'I Must Have Some Relief or It Will Kill Me': Abraham Lincoln's Reliance on Shakespeare

Tim McNeese
York College

President Abraham Lincoln once wrote concerning plays, "A farce or a comedy is best played; a tragedy is best read at home."[1] Perhaps the greatest of all American presidents, Abraham Lincoln is often remembered as the folksy spinner of yarns and knee-slapping jokes even as he represents the greatest success story of the nineteenth-century American frontier. Yet his legacy extends far beyond popular storytelling and rail splitting and rests instead on his fortunate capacity to provide exemplary leadership during his nation's most divisive tragedy—the Civil War. Lincoln remains in the minds of many modern students of history, politics, and literature an incongruent combination of human elements, those alternately comedic, morose, and tragic. This dual nature of Lincoln's personality and psyche may well have led him to turn often to the words of William Shakespeare. Lincoln's reliance, his resting on Shakespeare, manifested itself through two primary efforts: first, through his attending Shakespearean productions during his presidency as a means of coping, even escaping, the daily pressures of the war; and second, his own personal reading of and reflection on the works of Shakespeare, a practice that allowed him, through the Bard's complex characters, to discover parallel examples of his own struggles, political proximities that provided him with assurance, comfort, and positive reinforcement that his circumstances were not singularly his own.

As a boy, Lincoln had first been introduced to Shakespeare through his studies of William Scott's primer, *Lessons in Elocution*, and had memorized the more famous of Shakespeare's soliloquies

included in the book. Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, may have owned a copy of an 1806 edition of Scott's primer, which included twenty-six speeches and soliloquies. Here, Shakespeare would have entered the language and literary experience of Lincoln when the frontier youth was an impressionable student. It was from Scott's *Elocution* that the neophyte reader of Shakespeare memorized such lines as Falstaff's soliloquy on honor, as well as King Claudius's soliloquy on his murder of Hamlet's father, which were favorite, oft-quoted lines for the adult Lincoln: "O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven."[2]

As a young man in his twenties living in New Salem, Illinois, Lincoln was further influenced toward the Bard by a colorful individual (his reputation pegged him as the town drunk) named Jack Kelso. He was known as "a walking repository of Shakespeare's dramatic verses, as well as Robert Burns's ballads, which he would recite to any audience who would listen."[3] Lincoln seems to have been among the members of his various audiences on many occasions. It may have been Kelso who helped further Lincoln's love of Shakespeare. During Lincoln's circuit-riding days as a country lawyer in Illinois, he was remembered for carrying a "worn copy of *Macbeth* in his pocket."[4] According to an early law partner, Ward H. Lamon, who later became a federal marshal who served as bodyguard to his friend, the President of the United States, "Lincoln learned to love inordinately our 'divine William' and 'Scotia's Bard.'"[5] Family members, acquaintances, and even casual visitors to his home in Springfield or the White House remembered the man from Illinois as "fond of reciting poetry or reading aloud from favorite authors."[6] From various witnesses, it is clear that Lincoln's reputation was that he kept four books within reach on his desk in the White House: the U.S. Constitution, a volume of the U.S. Statutes, a King James version of the Bible, and a copy of Shakespeare's tragedies.[7]

A close acquaintance of Lincoln's believed three literary works were the sources of his wisdom. Lincoln, in fact, had told his friend that the Bible provided the answers for all issues pertaining to God, as well as the purposes for which humans live. As a lawyer, Lincoln had explained, Blackstone's *Commentaries* were essential for the practice of the law. Lastly, he noted, Shakespeare provided great insights into the natural tendencies found in the human heart, the motivations of everyone from a thief to a king.[8]

William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner in Springfield for many years, observed Lincoln's literary practices to reveal a somewhat haphazard approach to the great writers: "The truth about Mr. Lincoln is that he read less and thought more than any man in his sphere in America. No man can put his finger on any great book written in the last or present century that he read thoroughly. When young he read the Bible, and when of age he read Shakespeare; but, though he often quoted from both, he never read either one through. He is acknowledged now to have been a great man, but the question is what made him great . . . . He possessed originality and power of thought in an eminent degree."[9] Herndon noted that Lincoln "read law, history, philosophy, or poetry; Burns, Byron, Milton, and Shakespeare and the newspapers, retaining them all about as well as no ordinary man would any one of them who made only one at a time his study."[10]

