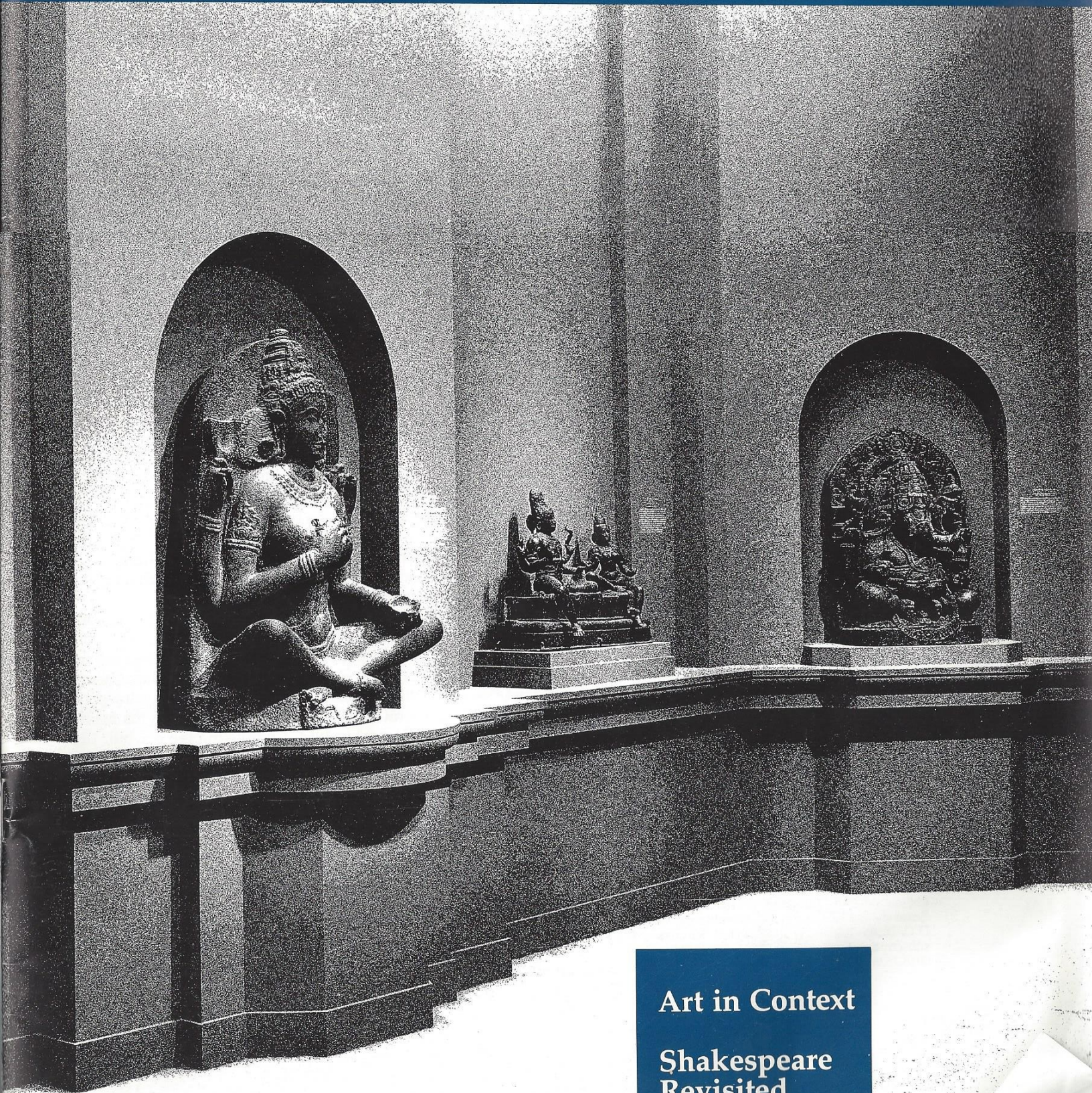


Humanities

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES • VOLUME 10 • NUMBER 2 • MARCH/APRIL 1989



Art in Context
Shakespeare
Revisited

Where did John Wilkes Booth
turn for a role model?

BLAME IT ON SHAKESPEARE

BY JOHN F. ANDREWS

IF YOU'VE EVER ambled through the groves at the south end of New York's Central Park, you may have happened upon sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward's splendid monument to Shakespeare. Roughly parallel to 67th Street, it looks across a garden plot to a symmetrically placed statue of Christopher Columbus that dates from 1892.

