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In an early scene of John Ford’s 1939 film *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Ann Rutledge responds to Abe’s recital of his inadequacies by saying, “But you’ve educated yourself, you’ve read poetry, and Shakespeare, and now law.” References to Shakespeare almost inevitably pop up in the fictional and semi-fictional representations of Abraham Lincoln that have been appearing since at least the beginning of the twentieth century. Having Lincoln quote, cite, or discuss Shakespeare became a certificate of authenticity, a detail so well-known that it could stand in for much that could not be referenced or easily incorporated into a Lincoln portrait. Many such allusions to Shakespeare are fanciful, but almost all have a source in the vast “archive” of Lincoln lore. In his quasi-historical *Lincoln, the Unknown*, Dale Carnegie embroiders Ann’s point, telling his readers that Lincoln “would walk back and forth under the trees, declaiming Hamlet’s instruction to the players, and repeating Antony’s oration over the dead body of Caesar.” One novelist even has Lincoln say to the pregnant Mary, “If it’s a boy . . . let’s call him William—after Shakespeare.” An imagined Lincoln can be counted on for a few lines from *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar* at the drop of his stovepipe hat, even if neither the context nor the tone seems quite right.

John Drinkwater, in his 1918 play *Abraham Lincoln*, invents this unlikely exchange between the president and Secretary of State William Seward:

**LINCOLN:** “There is a tide in the affairs of men . . .” Do you read Shakespeare, Seward?

**SEWARD:** Shakespeare? No.

**LINCOLN:** Ah! Never mind that the real Seward, who had enjoyed a formal education the president lacked, would almost certainly have recognized the allusion. At least the line from *Julius Caesar* is one that Lincoln, according to his law partner, William Herndon, particularly liked to recite. At another point in Drinkwater’s play, John Hay reads aloud to Lincoln the passage beginning “Our revels now are ended” and ending “rounded with a sleep” from *The Tempest*, a moment further elaborated in the 1952 *Studio One* television adaptation of *Abraham Lincoln*, which has Mary read the lines as Lincoln silently
mouths the words. At the end of the teleplay, as Lincoln walks off to his destiny at Ford’s Theatre, the camera closes in on a page from (one presumes) Shakespeare’s works on a reading stand as in voice-over Lincoln recites over rising music, “We are such dreams as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep” (slightly fumbling the lines). There is no evidence that Lincoln ever read or saw The Tempest, but Shakespeare’s words undeniably provide a moving close to the drama. In a better-known play, Robert Sherwood’s Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Lincoln does not directly quote or cite Shakespeare, but the character Joshua Speed is made to say of his friend, “He can split rails, push a plough, crack jokes, all day—and then sit up all night reading ‘Hamlet’ and brooding over his own fancied resemblance to that melancholy prince.” Poetic license, perhaps, but not unreasonable.

In other Lincoln-inspired poetry and prose, the Shakespeare reference can be inappropriate or simply puzzling. For poet Delmore Schwartz, identifying Lincoln with Hamlet is a way of debunking him: he calls Lincoln “This Hamlet-type” and adds,

O how he was the Hamlet-man, and this,  
After a life of failure made him right,  
After he ran away on his wedding day,  
Writing a coward’s letter to his bride.

The Lincoln of Irving Stone’s 1954 novel Love Is Eternal, speaking of the ambitions of his rival Stephen Douglas, comments, “I can only think of the line in Julius Caesar: ‘He doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs, and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves.’” Though Lincoln almost certainly knew Julius Caesar, the quoted passage is an odd one for the tall, long-legged Lincoln to apply to the short, squat Douglas. Among the handful of references to Shakespeare sprinkled throughout Gore Vidal’s 1984 novel Lincoln, the president several times cites or refers to Macbeth. In conversation with Edwin Stanton, Elihu Washburne, and others, he says of the play, “I have never seen it in a version I liked, not that I’ve seen all that many plays, of any sort.” The first part of this remark has no source, but the second tells us that Vidal had read a famous letter from Lincoln to the actor James Henry Hackett in which he similarly played down his experience. Although references to Macbeth, a play Lincoln knew well, are not surprising, Vidal’s other Shakespeare reference is less authoritative. As Lincoln prepares to go ashore on his visit to Fort Monroe, he remarks, “We shall be well-met by moonlight,” a somewhat bizarre refer-
ence to a play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that Lincoln very probably had not read and almost certainly never saw.

The screenplay by Tony Kushner for Steven Spielberg’s 2012 film *Lincoln* several times has the president quote Shakespeare, each time grabbing the words more or less out of thin air. Speaking to Secretary of State Seward’s factotums, Lincoln is made to say, “We have heard the chimes of midnight, Master Shallow” (slightly misquoting *Henry IV, Part 2*); all he means is that time is getting short. When Seward tells him that he has to choose between passage of the Thirteenth Amendment or accepting a Confederate peace, Lincoln, quoting from *Macbeth*, somewhat petulantly replies,

If you can look into the seeds of time
   And say which grain will grow and which will not,
   Speak then to me,

a convincing enough allusion given Lincoln’s well-known fondness for the play, though it is hard to imagine that he would address his secretary of state with Macbeth’s words to the Weird Sisters. A more meaningful moment comes in the conversation with Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave and Mary Lincoln’s dressmaker and friend, when Lincoln paraphrases a line from *King Lear*: “Unaccommodated, poor, bare, forked creatures such as we all are,” associating himself, and all mankind, with the people he has helped rescue from slavery. When he recounts a dream, Lincoln cites *Hamlet*: “I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space . . . were it not that I have bad dreams,” an oblique way of alluding to Lincoln’s oft-remarked-upon fascination with his own dreams.11