Yet for all of Lincoln's sometimes "shallow" approach to literature, this maxim from Herndon was hardly true of his study of Shakespeare. As Lincoln scholar Paul Angle notes, "In striking contrast was his passion for Shakespeare. Here . . . his propensity to dig deeply even if narrowly is illustrated."[11] Lincoln read Shakespeare over and over, just as he repeated his readings of Burns and Byron. He was a student of the English classics and the Bible, almost exclusively the King James Version, which mirrors the language of Shakespeare's era.[12]

Lincoln wrote later in life that he had read some of Shakespeare's tragedies—including *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *Henry VIII*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*—many times over. In a letter to an actor he had seen play Falstaff in *Henry IV* during his presidency, Lincoln summed up the extent of his life's reading of several of these Shakespearean tragedies. He wrote that he had read them "perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader."[13] Hugh McCulloch, Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury during the final months of his presidency, noted of his boss, "Shakespeare was his delight. Few men could read with equal expression the plays of the great dramatist."[14]

During an inspection tour of General George B. McClellan's massive Army of the Potomac bivouacked on the Virginia Peninsula in the spring of 1862, Lincoln entertained Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, and

General Egbert L. Viele, who recalled Lincoln's great capacity for reciting lines from memory: "With a mind well stored with the grandest and most beautiful in English literature, and a memory so wonderful that he could repeat, almost word for word, whatever he read, he would sit for hours during the trip repeating the finest passages of Shakespeare's best plays. . . . He was as familiar with *belles lettres* as many men who make much more pretension to 'culture.'"[15]

Lincoln, then, certainly did not restrict his interest in Shakespeare to his solitary reading or attending theatrical productions. He shared his love of the Bard, during evenings with colleagues, political associates, cabinet secretaries, and other Washington-types, not just for the intrinsic literary value of Shakespeare's works, but as a means of deflating from long days of problem-solving, political machinations, and war-related decisions. The war pressure on Lincoln was constant, extracting a heavy toll; and taking time to unwind with his favorite playwright helped him cope with and recover from the sometimes crushing details and difficulties of leading the country through the fire of an extremely bloody, civil conflict. One of his personal secretaries, young John Hay, wrote in his memoirs of the many evenings Lincoln would summon him and his fellow secretary John Nicolay, not to continue the undone business of the day, but as sounding boards for his reading of a few lines from Shakespeare. During the weeks following the battle of Gettysburg (July 1863), Hay recalled accompanying the President to the Soldiers Home, the Lincoln family refuge during Washington City's hot summer months, where "he read Shakespeare to me, the end of *Henry VI* and the beginning of *Richard III*, till my heavy eyelids caught his considerate notice & he sent me to bed."[16] Hay could recall the seemingly endless number of evenings when similar scenes were played out over and over: "He would . . . read Shakespeare for hours with a single secretary or audience. The plays he most affected were *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and the series of the Histories; among these he never tired of *Richard II*. The terrible outburst of grief and despair into which Richard 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!'"[17]

It would seem, then, as Lincoln read at one sitting, first from a portion of one play, then from another, that his purpose was

not only to express his admiration, even love of the lines of the greatest of English playwrights, but that he sometimes selected his passages for emotional motivations, rather than exclusively aesthetic or intellectual ones. During his four years in the White House, his interest in Shakespeare appears to have peaked. Against the backdrop of war and the endless harangue of politics, Lincoln was using the Bard as a means of coping, of taking assurance that, within the lines of Shakespeare, he could find men, as well as an occasional woman, whose circumstances paralleled his enough to provide a sustaining element for a tired president of the United States, who, at the end of many of his days as the nation's war leader, wearily felt that he had taken a beating. So he turned, as he did with his physical friends, to his old friend Shakespeare, drinking in the words, providing the Bard opportunity, between immortal lines, to whisper into the president's ear: This is life, there are universals, an island is no man, others have borne similar burdens.

Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin sums up this tendency of Lincoln's to find solace in Shakespeare: "The histories and tragedies of Shakespeare that Lincoln loved most dealt with themes that would resonate to a president in the midst of civil war: political intrigue, the burdens of power, the nature of ambition, the relationship of leaders to those they governed. The plays illuminated with stark beauty the dire consequences of civil strife, the evils wrought by jealousy and disloyalty, the emotions evoked by the death of a child, the sundering of family ties or love of country."[18]

Despite his heavy exposure and interest in Shakespeare's plays during his formative and even young adult years, Lincoln likely saw few performances of any of the Bard's plays until he won the presidency and took up residence in Washington City. There was a theater in Springfield, yes, but the dramas were mostly amateur. He did, on one occasion, host the well-known dramatist James Murdock to his home in Springfield to read from Shakespeare. Murdock had performed with Junius Brutus Booth, younger brother to the now infamous John Wilkes.[19]

Lincoln became an inveterate theater attendee during his four years in the White House. At the time of the Civil War, Washington City boasted two extremely popular venues for the theater crowd—

Grover's Theatre on E Street, just west of 13th Street, situated in close proximity to the White House at a mere three blocks distance, and the more remembered Ford's Theatre, over on 10th Street, another three blocks east of Grover's, its curtain blazoned with a portrait of Shakespeare himself. Ford's had suffered a fire prior to Lincoln's presidency and did not reopen its doors until August 1863. (Lincoln saw John Wilkes Booth on Ford's stage for the first time in November 1863, but not in a Shakespearean production.) At Ford's, the Lincolns attended so often that they had box seats. It was in those reserved seats that the doomed couple would face the death of the President in April 1865.[20]

Grover's was the more popular scene of attendance by the Lincolns. As Leonard Grover, impresario of the theater bearing his name recalled, the President attended his establishment more than 100 times in four years. Lincoln's theater attendance to Grover's alone, then, translates into the equivalent of once every two weeks through his entire presidency. Leonard Grover spoke with Lincoln enough for the theater owner to note that the President was "exceedingly conversant with Shakespeare."[21]

Many times he went to the theater with Mrs. Lincoln by his side (she loved the theater and encouraged her husband to attend often), including his last attendance on that fateful night in April 1865. Occasionally, he attended with his Secretary of State, William Seward, or one of his male secretaries, or even his young son Tad. On some occasions, though, he happily attended alone. With no Secret Service at the time, the possibility of the President of the United States strolling a few blocks from the White House to take in a play with no escort or bodyguard was still possible.[22] Newspaperman Noah Brooks, who sometimes went to the theater with his presidential friend, wrote of the importance of Lincoln's theater attendance on his psyche: "It gave him an hour or two of freedom from care and worry and what was better, freedom from the interruption of office-seekers and politicians. He was on such terms with the managers of the two theaters that he could . . . slip into the stage boxes without being seen by the audience."[23]

Presidential acquaintance and fellow theater attendee, William Stoddard, witnessed how Lincoln's theater-going helped distract his friend from the war. In the theater, "the drama by drawing his mind into other channels of thought, afforded him the most

entire relief."[24] This observation mirrors that of another Lincoln acquaintance, John Forney, who once wrote of the President's theater-going habits, "Mr. Lincoln liked the theater not so much for itself as because of the rest it afforded him. I have seen him more than once looking at a play without seeming to know what was going on before him."[25]

Lincoln himself admitted the necessity of taking at least occasional respite from the pressures of the war in the darkness of a theater. In 1864, during the brutal campaigns of General Grant against General Lee's army in Virginia—fighting that included the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and the disastrously bloody clash at Cold Harbor—the President took breaks from his almost constant vigils at the War Department to attend the theater. He admitted that "people may think strange of it, but I must have some relief from this terrible anxiety, or it will kill me."[26]