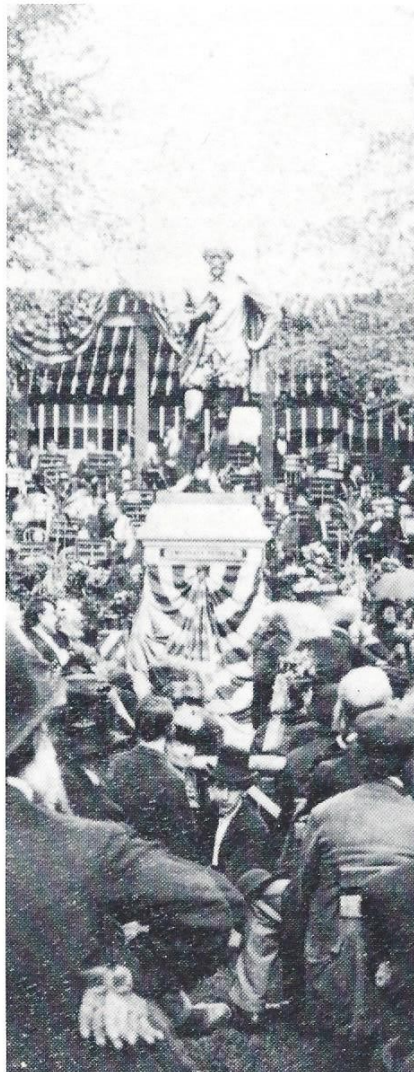
The Shakespeare memorial was commissioned on April 23, 1864, to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of the playwright's birth. It was dedicated eight years later on May 23, 1872. The principal speakers on that lovely spring afternoon were writer William Cullen Bryant, who extolled Shakespeare as "a giant among philosophers," and actor Edwin Booth, who recited a poem that said

*The hearts of all men beat in his,
Alike in pleasure and in pain.*

The ceremony concluded with an orchestral performance of Robert Schumann's stately overture to *Julius Caesar*.

In all likelihood, the music for the occasion was selected by Edwin Booth, who had just concluded a

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Unveiling the William Shakespeare statue in New York's Central Park, May 23, 1872. John Quincy Adams Ward was the sculptor.

The New-York Historical Society, New York City
record run of eighty-five consecutive nights in the principal roles of Shakespeare's Roman tragedy. Booth had spearheaded the raising of funds for the Shakespeare monument, and it may well be that at this moment his thoughts wandered back to a performance of the play that he had arranged for November 25, 1864.

Promoted as a benefit for "The Shakespeare Statue Fund," the evening's playbill announced that the performance would be "made memorable by the appearance of the sons of the great [Junius Brutus] Booth, . . . who have come forward with cheerful alacrity to do honor to the immortal bard from whose work the genius of their father caught inspiration and of many of whose creations he was the best and noblest illustrator the state has ever known."

Edwin played the role of Brutus; his older brother, Junius Brutus, played Cassius; and his younger brother, John Wilkes, played Mark Antony.

According to a review the following day, the theater was "fairly carried by storm from the first entrance of the three brothers. . . . Brutus was individualized with great force and distinctiveness. Cassius was brought out equally well. And if there was less of real personality given Mark Antony, the fault was rather in the part than in the actor. . . . He played with a phos-



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

The Booth brothers in Julius Caesar. Left to right: John Wilkes Booth as Mark Antony, Edwin Booth as Brutus, and Junius Brutus Booth, Jr., in the role of Cassius. Albumen silver print, 1864.

phorescent passion and fire which recalled to old theatregoers the characteristics of the elder Booth."

When we think about what happened less than five months later, we realize that as Mark Antony the youngest Booth was cast in the wrong role that night. But it may have entered his mind even then that he was in the right play. And with what rapt attention he must have listened as he heard his older brother speak Cassius' prophetic words:

*How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown?*

Junius Brutus Booth the elder was an English actor who had moved to America in 1821. By the time of his death in 1852, he had established himself as the leading tragedian of his generation. Like his forebears, the elder Booth was staunchly anti-authoritarian in his political convictions; and the names that he and his wife bestowed on their children were clearly meant to express those convictions. Their oldest son they named for Lucius Junius Brutus, the hero who had driven the Tarquins from Rome, abolishing kingship and establishing the Republic in 509 B.C. And John Wilkes they named after an eighteenth-century British radical known as "the Agitator." The original John Wilkes considered King George III a tyrant and supported

the rebellion of the secessionist American colonies during the civil war that led to the establishment of a new republic on this side of the Atlantic.