The impulse of novelists, poets, playwrights, and filmmakers to associate Lincoln with Shakespeare, sometimes felicitous, sometimes awkward and self-conscious in execution, is founded on a substantial body of evidence. Lincoln’s affection for Shakespeare’s plays was frequently mentioned by his contemporaries and has become a notable part of Lincoln lore, helping define his personality and character in a manner overlapping with but distinct from his penchant for jokes and comic stories. Throughout his life, and particularly in the years of his presidency, Lincoln turned to Shakespeare’s plays not only for the pleasure he took in the poet’s language and fund of dramatic incident but also for relief from the cares of state and even for solace when faced with personal disappointment. His Shakespeare was, inevitably, a partial Shakespeare, a Shakespeare adopted early on as an honorary American, shaped by the sensibilities of a new world and made palatable to the demo-
cratic, leveling impulses of the American nation. The tragedies and histories, in particular, appealed to Lincoln at least in part because they appealed to America. These plays again and again illustrated the dangers of inordinate ambition, the devastation of civil war (no less than eight plays are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the Wars of the Roses), and the corruptions of illegitimate rule. In addition to these thematic issues, the oratory of Shakespeare’s characters, the speeches and soliloquies, were well suited to a highly oratorical age. Politicians and other public figures quoted or cited Shakespeare in their speeches and writings. Lincoln’s interest in Shakespeare can only be understood fully when placed in the context of nineteenth-century American culture.

Although quotations from and citations to Shakespeare’s plays are not abundant in Lincoln’s own writings, he often read from and alluded to Shakespeare in conversation with friends, secretaries, family members, and other visitors and bystanders who recorded their impressions in diaries and letters as well as, in later years, essays and memoirs. We also have testimony to Lincoln’s interest in Shakespeare from newspapers and other more or less “official” sources contemporary to the events they describe or report. In the pages that follow, I strive to separate plausible evidence from myth without undermining my central contention that Lincoln was throughout his life fascinated by and engaged with Shakespeare’s plays. I then explore the question of how Lincoln came to know Shakespeare, including a consideration of what editions of the plays he may have owned or had access to at various points in his life. Particular interest is paid to Hamlet and Macbeth, the plays that figured most prominently in Lincoln’s imaginative life. I explore as well various aspects of nineteenth-century Shakespearean theater as Lincoln might have experienced it from his youth to the years of his presidency. Here, I examine what theatrical venues would have been available to Lincoln in Springfield as well as in other places to which he traveled before 1861, including New Orleans and Chicago. The American theater in general underwent a significant transformation in the period from when Lincoln would have first encountered it to his years in the White House. As a young man on the frontier, he would have had small occasion or opportunity to attend the theater; by the time he was elected president, theater all over America was a thriving institution.

When President Lincoln wrote to the actor James H. Hackett in the late summer of 1863, he revealed his enthusiasm for Shakespeare and initiated a friendship of sorts that gave him much pleasure, at least for a time. Hackett was one of the most popular comic actors in America, famous for his many
years of portraying Shakespeare’s Sir John Falstaff. Lincoln saw Hackett play Falstaff on several occasions, and Hackett from time to time visited the White House and discussed Shakespeare with the president. Beginning with Hackett’s Falstaff, Lincoln would see a variety of Shakespeare productions featuring the leading actors of his day. I describe the Shakespeare performances of Edwin Booth, Charlotte Cushman, Edwin Forrest, and others that Lincoln saw. Of particular interest are the observations of people who either accompanied Lincoln to the theater or were simply there at the same time and took note of his responses. Lincoln may have preferred reading to seeing Shakespeare, as some have suggested, but he still liked measuring his understanding of the plays against the interpretations of professional actors. While he certainly read and enjoyed other writers, from poets like Robert Burns and Lord Byron to satirists like Petroleum V. Nasby and Artemus Ward, it was to Shakespeare’s dramatic universe that Lincoln turned again and again for intellectual nourishment, emotional support, and sheer pleasure he could find nowhere else.

When quoting from nineteenth-century documents, I have kept the original spelling and punctuation without indicating apparent errors and anomalies unless the meaning was unclear. The word “Shakespeare,” for example, is variously spelled in the sources (Shakspeare, Shakespere, Shakspere, etc.), and I have not attempted to regularize the usage.
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I am fortunate that both of my children live in Washington, D.C., where the Folger Library and the Library of Congress are located. My son Niles worked for a time as a historical interpreter at President Lincoln’s Cottage and one day casually told his boss, Callie Hawkins, that his dad would be happy to give a talk on Lincoln and Shakespeare—before his dad had even thought of linking those names together. I eventually gave the talk, and my other son, Timothy, who heard it, remarked afterward, “So, Dad, are you...
writing a book?” I guess I was. I thank them both, and I thank Callie for the invitation and encouragement.