When Secretary of War Edwin Stanton came to Grover's Theater one night earnestly needing the President to deal with what the secretary thought to be a matter of the utmost urgency, Lincoln refused to take his eyes off the performance, leading an indignant Stanton to brusquely grab Lincoln by his coat lapels and force him to face him directly. Lincoln merely smiled and returned his gaze to the stage. A frustrated Stanton had no choice but to leave the theater with the matter still unsettled.[27]

Not all stage productions Lincoln took in were Shakespeare. Lincoln's stage tastes ran the gauntlet, from the Bard to blackface. He enjoyed performances of an Irish comic named Barney Williams, who was noted at the time for his blackface antics. But there is little doubt that his favorite performances were those of Shakespearean productions. One friend noted Lincoln as he sat in the darkened theater, watching a performance of *Henry IV*: "He has forgotten the war. . . . He is out of politics. He is living in Prince Hal's time."[28]

That Lincoln enjoyed seeing productions of his favorite English playwright on stage is without denying, but he also took time to invite several celebrated actors to the White House after attending their performances at either Grover's or Ford's. The era of the Civil War was a stellar age during which, in the words of drama historian Garff B. Wilson, "the American theatre was blessed with a galaxy of performers who have never

been excelled."[29] The pantheon of great thespians of the 1860s included Edwin Forrest, John McCullough, James Hackett, Edwin Booth, Laura Keene, and Charlotte Cushman. (Miss Keene was performing in Ford's Theatre the night Lincoln was shot and later that evening wheedled her way into holding the head of the dying President in her lap.) Cushman was considered THE actress of her day in playing Lady Macbeth.[30]

During two back-to-back months—February and March—in 1864, Lincoln attended productions of at least four of Shakespeare's tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. Each production included the same actor—Edwin Booth, perhaps the most famed of Shakespearean performers in America at that time. Booth was, ironically, the older brother of Lincoln's future assassin, John Wilkes Booth. (Lincoln had seen his future killer in 1863 in another production of *Richard III*, which had prompted the President to express a desire to meet the actor some day.)[31] He saw noted actors J. W. Wallack, Edward Davenport, and Charlotte Cushman in a production of *Macbeth*. He took in Edwin Forrest as *King Lear*, and in the first performance he attended of *Hamlet*, actor Edwin Booth played the title role. Lincoln also saw Edwin in *The Merchant of Venice*.[32]

On one occasion, a congressman brought the actor John McDonough to meet Lincoln at the Executive Mansion during a violent rain storm. Lincoln was ecstatic, having recently seen McDonough in *King Lear*. The President and the actor spent four hours together, talking about the theater, with Lincoln questioning McDonough as to why certain scenes had not been included in the production he had seen. Lincoln showed the actor his "well-thumbed volume" of Shakespeare, read passages aloud, then recited several from memory. By the time the men separated at midnight, the President assured them he had "not enjoyed such a season of literary recreation" in a long time, and summed up the evening as a most "pleasant interval" from the press of his responsibilities as Chief Executive.[33]

James Hackett so impressed Lincoln in his portrayal of Falstaff that the President wrote him a letter of praise, in which he included the assurance, "Perhaps the best compliment I can pay is to say as I truly can, I am very anxious to see it again." In that same letter to Hackett, Lincoln admitted to not having read all of

Shakespeare's plays, while noting his repeatedly having read such plays as *King Lear*, *Richard III*, *Henry VIII, Hamlet*, and "especially *Macbeth*. I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. It is wonderful."[34] That Lincoln should cite a play that featured a violent struggle for power, hard-edged politics, bitter jealousies, treason, and deadly campaigns of war should come as no surprise, as Lincoln found himself in the midst of such circumstances during his wartime presidency. Throw in the fact that Mrs. Lincoln had spent the first twenty years of their marriage as intent on her husband achieving ultimate political position (read "the presidency"), *Macbeth* offered the man from Illinois too many personal parallels for him not to find the Scottish play noteworthy, even if whether he felt he had blood on his own hands due to the war may remain a question.

