

The Shakespeare Newsletter

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"Knowing I lov'd my books, he furnished me..."

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Shakespeare and the Lincoln Assassination

"I know, you've seen *JFK* and you're lusting for another lurid conspiracy theory. I'll try not to disappoint you. Because I'm here to out-Stone this year's most controversial filmmaker by demonstrating that the Lincoln assassination was a Shakespearean plot that involved scores of accomplices and extended all the way back to pre-Christian antiquity."

With these words John Andrews began his lecture--"Was Shakespeare Behind the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln?"--last February 12 at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History. Andrews, known to readers of *SNL* as a former director of academic programs at the Folger Library, recently completed a 19-volume annotated edition--*The Guild Shakespeare*--for the Literary Guild.

Andrews's lecture in fact eschews the sensationalism and inaccuracies characteristic of Oliver Stone's film and presents instead some interesting observations on the connections between Lincoln and Shakespeare. It is well known that Shakespeare was one of Lincoln's favorite writers and that he had memorized a great deal of the verse. John Hay, who served as a private secretary in the White House, reported that Lincoln was particularly fond of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the histories, including *Richard II* and *Richard III*. Hay notes: "The terrible outburst of grief and despair into which Richard II falls in the third act had a peculiar fascination for him: 'For God's sake let us sit upon the ground/ And tell sad stories of the death of Kings!'" On another occasion Lincoln observed, "I have all my life been a fatalist; what is to be will be; or rather, I have found all my life, as Hamlet says, 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will.'"

Thanking the actor Henry James Hackett in 1863 for a volume of *Criticisms and Comments* he had sent, Lincoln praised Hackett's Falstaff and mentioned, in addition to the plays listed above, *Lear* and *Henry VIII* as favorites: "I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. I think it is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in *Hamlet* commencing 'Oh, my offense is rank' surpasses that commencing 'To be or not to be.' But pardon this small attempt at criticism."

John Andrews reports on Lincoln's "lengthy discussion of the scenes in *Macbeth* that focus on the slaying of an innocent ruler" on Palm Sunday, 9 April 1865: "Lincoln recited a number of lines from the tragedy in which the word 'assassination' makes its first recorded appearance in English, and one member of the party, the Marquis de Chambrun, later reported that Lincoln seemed particularly preoccupied with the moment 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.

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New Folger Library Shakespeare

The first volumes of the New Folger Library Shakespeare, edited by Barbara Mowat (Folger Library) and Paul Werstine (Western Ontario), have appeared. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Caesar*, *Romeo*, and *Merchant* have been received; *Taming*, although not available at this writing, is expected shortly. The series, which replaces the older General Readers' Shakespeare, is expected to continue at about four new titles per year, thus appearing throughout at least most of the decade. It is very much a major editorial enterprise.

It also is an ambitious undertaking, for the New Folger proposes both to retain "many of the features that have always made the Folger Shakespeare so attractive to general readers," and also to reflect current ways of "dealing with Shakespeare's text and with the interpretation of his plays."

As to the first, the distinctive format of the General Readers' Shakespeare--an uncluttered and unannotated text only on the right-hand pages, and scene synopses, glosses, and contemporary illustrations on the left--has been retained. There is now some intrusion into the text, as the New Folger marks emendations of its copy-texts with superior half-brackets. But for at least four of the first titles (*Hamlet* is a special case), the half-brackets are fairly infrequent, and thus as unobtrusive as the editors wished. They do occur often in the stage-directions, which are very generous in this edition, the editors being strongly committed to aiding the visualization of stage action; but since all stage directions are of their nature somewhat obtrusive into the dialogue, there is no harm done.