Jeanne, once again, gave me her love and support in every way, and I can only repeat what I have said before: as wife, partner, and dearest friend, she helped in all sorts of ways, not the least of which involved reading my drafts and keeping me honest.
LINCOLN
and
SHAKESPEARE
Abraham Lincoln and America’s Shakespeare

All that Shakspeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” Essays, First Series

The image of young Abraham Lincoln reading by the light of a fireplace, especially as captured in Eastman Johnson’s 1868 painting, has become a significant part of America’s imaginative understanding of its most beloved historical figure: the humbly born, self-educated frontier boy who grows up to be president holds an iconic force thoroughly embraced from Lincoln’s time to our own. If we were asked what Lincoln is reading in this fanciful depiction of his youthful studies, the answer would probably be the plays of William Shakespeare, though the Bible, John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress, and Parson Weems’s Life of Washington might also be suggested. That Lincoln read and enjoyed Shakespeare is well known. While he was alive, witnesses testified to his appreciation of Shakespeare’s plays and took note of his attendance at Shakespeare performances in the years of his presidency; after his death, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances came forward with a variety of stories and anecdotes that contributed to a view of him as a Shakespeare enthusiast. In a letter to the actor James H. Hackett (discussed in detail in chapter 4), Lincoln unwittingly made public his love of Shakespeare and at the same time gave friends and enemies the opportunity to make political hay from his observations. Although he seldom quoted or cited Shakespeare in his writings and speeches (as Robert Bray notes, Lincoln “rarely refers to any poet, no matter what his mode of writing or his audience”), he often em-
ployed allusions to Shakespeare in conversation, and he read Shakespeare’s plays aloud on a number of occasions. Not surprisingly, perhaps, some of the evidence for Lincoln’s Shakespearean interests is highly dubious: myth—that “vast accumulation of the apocryphal, fabulous, and spurious that began to gather about the man during his lifetime”—soon came to overtake fact in Lincoln’s posthumous fame. As important as it is to separate fact from fiction, however, the myth nevertheless has its own value. The desire to see Lincoln associated with Shakespeare speaks to something deep in the culture of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America.

The conjunction of Lincoln and Shakespeare derives perhaps as much from the way we understand Shakespeare as from the way we understand Lincoln: both were boys of obscure birth who grew up to great achievement and posthumous fame. If Lincoln has become the great man as statesman, Shakespeare is the great man as author. Walt Whitman early on made the case:

One of the best of the late commentators on Shakespeare . . . makes the height and aggregate of his quality as a poet to be, that he thoroughly blended the ideal with the practical or realistic. If this be so, I should say that what Shakespeare did in poetic expression, Abraham Lincoln essentially did in his personal and official life.

Shakespeare, furthermore, could be seen to embody the “right to rise” impulse often ascribed to Lincoln. The year Lincoln assumed the presidency, the Scottish reformer Samuel Smiles, in his popular book Self-Help, alluded to Shakespeare as an exemplar of the self-made man. For some writers, Lincoln and Shakespeare share a special, sometimes spiritual affinity. Francis Carpenter, who spent six months in the White House preparing and executing the painting First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln, describes Lincoln’s temperament in these terms: “It has been well said by a critic of Shakspeare, that ‘the spirit which held the woe of ‘Lear,’” and the tragedy of “Hamlet,” would have broken, had it not also had the humor of the “Merry Wives of Windsor,” and the merriment of “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” With equal justice can this profound truth be applied to the late President. The world has had no better illustration of it since the immortal plays were written.” Lincoln could even be seen as a character out of Shakespeare’s plays: “Among all the public figures in American history,” Roy Basler writes, “Lincoln stands out as the character with a difference, part of this difference being that in dramatic actions as well as words, he seems to
have been cast in a heroic role comparable to that of a Shakespearean hero.”

John Drinkwater, the English poet who wrote a play about Lincoln, invented an imaginary conversation between Lincoln and Shakespeare in which he has the latter say, “A simple proposition—like this. England—a poet—with a shrewd head for affairs—good bargain and a comfortable retirement at the end. But a poet always. America—a politician, searching always for vision, vision—as the poet does. We should understand each other.” Lincoln and Shakespeare here combine pragmatism and idealism even as they are conjoined as symbols of Anglo-American unity and amity.

Abraham Lincoln first came to Shakespeare, as did many other Americans, through schoolbooks and oratory. Of the so-called readers available to him as a youth, some, like Lindley Murray’s enormously popular English Reader, did not include any Shakespeare; those that did, including one Lincoln undoubtedly used, Lessons in Elocution, provided little more than excerpts of set speeches and soliloquies. Beyond his exposure to school anthologies, the young Lincoln, as he grew to manhood in the 1830s, would have attended lectures of various kinds; the lyceum movement, in particular, which “played an important part in American culture after 1825 by helping to extend the cultural frontier,” often featured talks on Shakespeare and other writers. When lyceum speaker Ralph Waldo Emerson lectured in the 1840s, he included Shakespeare among his six “Representative Geniuses”; in 1853 he came to Springfield, where he may have given his Shakespeare lecture. Some lecturers would perform Shakespearean readings in place of or in addition to analysis and commentary. As Esther Cloudman Dunn has noted, “Readings from Shakespeare [in the early nation] were a real rival to the production of the plays as a whole.” “Elocutionists,” as these speaker-readers were sometimes called, “argued that the practice of reading great works aloud sharpens the mind and nurtures elocutionary talent.” One such elocutionist, James Murdoch, performed several nights of readings from the works of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and other writers in Springfield in January 1861; Lincoln almost certainly attended one and may have been present at both. Lincoln himself, of course, participated in oratorical activities from early on. Apart from purely political speeches, he prepared and sometimes delivered talks on various topics, most notably when he spoke, in 1838, at the Young Men’s Lyceum, a place “where aspiring young men of the town tested their rhetorical skill and improved their elocution before their peers.” “Whether declaiming or debating,” one writer has noted, “Lincoln appeared before audiences whose ears already rang with the oscillations between the bawdy insult of the political arena and the rhetorical flourish of training in classical rhetorical
modes.” While there is nothing of Shakespeare, or any other literary text (though there is one New Testament quotation) in Lincoln’s lyceum talk, it is this oratorical culture that, at least in part, would have attracted Lincoln and his contemporaries to the rhetorical richness of Shakespeare’s plays.