That Lincoln held an abiding place and appreciation in his intellectual framework for Shakespeare was noted during a prolonged visit to the White House by the American painter F. B. Carpenter, who was engaged in painting the now oft-reproduced "Signing of the Emancipation Proclamation," a work depicting Lincoln and all seven of his Cabinet members. One day, while painting the President, as Carpenter relates in his book, *Six Months at the White House*, he found himself engaged in a conversation with Lincoln concerning Shakespeare. The President declared, "It matters not to me whether Shakespeare be well or ill acted; with him the thought suffices."[35]

In that same conversation, Carpenter reveals how much Lincoln's frequent theater-going had sparked something of the critic in the President. Lincoln quoted the section from *Hamlet*—"O, my offense is rank"—which was a lifelong favorite of his, then observed how actors typically butcher the lines or even leave them out of performances. He was equally critical of the poor deliveries he had seen of lines from *Richard III*, including:

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
> And all the clouds that lowered upon our house
> In the deep bosom of the ocean buried. (1.1.1-4)

Lincoln commented how the lines should be delivered, as expressions of "intense bitterness and satire."[36]

On another occasion, near the end of the war, following the fall of Richmond in April 1865, Lincoln was on a ship on the

Potomac in the company of Senator Charles Sumner, an ardent abolitionist from Massachusetts, and the Marquis de Chambrun. Both men accompanying the President on that trip later wrote of a conversation they had with Lincoln over Shakespeare. The President read several passages to his guests, including lines from *Macbeth*, those following the murder of Duncan, "when the new king falls prey to moral torment."[37] As he read those lines, he stopped and reread them:

> 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. (3.2.22-26)

Lincoln followed his reading with an expatiation of the scene, a psychological study of the mind of the killer, which includes his jealousy of his victim's "calm sleep." As Chambrun later related, he found himself drawn by the President's love of Shakespeare:

> In discussing literature, his judgment showed a delicacy and sureness of taste which would do credit to a celebrated critic. Having formed his mind through the process of lonely meditation during his rough and humble life, he had been impressed by the two books which the Western pioneer always keeps in his log-cabin, the Bible and Shakespeare. From the Sacred Writings he absorbed the religious color in which he clothed his thoughts. From Shakespeare he learned to study the passions of humanity. I am inclined to think that this sort of intellectual culture, since it aids in preserving originality, is better suited to the development of a gifted mind than is regular education.[38]

Thus, it appears, through individual study on his own, through decades of reading, rereading, and ultimately absorbing the words of Shakespeare, Abraham Lincoln gained a lifelong fondness for the works of the Bard. Just as Scripture held specific and important meanings and insights for Lincoln, so the works of Shakespeare provided the man from Illinois with clear-eyed insights into the nature and tendencies of the human race. Ultimately, such insights provided Lincoln with a deeper, even cathartic, understanding of his own experiences, his own life, including his politics of power, especially those framed by war and rebellion.

Shakespeare helped Lincoln understand the great temptation of ambition among men. Such plays as *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, as well as *Hamlet*, helped the President to understand the motives of political rivals, as well as those of sometimes fawning friends and contemporaries. He likely understood his own ambitious tendencies—it was a lifelong goal of Lincoln's to accomplish something "great" through his own actions. Through reading and rereading, interpreting and reinterpreting such historical plays as *King John*, *Richard II*, *Henrys IV, V*, and *VI*, and *Richard III*, the President could observe the variety of human drives and motives, not just within the context of rich tapestries of political machinations, but also surrounded by those human elements as they unfolded during time of great and bloody civil conflict.

From his vantage point as President, when Lincoln read Part 3 of *Henry VI*, where King Henry notes, following the anguished lament of a son who has committed patricide, the pain and sorrow of a father who has killed his own son in the heat of battle, the words rang deeper and truer for him. He could absorb the lines:

> Sad hearted men, much overgone with care,
> Here sits a king more woeful than you are. (2.5.23-24)

Lincoln, like Henry VI, held sway over a nation rent by civil war, a titanic national struggle that brought him almost daily news of death and destruction, including battles that represented the slaughter of thousands of his fellow countrymen. Play after play provided Lincoln with opportunities for application to his daily struggles. As families were torn apart by civil strife in the lines of Shakespeare, so Lincoln saw such divisions up close and personal. In the battle of Chickamauga (September 1863), a fight that constituted two of the bloodiest days of the Civil War, one of his wife's brothers-in-law, Confederate Brigadier General Ben Hardin Helm, was killed, leaving Mary's sister, Emilie Todd Helm a widow, prompting the President to order her to be brought through enemy lines to spend a few weeks in the White House in December.