The scene synopses, now completely rewritten, and the illustrations, almost all new and far better reproduced than in GRS, are retained on the left-hand pages. So, too, are the glosses; these are also rewritten, and, by my spot-checking, about half again more frequent. The NFL editors seem more concerned to facilitate the reader's understanding of Elizabethan syntax and idiom, and they

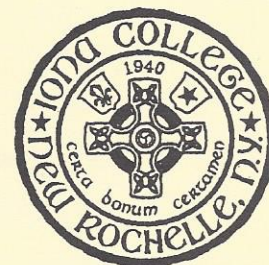
even frequently extend themselves to make sure that the metaphorical sense of the language is appreciated. The new editors are much aware of the general reader for whom the earlier series was devised, and like the GRS, they provide introductory essays, which appear verbatim in all volumes, on "Shakespeare's Life," "Shakespeare's Theater," and "The Publication of Shakespeare's Plays." These are, as one would expect from such distinguished editors, reliable and up-to-date; they are also well written, clear, and as uncomplicated as the subjects allow. Among the



The Shakespeare statue in New York's Central Park

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Andrews on the Lincoln Assassination

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Andrews quotes the Marquis, "Either because he was struck by the weird beauty of these verses, or from a vague presentiment coming over him, Mr. Lincoln paused here while reading and began to explain to us how true a description of the murderer that one was when, the dark deed achieved, its tortured perpetrator came to envy the sleep of his victim." At this point, the Marquis recalled, the President reread "the fateful lines which might well be [his] own epitaph."

Andrews recalls the famous nightmare reported by Lincoln in which the President wanders through the White House searching for the source of sobs and weeping, only to discover a catafalque in the East Room. The corpse "wrapped in funeral vestments" is his own, surrounded by a throng of people, and a soldier on guard explains that the President was killed by an assassin. Describing this nightmare to a friend, Lincoln quoted Hamlet: "To sleep, perchance to dream; ay there's the rub." Andrews reports: "Mrs. Lincoln was frightfully disturbed by the President's dire vision, and in retrospect he admitted that he probably should not have shared it with her; but 'like Banquo's ghost,' he said, 'it will not down.'"

The Booth Connection

On November 25, 1864, Edwin Booth and his two brothers performed *Julius Caesar* at New York's Winter Garden Theatre as a benefit for "The Shakespeare Statue Fund" to erect a statue in Central Park to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. According to Andrews, "at a time when people normally paid from 15 to 75 cents to see a play, the Booths were able to fill a house of 3,000 at prices ranging from one to five dollars. Through this one-time performance they contributed nearly \$4,000 to the Statue Fund." Edwin played Brutus; his older brother, Junius Brutus, played Cassius; and his younger brother, John Wilkes, played Mark Antony.

The Booth brothers were sons of Junius Brutus Booth, an English actor who had moved to America in 1821 and established himself as the leading tragic actor of the era by the time he died in 1852. Junius Brutus had been named for the founder of the Roman Republic and the descendant who tried to maintain the Republic by assassinating Julius Caesar. Junius named his oldest son for himself; his second son was named for Edwin Forrest, the first American actor to challenge the dominance of British actors in this country (as the recent Broadway play *Two Shakespearean Actors* makes clear); the youngest son was named for a remote ancestor, the eighteenth-century John Wilkes, "known to friend and foe as 'the Agitator.'"

The Booth brothers' benefit performance in *Julius Caesar* won them critical applause. The reviewer for the *New York Herald* wrote that "Brutus was individualized with great force and distinctiveness. Cassius was brought out equally well. . . . [John Wilkes Booth in the role of Antony] played with a phosphorescent passion and fire which recalled to old theatregoers the characteristics of the elder Booth."

Except for John Wilkes, the Booths admired Abraham Lincoln. The President had seen Edwin perform many times; Lincoln "commended Edwin Booth as the protagonist the first time he ever attended a production of *Hamlet*. And after he saw the actor do Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, he confessed 'I had a thousand times rather read' the work 'at home if it were not for Booth's playing.'" And, as a matter of fact, early in 1865, Edwin saved the life of young Robert Todd Lincoln, when the President's son accidentally slipped between a departing train and the railway platform on which Edwin happened to be standing in Jersey City.