In addition to school readers and lectures, Lincoln would have encountered Shakespeare in the theater. Unfortunately, little is known of his youthful theatergoing experience. Only when he became president did he have the opportunity to attend plays on a more or less regular basis, though there is no definitive evidence that he did so before 1863. Lincoln was fortunate to be in Washington as that city, though physically not much changed from the time of his previous habitation in 1847–1849, was becoming something more than the cultural backwater it had been for the first few decades of its existence. Famous American Shakespearean actors frequently came to the capital in the years of his presidency, from the aging stars of an earlier era, such as Edwin Forrest, to the emerging stars of the second half of the century, such as Edwin Booth, and the evidence suggests that Lincoln saw Shakespeare’s plays whenever he could. In part because that was the taste of the time, and perhaps in part because of his own inclination, he sought out tragedies and histories primarily: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *Henry IV*, along with *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Lincoln’s attendance at the theater and his reaction to what he saw and heard was reported both in the press and in the diaries and reminiscences of those who accompanied him or happened to be present at a particular performance. We have firsthand accounts of his reactions to or comments on *The Merchant of Venice* with Edwin Booth, *King Lear* with Edwin Forrest, and *Macbeth* with Charlotte Cushman. As president, Lincoln also continued to attend readings, which often included Shakespeare. James Murdoch, whom he had met in Springfield, became a fund-raiser and morale booster for Union troops and engaged in readings of Shakespeare and other writers in the capital as well as in the field, and his audience several times included the president.

That Lincoln so often attended Shakespeare productions insulated him to some degree from the condemnation of those who thought theater immoral and the president’s attendance indecorous. Just as presidential vacations today can be criticized as irresponsible by political enemies and defended by political friends as necessary relief from the rigors of governing, Lincoln’s playgoing was both regretted and justified. Lincoln’s journalist friend Noah Brooks retrospectively made the case as well as anyone: “Those who are disposed to consider that Lincoln exhibited a frivolous side of his character by his play-going should reflect that the theater was almost the only place where
he could escape from the clamor of office-seekers, and for a moment un-fix his thoughts from the cares and anxieties that weighed upon his spirit with dreadful oppressiveness."15 Theater manager Leonard Grover, employing a Shakespearean phrase, noted that Lincoln, no matter what he came to see, “was satisfied with being entertained and amused, and to have his mind taken from the sea of troubles which awaited him elsewhere.”16 After Lincoln’s assassination at Ford’s Theatre, southern sympathizers and other mean-spirited individuals suggested that he had got what he deserved for going to see a play on Good Friday; that he had been killed by an actor could be seen as further evidence of heavenly judgment. But for most Americans, the fact that Lincoln was murdered while enjoying a well-earned moment of relaxation and celebrating the war’s end added to the poignancy of his tragically premature death.

Lincoln’s interest in Shakespeare necessarily belongs to the wider history of how Shakespeare’s plays were received and understood in nineteenth-century America. What Shakespeare’s works have meant to Americans over the last 400 years cannot be recovered fully, but it is fair to say that “since the middle of the eighteenth century . . . [the English playwright] has remained a staple in America’s cultural diet.”17 Much has been made of a somewhat cavalier remark in Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, an often-cited guide to life in the United States in the 1830s, claiming that there was “hardly a pioneer’s hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare.” Tocqueville adds that he “read the feudal drama of Henry V for the first time in a log cabin.” It is not entirely flippant to wonder just how many log cabins Tocqueville visited on his travels. But we do not need to take this observation entirely at face value to accept the idea that the French observer was pointing to a phenomenon actually present in American culture. We know, from a variety of sources, that Shakespeare was read, quoted, and performed in America by the early 1800s, even if attitudes toward the English poet were not entirely unmixed. Another famous foreign traveler to America in the 1830s, Frances Trollope, discussing literature with an unnamed interlocutor “said to be a scholar, and a man of reading,” is told, “Shakespeare, madam, is obscene, and, thank God, we are sufficiently advanced to have found it out!”19 In any case, from the early days of the Republic, if not earlier, Americans were familiar with and often cited at least the better-known of Shakespeare’s works. Bardolatry, which can be roughly dated in Great Britain from actor David Garrick’s Shakespeare Jubilee of 1769, reached the shores of New England and elsewhere quite soon afterward. A number of the Founding Fathers were enthusiastic Shakespeareans. George Washington, an avid the-
atergoer, staged a production of *Julius Caesar* in the executive mansion in Philadelphia, and he frequently cited Shakespeare in his writings; his letters were “filled with passing references to *Hamlet, Othello, The Merchant of Venice,* and *The Tempest.*” That John Adams and Thomas Jefferson together visited the Shakespeare birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon suggests that, at least to these educated Americans, that humble abode had already become a shrine. What is of particular interest in Tocqueville’s observation, however, is the implication that the appreciation of Shakespeare pervaded the entire social and economic spectrum.