Emilie's visit proved scandalous to opposition party newspapers, whose pages lambasted the president for giving harbor and comfort to a Confederate widow. Toward the end of her visit, Lincoln was drawn into a heated argument with dinner guest and Gettysburg veteran, General Dan Sickles, who, despite

being a dinner guest in the White House, angrily told the President, "You should not have that rebel in your house." Lincoln informed Sickles that "my wife and I are in the habit of choosing our own guests. We do not need from our friends either advice or assistance in the matter."[39] The heated exchange exasperated Lincoln and frightened off Emilie.

On the day Mary's sister departed the White House, Lincoln had to get away from the conflict and unpleasantness by packing off to Ford's Theater that Monday evening with his two young secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, for a production of *Henry IV*, featuring famed actor James Hackett in the role of Falstaff. (Lincoln had seen Hackett more than once perform in the lusty role of Falstaff. Earlier in 1863, he had gone to four performances in a row in as many nights!) Following the play, Lincoln brought his two companions back to the Executive Mansion for a spirited discussion of the performance. At the Cabinet meeting the following morning, Lincoln was in such a cheerful mood that Gideon Welles, his Secretary of the Navy, wrote in his diary of Lincoln's "fine spirits."[40] With the pleasantness of an evening with Shakespeare possibly still ringing in his ears, Lincoln went back to Ford's on Thursday (three days following *Henry IV*) to see *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

That the President of the United States could, in time of war, make the opportunity to knock out evening after evening at the theater, often to see a Shakespearean production, might seem to indicate a leader too easily distracted from the weighty matters of state to be taken seriously as a true commander-in-chief. But few today, or even in his own time, could appreciate how ponderous the bloody conflict was on the North's Chief Executive, what with the war producing 620,000 dead, a casualty list brought about by carnage in industrial quantities. Even a passing comparison by a casual observer of photographs taken of Lincoln during his four years of presiding over a divided Union and the destruction of war reveals how Lincoln aged 20 years. Descriptions of his deteriorating appearance, his worn, line-creased, forlorn face are many, as one by the visiting artist, Francis Carpenter, who recalled a sleepless night for Lincoln (and he had many) and of seeing the President "clad in a long morning wrapper, pacing back and forth . . . his hands behind him, great black rings under his eyes, his

head bent forward upon his breast."[41] Lincoln was himself aware of the crushing challenges he faced with each day of the war, as casualties continued to mount, and the necessity of remaining hopeful and confident when in the presence of his cabinet, politicians, even the American public. Thus, as a means of coping, to keep himself in balance emotionally and psychologically, he attended the theater, saw his favorite Shakespearean dramas and comedies performed, as well as other productions.

As the casualties of war mounted, Lincoln sometimes turned directly to Shakespeare for solace. In the spring of 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant, newly-appointed by Lincoln from the Western Theater of the war to Virginia to face Confederate General Robert E. Lee directly in the field, opened a large scale campaign with the ensuing first engagement, called the battle of the Wilderness, producing staggering bloodshed. Wearied by three years of incessant war, upon hearing the casualty reports of the great human losses incurred between Grant's Army of the Potomac and Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, Lincoln took up his volume of Shakespeare. Interrupted during his reading by a friend, John W. Forney, the President said, "Let me read you this from *Macbeth*. I cannot read it like Forrest [referring to the actor Edwin Forrest] who is acting at the [Ford's] theater, but it comes to me tonight as a consolation."[42] Lincoln then read Macbeth's soliloquy:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing. (5.5.19-28)