The Booths settled on a farm in northern Maryland and, like many another American family, eventually found themselves divided by the great conflict that erupted in 1861. Mary Ann Booth and all but one of her children supported the Union and were fond of President Lincoln. On one occasion, in fact, Edwin saved the life of young Robert Todd Lincoln when the President's son fell between a train and a railway platform in Jersey City. This spontaneous act of heroism earned Edwin a letter of appreciation from General Grant and the warm regards of the President, who attended a number of his performances and became one of his greatest admirers.

But of course it was the youngest Booth whose destiny most significantly intersected with the President's. John Wilkes Booth despised Lincoln and convinced himself that this "boorish" frontiersman was out to destroy the republic the Founding Fathers had created. In Booth's view, the President's policies were de-

signed to abrogate the Constitution, do away with states' rights, abolish civil liberties, and reestablish monarchy. Persuaded that the Confederacy was the only bulwark against "King" Lincoln's tyranny, Booth became a passionate advocate of the South's cause. During the early years of his career, he performed frequently in cities such as Richmond, Montgomery, and New Orleans. And for much of 1864 and early 1865, he plotted to kidnap the President and use his capture to ransom Confederate prisoners of war.

There is a story that sometime in the spring of 1865 John Wilkes Booth was having a drink in the tavern next to Ford's Theatre when one of his detractors infuriated him with the challenge that he would "never be the actor [his] father was." The swash-buckling young thespian's reply was ominous: "Before I leave the stage, I'll be the most famous man in America."

And so he was. As he hobbled across the boards of the theater after shooting Lincoln on April 14, 1865, Booth spat out "Sic Semper Tyrannis" (Thus be it ever to tyrants), thereby evoking the image proverbially associated with both Brutuses, and thereby casting himself forever in the role that Shakespeare had written for history's most famous assassin. Now as fate would have it, Booth's victim was also an ardent Shakespearean. Lincoln had commit-



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ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN

ted to memory long passages from the tragedies. During his time in the White House he attended dozens of plays, many of them Shakespearean. And he sometimes drew parallels between his own melancholy and that of the Prince of Denmark.

On Palm Sunday, April 9, the President had engaged some of his closest companions in a lengthy discussion of the scene in *Macbeth* where Duncan is assassinated. One member of the party later recalled that Lincoln seemed particularly preoccupied with the passage in which Macbeth says

*Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel,
nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further.*

Around this same time, Lincoln told a few close family friends about a nightmare he had had about ten days earlier. In this dream Lincoln had awakened to hear "mournful sounds of distress" in the White House. After wandering through the corridors, he eventually discovered a corpse lying in state in the East Room. When he asked who it was, he was told that it was "the President: he was killed by an assassin!"

In *Julius Caesar*, on the eve of the assassination Calpurnia dreams that she sees the fountains of Rome flow-

ing with her husband's blood. Like the Soothsayer who has warned Caesar to beware the Ides of March, she implores him not to go to the Capitol. Disregarding her, Caesar says

*What can be avoided
Whose end is purpos'd by
the mighty Gods?*

Like Caesar and to some degree like Hamlet, Lincoln had a fatalistic turn of mind. And he too set aside his own forebodings and the repeated warnings of others when he proceeded with his announced plan to attend "Our American Cousin" on an overcast Friday night at Ford's Theatre.

THERE IS NO REASON to suspect that John Wilkes Booth attached any significance to the fact that he performed his terrible deed on Good Friday. But the symbolism of the date had at least a subliminal effect on the rapidity with which Lincoln came to be revered by his grieving nation as a man of Christ-like compassion.

Meanwhile, the name of John Wilkes Booth was vilified in ways that may recall to our minds the

place that Brutus had long occupied in Dante's *Inferno*. Dante had consigned Brutus to the lowest circle of Hell, a bad eminence "the noblest Roman of them all" shared with only Cassius and one other archetypal traitor: Judas.

This connection too is echoed in *Julius Caesar*. In a significant addition to what he found in Plutarch, Shakespeare has Brutus describe the assassins as "sacrificers but not butchers." The play refers repeatedly to the blood of a man who is to be carved "as a dish fit for the Gods." Shakespeare has Caesar invite his "friends" to "taste some wine" with him before they depart for the Capitol. He informs us that the slaying occurs at "the ninth hour." And when Brutus agrees to let Mark Antony speak at Caesar's funeral, Shakespeare has Cassius tell Brutus, "you know not what you do."

Like Brutus, John Wilkes Booth was astonished by the reaction to his deed. Near the end he wrote in his diary, "After being hunted like a dog . . . with every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why? For doing what Brutus was honored for, what made William Tell a hero."

As he lay dying after his capture, John Wilkes Booth's last request was "Tell Mother I died for my country." By a most fitting coincidence, he expired on April 26, 1865—the 301st anniversary of the christening of William Shakespeare. ♠