But Tocqueville, whatever weight we want to give to his words, does not really tell us all that much about the reading habits of early-nineteenth-century Americans; after all, many a family Bible sits on a shelf unread. The possession of Shakespeare’s *Complete Works,* then or now, either in a frontier cabin or in a Virginia mansion, cannot guarantee close acquaintance with the contents. The more difficult question would be, How was Shakespeare known? What, for example, does it tell us that the *Massachusetts Spy,* a newspaper in colonial America, printed a parody that begins with the words “Be taxt or not be taxt—that is the question?” Are we to assume that the paper believed its readers to have read *Hamlet,* or, much more likely, that the phrase “to be or not to be” was already common currency, a well-worn cliché, 150 years after Shakespeare’s death? An allusion to Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, in other words, could suggest nothing more than that Shakespeare was well enough known, at least in bits and pieces, to inspire parody and burlesque. In this context, cultural historian Lawrence Levine has remarked on the difficulty of taking “familiarities with that which is not already familiar; one cannot parody that which is not well known.” This may serve well enough as a general principle, but in practice parody, pastiche, and burlesque can exist even when the audience is not familiar with the original, as the jokes of Jon Stewart and other television satirists sometimes demonstrate. There is a considerable distance between a paraphrase of Hamlet’s soliloquy and a genuine familiarity with Shakespeare’s melancholy Dane. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, and moving to Tocqueville’s era, we find John Quincy Adams engaging in a sophisticated discussion of *Hamlet, Othello,* and other plays with the Shakespearean actor and later-to-be Lincoln “friend,” J. H. Hackett. Certainly, Shakespeare’s works were known to the educated elite of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By the 1840s, when P. T. Barnum attempted to purchase Shakespeare’s birthplace and bring it to New York, America’s interest in Shakespeare, we may assume, was becoming more widespread; if anyone can be said to have had a finger on the pulse of American tastes, it was Barnum.
By the 1830s and 1840s, too, a select number of Shakespeare’s plays were beginning to dominate the stage, accounting for “one-fifth to one quarter of performances.” For a variety of reasons—the Puritan resistance to theater, the mainly provincial origins of the early English settlers (relatively few were from London), the absence of any theater productions in England during the 1640 to 1660 interregnum, the alienation many colonists felt toward the mother country—virtually nothing in the way of Shakespearean stagings is known before the middle of the eighteenth century. The first reported professional production of Shakespeare (Richard III) dates from 1750, more than three decades after the first appearance of a Shakespeare text in America. After the Revolution, however, theatrical activity flourished, and Shakespeare soon became established as a “draw.” Although Levine no doubt exaggerates when he writes that “Shakespeare actually was popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America,” the evidence suggest that the plays appealed to a wide range of readers and theatergoers, low-, middle-, and highbrow alike. As Levine goes on to remark, Americans in the mid-nineteenth century “shared a public culture less hierarchically organized, less fragmented into relatively rigid adjectival boxes than their descendants were to experience a century later.” Nonetheless, it is important to note that Shakespeare’s “popularity” needs to be significantly qualified when considered in the context of such forms of theatrical presentation as satire and burlesque. Much of what passed as “Shakespeare” was not really Shakespeare at all, or was only obliquely or marginally so. When audiences in the mining camps of California went to see and hear Junius Brutus Booth in Richard III or King Lear, they were drawn by the overwhelming theatrical personality of the actor as much as, and perhaps more than, the words of Shakespeare—words that, in any case, were as much from Colley Cibber’s (Richard III) and Nahum Tate’s (King Lear) eighteenth-century adaptations as they were from Shakespeare. One might even argue that the movement from lowbrow to highbrow that Levine traces was not so much a matter of changing audience taste as it was a change in Shakespeare: new and better editions of the texts and restorations by actors and producers of the plays more or less as originally written meant that a less easily accessed Shakespeare came to the fore, replacing, even if never entirely erasing, the “popular” Shakespeare of earlier decades.

References to Shakespeare can also be found both in the congressional debates and unofficial political discourse of the time, much of which would have been familiar to Lincoln. A number of the men who populated the halls of Congress were of the educated elite, but even members not well educated could cite Shakespeare. In the course of the debates over the Missouri Com-
promise, “senators and congressmen who more often than not lacked college educations spoke from the barest of notes (or none at all) for hours on end, and were confident that their colleagues and the public would understand them, in speeches that were peppered with allusions to Shakespeare, the Bible, American history, British common law, and classical literature.”

Shakespeare allusions are employed by virtually all the major participants, either in debate or in personal correspondence: Henry Clay (“Meantime some of the Hotspurs of the South are openly declaring themselves for a dissolution of the Union, if the Wilmot Proviso be adopted,” Henry IV, Part 1), William Seward (“You may slay the Wilmot Proviso in the Senate chamber, and bury it beneath the Capitol today; the dead corse, in complete steel, will haunt your legislative halls tomorrow,” Hamlet), Thomas Hart Benton (“It is giving a government and leaving out the people! It is the play of Hamlet—the part of Hamlet left out!”), and Stephen Douglas (writing of Clay, “But let it be said of old Hal that he fought a glorious & a patriotic battle,” Henry IV). Lincoln’s political heroes—Clay, Daniel Webster—were familiar with the plays and dropped references to them both in formal speeches and in casual conversation. Clay, like Adams and Jefferson before him, visited Shakespeare’s birthplace in Stratford-upon-Avon. Alluding to the notoriety of Peggy O’Neil Eaton, the wife of Jackson’s secretary of war, John Eaton, Clay quipped, “Age cannot wither, nor custom stale her infinite virginity.”

John Eaton, too, could cite Shakespeare against a political enemy, in this instance John C. Calhoun: “The time will come when the victims of his policy shall rise before him,” Eaton wrote, “like the shades which appalled the insidious and heartless usurper Richard, to disturb his slumbers and to drive peace from him.” We cannot, of course, entirely gauge the extent or depth of knowledge represented by this or that quotation from Shakespeare, but taken together these allusions suggest an easy familiarity with at least parts of the canon.