According to Andrews, John Wilkes Booth, "five years junior to Edwin and a performer whose standing quickly grew to rival that of his older brother," achieved genuine distinction in such roles as Romeo, Richard III, Hamlet, and Macbeth. Lincoln saw the youngest Booth perform in a melodrama called *The Marble Heart* at Ford's Theatre in November of 1863. But John Wilkes "detested Lincoln and convinced himself that the President was determined to dismantle

the republic. . . . Persuaded that the Confederacy was the New World's only bulwark against a would-be king's encroaching despotism, Booth became a fervent advocate of the Southern cause." Although the very style of the assassination suggests the romantic streak in Booth's character, it is clear that he "was a man of calculation as well as passion." The plot to kill Lincoln and members of his cabinet in April of 1865 sprang from the sincere belief that the Confederacy might be salvaged, even after the surrender at Appomattox, if "by a decapitation of the Washington government" the Union were to collapse.

John Wilkes Booth as Brutus

John Andrews suggests that Booth saw himself as the Brutus to Lincoln's Caesar; surely his "Sic Semper Tyrannis," as he fled from shooting the President, supports the suggestion. We have already seen how Lincoln himself experienced several Shakespearean premonitions of his end; his dream of his own death recalls Calphurnia's nightmare on the eve of Caesar's death. Lincoln apparently felt close to characters like Richard II, Hamlet, and Duncan, classic Shakespearean victims. By the same token, Booth, "like the Shakespearean protagonist he most emulated, expected his act to be widely approved; and like Brutus, he was astonished by the reaction his deed elicited in a public whose affection for the fallen captain he had grievously underestimated. Near the end, reports Andrews, "Booth 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.'" Booth died on April 26, 1865, 301 years to the day after Shakespeare was christened in Stratford.

As Andrews observes, Shakespeare's own attitude toward Brutus is profoundly ambivalent. Although Booth had performed in the play many times, he seems to have misinterpreted Shakespeare's treatment of Brutus, or at any rate to have chosen to focus only on the positive aspects of the character. But Booth can perhaps be forgiven for his oversimplification. Although Dante placed Brutus in the lowest circle of Hell with Cassius and Judas, and Elizabethans distrusted a character who threatened the status quo, Renaissance writers both abhorred and defended Brutus. American audiences would have drawn a parallel between Caesar and George III; Andrews contends that, "for Lincoln, the Booth brothers, and their contemporaries, *Julius Caesar* was a play of unquestioned relevance to American life, a drama about the need for vigilance against any threat to the security of republican institutions." Booth saw himself as a defender of those institutions.

A Postscript

The Shakespeare statue that the Booth brothers helped to make possible was finally unveiled in New York's Central Park on May 23, 1872, eight years after the benefit performance of *Julius Caesar*. The statue was sculpted by John Quincy Adams Ward, who sought advice from Edwin Booth on various details of Elizabethan apparel. Among the speakers at the dedication ceremonies was Edwin Booth, who had just completed a record run of eighty-five straight nights in the principal roles of *Julius Caesar*. For the occasion, Booth read a poem in which his friend R.H. Stoddard described Shakespeare as "the best interpreter" the human race had yet been blessed with, an author who epitomized "Mankind in heart and brain." Andrews records that "shortly after Booth's recitation the program concluded with an orchestral performance of Robert Schumann's stately overture to *Julius Caesar*."

Although Lincoln himself once observed that no monument could do justice to Shakespeare's unique greatness, the statue still stands (see illustration on page 21) at the south end of the Mall in Central Park, near 66th Street, and in 1987 a bronze reproduction of the statue was unveiled in a theater lobby in Montgomery, Alabama. John Andrews notes the irony of this second unveiling, in the city where John Wilkes Booth spent six weeks near the end of 1860 performing in several melodramas and three Shakespearean tragedies.