By Forney's recollection of Lincoln's words, the President spoke of these lines from *Macbeth* as a "consolation," a seemingly odd reference. Perhaps Lincoln was himself standing on the edge of absolute despair concerning the course of the war. He had finally landed on Grant as his only remaining hope for victory over the Confederate commander Lee. Perhaps Lincoln was so deep

in despair that he was able to find hope and the strength to cope knowing that Shakespeare had, through his characters, walked in his shoes, giving the leader of the embattled Union "more solace than any platitude of hope for the future."[43]

While Lincoln could find "consolation" from despair from war in lines from *Macbeth*, he also found comfort in the words of the Bard concerning his personal life. In the spring of 1862, with the war already a year past, Union General George B. McClellan launched a massive campaign against Richmond, a well-delineated strategy that had preoccupied the general throughout the winter of 1861-62. In February, Lincoln's son, Willie, known to be the President and Mary's favorite of their three offspring, had died of typhoid fever. That spring, the campaign underway, Lincoln visited McClellan in the field at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, the jumping-off place for McClellan's campaign. One evening, in the company of Colonel Le Grand B. Cannon, Lincoln read aloud lines from act 3 of *King John*, those spoken by Constance who is grieving over the loss of her son:

> And, father cardinal, I have heard you say
> That we shall see and know our friends in heaven.
> If that be true, I shall see my boy again. (3.4.76-78)

Turning from the words of Shakespeare, Lincoln said to the colonel, "If that be true, I shall see my boy again." He then added, "Colonel, did you ever dream of a lost friend and feel you were holding sweet communion with that friend, and yet have a sad consciousness that it was not reality?—just so I dream of my boy Willie."[44] Following this revealing personal confession, with Shakespeare's words framing his emotional revelations, the President was then overcome with grief. Colonel Cannon relates how the Chief Executive "dropped his head on the table, and sobbed aloud."[45] Once again, Lincoln turned to Shakespeare for the Bard's "insights into the human condition, and the substance of his plays gave solace to Lincoln's deepening sense of the tragedy" of his son's death and of the destructive elements of the Civil War.[46]

When death came to Lincoln at Ford's Theater on the night of April 14, 1865, it seems Shakespeare was there in spirit, even if channeling through the mind of the actor-turned-assassin, John Wilkes Booth. Just a few weeks prior to his death, the President

had dreamed vividly of his walking the dim halls of the White House in search of the source of baneful mourning, only to find, in the East Room, a catafalque bearing an unseen body. In his somewhat prophetic vision, Lincoln asked a blue-clad soldier standing guard, "Who is dead in the White House?" In answer, the guard stated that it was the President.[47] Lincoln told the dream-inspired premonition to his wife and a small group of friends, noting that "like Banquo's ghost [the dream] will not down."[48] When he recounted the dream to his old Illinois friend and bodyguard, Ward Lamon, he turned again to Shakespeare, quoting lines from *Hamlet*: "To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub" (3.1.64).

The play the President and the First Lady attended that fateful night was not one from the Canon, but a low-brow British comedy, *Our American Cousin*. Yet Booth, ever the Shakespearean actor, drew parallels in his actions that night with the killing of Julius Caesar. Booth had played Brutus, Caesar's killer, on several occasions and knew well the words of the Roman assassin following the death of his victim:

> Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!
> Run hence, proclaim, cry out about the streets.
> Some to the common pulpits, and cry out,
> "Liberty, freedom, and enfranchisement!" (3.1.78-81)

Obviously, to repeat the entire phrase would have required Booth to linger on the Ford's Theater stage a little too long before disappearing stage right and into the night following his deadly deed. "Tyranny is dead!" might have sufficed, but Booth ultimately took his deathless phrasing from Virginia's state motto, "Sic Semper Tyrannis" ("Thus always to tyrants"). Yet in killing Lincoln, Booth was living out his role as Brutus, bringing Shakespeare into the drama that night, as the Southern sympathizing actor avenged a defeated Confederacy, even if the playbill of the evening featured a less than memorable comedy.[49] Thus, in the final act of a life connecting one poet to another, Lincoln and Shakespeare became intertwined in death, just as they had been in life.

Notes

1. James Humes, *The Wit & Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln: A Treasury of Quotations, Anecdotes, and Observations* (Nashville, TN: Beckon Books, 1996), 43.