Allusions to Shakespeare, his plays having become by midcentury a species of cultural capital, could lend authority to any writer or speaker, serving quite different functions depending on the occasion. For the political elite, an exchange of Shakespearean language was a form of mutual recognition. But Shakespeare is not always cited primarily to make points: an offhand allusion, unidentified, suggests the pervasive presence of Shakespearean sentiment that may not even enter into the consciousness of the user. An interesting example of this is the phrase “the tented field” (“For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith, . . . / they have used / Their dearest action in the tented field,” Othello, act 1, scene 3), which occurs as a passing allusion in
quite different contexts. In itself an unremarkable expression, a periphrasis for “military experience” (“at the bidding of their government, they left the plough for the tented field”), it nevertheless carries a certain compressed elegance of meaning. Thomas Jefferson could use the phrase as a less alarming substitute for “going to war”; if peace is not possible, he wrote, “we must again take the tented field, as we did in 1776.” When South Carolina congressman Robert Barnwell Rhett spoke of “the stern realities of the tented field,” the phrase was a contribution to a rhetoric of secession. When the president of the New York Fire Department sent Lincoln’s friend Elmer Ellsworth and his First Fire Zouaves into battle with the words “We know that, whether in the midst of burning cities, or in the tented field, you will sustain your own high character, and these banners will ever wave in triumph, even though it be in the midst of ruins,” it was an encouragement to quench the flames of rebellion. On a less exalted level, a comic writer Lincoln particularly enjoyed reading, Petroleum V. Nasby (the nom de plume of David Ross Locke), writes in an 1862 essay, “I see in the papers last nite, that the Government hez institooted a draft, and that in a few weeks, sum hunderds uv thou- sandz uv peeseable citizens will be dragged to the tented feeld.” Nasby in his ironic fashion here zeroes in on the way Shakespeare’s words had evolved into a pompous euphemism.

A famous moment in the history of American political debate, however, suggests a richer and more complex engagement with Shakespeare than the passing references cited above. In January 1830, Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts engaged with Senator Robert Hayne of South Carolina in an exchange that would reverberate throughout the following decades; ostensibly about the sale of public lands, the debate came to focus on sectionalism and the value of the Union in the wake of the Nullification Crisis. Of particular note here is Hayne’s First Reply to Webster. In the course of several paragraphs, Hayne quotes, cites, and paraphrases Shakespeare a half dozen times. Rhetorically questioning Webster, Hayne asks, “Has the gentleman’s distempered fancy been disturbed by gloomy forebodings of ‘new alliances to be formed’ at which he hinted? Has the ghost of the murdered Coalition come back, like the ghost of Banquo, to ‘sear the eye-balls of the gentleman,’ and will it not ‘down at his bidding’?” It would be interesting to know what books Hayne had available to him when he prepared his reply to Webster. Did he have Shakespeare’s plays? Did he have a copy of the newly published Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations? Or was he relying on his memory? It would not need recourse to a text, certainly, to make an allusion to Banquo’s ghost: Macbeth was one of the most popular plays on stage at that time and, like...
Hamlet’s “To be or not to be,” the ghost at the feast can be assumed to have been well-known, both to Hayne and to his listeners. That same ghost finds its way into a political argument over slavery: in 1828, a New York congressman, arguing that slaves could not be considered property, paraphrases from Macbeth to ask rhetorically, “Is the ghost of the Missouri question again to be marched, with solemn and terrific aspect, through these halls? Is it again to ‘shake its gory locks’ at us, and, pointing with one hand to the North, and with the other to the South, and gazing its blood-shot eye on slavery, written on the escutcheon of the Constitution, to proclaim with unearthly voice, ‘out damned spot’?”

Horace Mann, in 1851, referring to Daniel Webster’s support of the Fugitive Slave Act, wondered “whether the political Macbeth shall succeed to the Banquo he spirited away, though all the ‘weird’ brethren of the slave mart and of the ‘Union and Safety committees’ still tempt him onward by their incantations.”

Hayne goes on to quote from or cite other Shakespeare plays, and here we can be fairly certain that, in addition to what he might have been able to recall from earlier reading, some more recent turning of pages must have taken place. Alluding to Henry IV, Part 1, Hayne remarks, “I doubt not the gentleman feels very much, in relation to the tariff, as a certain knight did to, instinct,’ and with him would be disposed to exclaim—‘Ah! no more of that, Hal, an’ thou lovest me.’” (118). A few paragraphs later, Hayne turns to Othello: “We solemnly declare that we believe the system to be wholly unconstitutional, and a violation of the compact between the States and the Union; and our brethren turn a deaf ear to our complaints, and refuse to relieve us from a system ‘which not enriches them, but makes us poor indeed’” (119). In quick succession, Hayne cites Julius Caesar (“Sir, if the gentleman had stopped there, the accusation would have ‘passed by me like the idle wind, which I regard not,’” 119) and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (“But when he goes on to give to his accusation a local habitation, and a name,” 119). Later, he cites a familiar Hamlet quotation, one that, according to William Herndon, was a favorite of Lincoln’s (“But a wise and just Providence, which ‘shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will,’ gave us the victory, and crowned our efforts with a glorious peace,” 134), but he follows it with what can only be considered a remarkably obscure and at the same time bizarre Shakespeare allusion: “It mattered not whether the gift was bestowed on Towser or Sweetlips, ‘Tray, Blanche, or Sweetheart’” (138). Even someone quite familiar with Shakespeare’s plays would have to jog his or her memory to remember that “Tray, Blanche, or Sweetheart” are the names of King Lear’s (imaginary?) dogs. And why does Hayne mention these canines?
at all? The phrase comes as mere decoration: Hayne, having quoted John Randolph’s observation that “the power of conferring favors creates a crowd of dependents,” merely adds Shakespeare’s dogs to the generic names Towser and Sweetlips. The King Lear reference, in short, is completely unnecessary and may simply be an example of a kind of stream of consciousness flow on Hayne’s part: the reference to hounds makes him think of Lear’s dogs, he recalls their names, and more or less for his own amusement, includes them in his parse of Randolph’s remark. It is possible, of course, that the allusion may have meant something quite specific to Hayne’s hearers that we can no longer recover. Lear’s dogs, curiously enough, are mentioned in another comment on Peggy O’Neill Eaton and her husband: we read in the Washington Globe for July 26, 1831, that the Eatons would remain in Washington so long as “the kennel corps, Tray, Blanch and Sweetheard [sic], growl and bark so fiercely.”

