; theatres were sinful, don't you know! But the oh-so-merry monarch changed the rules. New plays were produced, of course, during this time. But Shakespeare was revived as well. In chapter two, "Performing Shakespeare," Lynch discusses several centuries worth of actors whose claim to fame was due in part to playing Shakespeare roles. Notable actors mentioned include: Thomas Betterton, Colley Cibber, James Quin, David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, Sarah Kemble Siddons, Fanny Kemble, Mary Robinson, Dorothy Jordan, and Edmund Kean. Chapter three, "Studying Shakespeare" is the story of Shakespeare scholarship through the centuries. This focuses on publishing and editing and various editions, changes to the texts, etc. This chapter is not about censoring Shakespeare, that story is saved for another chapter. Chapter Four, "Improving Shakespeare," is about adapting or editing Shakespeare for the stage. This chapter focuses on producers changing or rewriting Shakespeare to meet their needs and satisfy their audiences. This included changing endings in some cases! It also included adding scenes, adding characters, adding lines. In some cases, these "new" editions of Shakespeare were produced on the stage for decades while the original play was not. So one's new-and-improved King Lear might be the only one seen by many generations! Chapter five, "Co-opting Shakespeare" is all about politics, about using Shakespeare lines or quotes for your own purposes, to prove your point or make an argument, as propaganda in a way. This wasn't a favorite chapter. But it had its moments. It discusses how people read politics into his plays. How they could watch a play on the stage and come away with an opinion about modern politics. Chapter six, "Domesticating Shakespeare" is about making Shakespeare family-friendly and safe for all ages. This is about censorship or "bowdlerizing" the text. Removing puns and innuendos and such. But this is also the chapter that talks about retelling Shakespeare the right way (Tales from Shakespeare). Chapter seven, "Forging Shakespeare" is about writers or historians who have "found" or "discovered" documents (signatures, plays, poems, etc.) It is about various attempts to hoax the public and achieve fame. Chapter eight, "Worshipping Shakespeare" is all about

celebrating Shakespeare making him larger-than-life in some instances. This is about cultivating and celebrating his legacy. For example, Shakespeare celebrations and Shakespeare-related tourist attractions.

I definitely enjoyed this one! Some chapters I appreciated more than others. Some I thought did a great job in capturing culture and society.

Kathie Harper says

I love finding the unexpected on library shelves. This book is one of those gems. The author takes the reader on a well-researched and interesting journey into how Shakespeare became "The Bard" from the time of his death in 1616 up through his 300th anniversary. Like his plays, Shakespeare's identity was shaped by history, interpretations, reinventions, academic research, and personal tastes. There are lots of great and interesting facts about actors who played the roles, the changed endings like in King Lear, and the popularity of the Mulberry tree outside of his retirement house that was cut down to make souvenirs. I found it interesting that the author said he would have titled the book, *Inventing Shakespeare* if it hadn't already been taken. So it got me thinking about his bias. Is he a birther? Does he think that Shakespeare is a product of invention or his reputation was just enhanced by it? Interesting to ponder. But then he ends with this proclamation: Argument of book, Shakespeare didn't do everything himself, it took concerted efforts of many people to turn him into the cultural figure he has since become. Whoever he has become, I'm glad that Shakespeare is here to stay at least for the interim, and that thanks to books like this fans can gain more insight and knowledge about his amazing trajectory into the annals of the literary canon.