2. Luis Warren, *Lincoln's Youth: Indiana Years Seven to Twenty-one, 1816-1830* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1959), 76-79; James G. McManaway, "Shakespeare in the United States," *PMLA* 79, no. 5 (1964): 513.

3. Humes, *Wit & Wisdom*, 69-70.

4. Robert Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest in Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1951): 304.

5. Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln, From His Birth to His Inauguration as President* (Boston: James R. Osgood & Company, 1872), 144-45.

6. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 455.

7. Humes, *Wit & Wisdom*, 69.

8. Ibid., 79.

9. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, eds, *Herndon's Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 354.

10. Ibid., 312.

11. Paul M. Angle, "Lincoln's Power With Words," *Papers of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 3 (1981): 12.

12. Paul M. Angle, ed., *Abraham Lincoln by Some of the Men Who Knew Him: Being Personal Recollections of Judge Owen T. Reeves, Hon. James S. Ewing, Col. Richard P. Morgan, Judge Franklin Blades, John W. Bunn* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 56.

13. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap, eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, IX* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953-55), 85; Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest," 308.

14. Allan Thorndyke Rice, ed., *Reminiscences of Lincoln by distinguished Men of his Time* (New York: The North American Review Publishing Company, 1888), 412.

15. E. L. Viele, "A Trip with Lincoln, Chase, and Stanton," *Scribner's Monthly* 16 (1878): 813-22.

16. Tyler Dennett, *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1939), 118.

17. John Hay, "Life in the White House in the Time of Lincoln," *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 41 (1891), 36.

18. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 611-12.

19. Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest," 304.

20. Dennis Gaffney and Peter Gaffney, *The Civil War: Exploring History One Week at a Time* (New York: Hyperion, 2011), 350.

21. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 609; Leonard Grover, "Lincoln's Interest in the Theater," *Century* LV (1909): 942-50.

22. Gaffney, *The Civil War*, 350.

23. Noah Brooks, "Personal Reminiscences of Lincoln," *Scribner's Monthly* XV (1878): 675.

24. Goodwin, Team of Rivals, 609; William O. Stoddard, *Inside the White House in War Times: Memoirs and Reports of Lincoln's Secretary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 191.

25. Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest," 311.

26. Schuyler Colfax, *Life and Principles of Abraham Lincol* (Philadelphia: James B. Rodgers, 1865), 12.

27. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 613.

28. Gaffney, *The Civil War*, 350; Stoddard, Inside the White House, 107.

29. Garff B. Wilson, *Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre: From Ye* Bare and Ye Cubb *to* Hair (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 144.

30. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 610.

31. *Ibid*., 612-13.

32. Roy P. Basler, *A Touchstone for Greatness: Essays, Addresses, and Occasional Pieces about Abraham Lincoln* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973), 221; Charles M. Segal, ed., *Conversations with Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 303.

33. Basler, *Touchstone for Greatness*, 221.

34. Harold Holzer and Joshua Wolf Shenk, eds., *In Lincoln's Hand: His Original Manuscripts with Commentary by Distinguished Americans* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 139.

35. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 620.

36. M. L. Houser, *Lincoln's Education and Other Essays* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1957), 219.

37. Basler, *Touchstone for Greatness*, 221.

38. Ibid.

39. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 593.

40. Ibid.

41. Francis Carpenter, *The Inner Life of Abraham Lincoln: Six Months at the White House* (New York,1868), 30. (This book has alternate titles and several dates of publication.)

42. Basler, *Touchstone for Greatness*, 223.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Luther Emerson Robinson, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Letters* (Chicago: The Reilly & Britton Company, 1918), 203.

46. Harold Holzer and Joshua Wolf Shenk, eds., *In Lincoln's Hand: His Original Manuscripts with Commentary by Distinguished Americans* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 139.

47. Ward Hill Lamon, *Recollections of Abraham Lincoln 1847-1865* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 116-17.

48. Berkelman, "Lincoln's Interest," 310.

49. Humes, *Wit & Wisdom*, 89.