Even if the allusion had a meaning in the 1830s that we no longer have access to, that would in itself suggest a sophisticated employment of Shakespeare, one that goes beyond common knowledge or familiar quotation.

Hayne’s literary citations and allusions also illustrate the possible pitfalls of employing Shakespeare in argument. Webster, in what is known as the Second Reply to Hayne, was quick to suggest that Hayne’s references to Banquo’s ghost were off the mark. “But . . . the honorable member was not . . . entirely happy in his allusion to the story of Banquo’s murder, and Banquo’s ghost. It was not, I think, the friends, but the enemies of the murdered Banquo, at whose bidding his spirit would not down.”

The honorable gentleman [Webster continues] is fresh in his reading of the English classics, and can put me right if I am wrong; but, according to my poor recollection it was at those who had begun with caresses, and ended with foul and treacherous murder, that the gory locks were shaken. The ghost of Banquo, like that of Hamlet, was an honest ghost. It disturbed no innocent man. . . . It made itself visible in the right quarter, and compelled the guilty, and the conscience-smitten, and none others, to start, with,

Pr’ythee, see there! behold—look! lo,
If I stand here, I saw him! . . .

I have misread the great poet if those who had no way partaken in the deed of the death, either found that they were, or feared that they should be, pushed from their stools by the ghost of the slain, or exclaimed to a
spectre created by their own fears and their own remorse, ‘Avaunt! and quit our sight!’

Webster then strings together a number of citations and quotations from *Macbeth*:

Did not even-handed justice ere long commend the poisoned chalice to their own lips? Did they not soon find that for another they had “filed their mind”? that their ambition, though apparently for the moment successful, had but put a barren sceptre in their grasp? Ay, sir,

“A barren sceptre in their gripe,  
Thence to be wrenched by an unlineal hand,  
No son of theirs succeeding."

Sir, I need pursue the allusion no farther. I leave the honorable gentleman to run it out at his leisure, and to derive from it all the gratification it is calculated to administer.

Webster, with self-satisfied irony, makes it clear that a misquotation, or quoting out of context, can be dangerous, and that two can play the game of citing Shakespeare to support or clinch an argument.

Another kind of political discourse, satirical cartoons, made use of Shakespeare in the contentious politics and electoral atmosphere of the first half of the nineteenth century. The popularity of Shakespeare’s history plays, *Richard III* in particular, encouraged pointed commentary associating ambitious politicians with Shakespearean monarchs. Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun, among others, were sometimes portrayed in cartoons depicting “Shakespearean” scenes, such as one from the 1828 election depicting Jackson as Richard with a caption reading, “Methought the souls of all that I had murdere’d came to my tent.” Another, captioned “The assassination of the Sage of Ashland,” from 1848, shows Clay about to receive multiple dagger thrusts from his erstwhile Whig associates, who speak phrases from *Julius Caesar* as they prepare to stab him. In “The hurly-burly pot,” from 1850, publisher Horace Greeley, congressman David Wilmot, and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison are portrayed as *Macbeth’s* witches, stirring the pot of disunion as they utter variations of “Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble!” while the aging Calhoun eggs them on. The witches’s cauldron from *Macbeth* reappears in a cartoon print, from sometime during the presidency of James

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Buchanan, captioned “A proslavery incantation scene, or Shakespeare Improved.” This cartoon shows Buchanan and a group of unidentified proslavery supporters burning a variety of documents in a cauldron as they chant “Double double, Free state trouble. Till Fremont men are straw & stubble,” together with a number of variations of like nature.

But no previous president or politician would be as frequently caricatured as Lincoln was, and a number of these cartoons, both pro and anti, placed him in a Shakespearean context. In one of the earliest of these, “Et tu, Greely,” published soon after the 1860 Republican Convention in Chicago, a very dark-skinned and proportionally small “Lincoln,” the very image of a “black Republican,” plays a secondary role (he is not even identified in the caption) as Pompeii’s statue, overseeing the death of William (Caesar) Seward, murdered by Horace Greely and other of Seward’s former supporters. Lincoln plays a larger role in a preelection cartoon from 1860, “The Smothering of the Democratic Princes,” from Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun. Alluding to Richard III, the cartoonist shows “Catesby Lincoln” as one of Shakespeare’s two assassins smothering presidential candidates John Bell and John C. Breckenridge with a “pillow” in the shape of Stephen Douglas labeled “Squatter Sovereignty.” (The politics here are sufficiently oblique that a thirty-line poem has been appended to explain the imagery.) Almost immediately after the election, the cartoonist Henry L. Stephens, in Vanity Fair, drew on Much Ado about Nothing for “Dogberry’s Last Charge,” a parody of the upcoming presidential transition in which Buchanan is cast as Shakespeare’s comically inept watchman, Dogberry, and Lincoln as his equally inept deputy, Seacoal; the caption includes a direct quotation from Shakespeare’s play in which Seacoal is described as “the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch,” which makes clear that, in the opinion of Vanity Fair, one incompetent was giving way to another.

As president, Lincoln became the target of a wide variety of comic and satirical portraits, not only in the United States, in both the North and the South, but in Great Britain as well. One particularly elaborate, if at times oblique, attack from 1864 on the entire Lincoln administration is the print entitled “Behind the Scenes,” purporting to be a rehearsal for Othello with Lincoln, in blackface (and black body), in the starring role. Othello was one of the most frequently burlesqued of Shakespeare’s plays in the nineteenth century, reflecting both the fragile balance of tragic and potentially farcical elements in the play itself and the fascination with and fear of blackness generated by the slavery crisis. Lincoln was variously portrayed either as “black” himself (as in “Et tu, Greely,” mentioned above) or as burdened by various
black figures either weighing him down or pulling him toward a right or wrong action, depending on the satirist. Lincoln-Othello, seemingly reading from the text of the play in his hand, here speaks several lines from different scenes: “O, that the slave had forty thousand lives! I am not valiant neither:—But why should honour outlive honesty? Let it go all.” The dialogue balloons make reference to other Shakespeare plays, as when Union general Benjamin F. Butler, in a Falstaff costume, is made to say (combining disparate lines from *Henry IV, Part 1*), “We that take purses, go by the moon and seven stars; and not by Phoebus! I would to God, thou and I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought!”—a reference to Butler’s alleged rapacity. The satire is presented in a scattershot way, with members of Lincoln’s cabinet and others, including Andrew Johnson, all targets of scurrilous representations. Although it cannot be precisely dated, this print is clearly aimed at Lincoln’s 1864 reelection campaign. In another print from the same period, Lincoln plays a decidedly secondary Shakespearean role—Yorick’s skull—to Democratic presidential candidate George B. McClellan’s Hamlet. “I knew him, Horatio: A fellow of infinite jest. . . . Where be your gibes now?,” McClellan says, as Peace Democrat and New York governor Horatio Seymour looks on. The immediate context may have been a story in the *New York World* accusing Lincoln of inexcusable levity when touring the Antietam battlefield, but whatever the occasion, Lincoln’s reputation as jester has seldom been so cleverly and acidly presented.53
Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was English publications like Punch that were most likely to employ Shakespearean allusions in political cartoons, particularly those featuring Lincoln. From time to time, those cartoons—at least the most negative ones—found their way into Southern newspapers; as Gary Bunker notes, “England’s image makers were the primary sculptors of [Lincoln’s] pejorative international reputation.” Several of these images are particularly memorable because they are so well executed. In a November 9, 1861, cartoon captioned “The Genu-ine Othello,” John Tenniel (the illustrator of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland) shows a surprisingly dignified-looking black man telling both North and South, “Keep up your bright swords, for de dew will rust dem. . . . Both you ob my inclining, and de rest.” Lincoln, whose expression in this first appearance in Punch only hints at the “malice, vulgarity, and cunning” that would sometimes characterize Tenniel’s drawings of the American president, is here depicted in a “Brother Jonathan/ Uncle Sam” manner. In the April 5, 1862, issue of Punch, Lincoln as Oberon demands of Titania (Miss Virginia) “a little nigger boy, to be my henchman” (A Midsummer Night's Dream, act 2, scene 1), the casual racism contrasting with the elegance of the draftsmanship. Tenniel’s drawing was a comment
on Lincoln’s plan for compensated emancipation, but, minus the caption, it could almost be an illustration for Shakespeare’s play, even if the bearded image of Oberon clothed in a costume of stars and stripes seems a bit out of place. The specificity and ironic appropriateness of the allusion to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a play only infrequently presented on the American stage, testifies to the educated middle- and upper-class readership *Punch* enjoyed.

A Tenniel cartoon entitled “Scene from the American ‘Tempest,’” published in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation, shows “Caliban (Sambo)” pointing to his presumed Confederate master and telling Lincoln, “You beat him ’nough, Massa! Berry little time, I’ll beat him too,” a paraphrase from the play identified in the caption as “Nigger Translation.” (Tenniel here anticipates the twentieth-century postcolonial interpretation of Caliban as an African slave.) Although Tenniel’s drawing of Lincoln is hardly flattering, the
PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI—APRIL 5, 1862.

OBERON AND TITANIA.
Oberon (Mr. President Lincoln). "I DO BUT REG A LITTLE NIGGHER BOY,
TO BE MY HENCHMAN."

Titania (Miss Vesey). "SET YOUR HEART AT REST,
THE NORTHERN LAND BUYS NOT THE CHILD OF MEB.'"
association with Shakespeare’s Prospero, an image of fair-minded if severe authority, makes it possible to see the cartoon overall as “perhaps among the most benevolent images on emancipation published in Punch,”56 which, however, is not saying very much. Tenniel places Lincoln in a Shakespearean context one final time (August 15, 1863), presenting a particularly loutish, disreputable image of him as Brutus in his tent, the ever-popular Joe Miller joke book in hand, with a youth (Shakespeare’s Lucius), a black boy with banjo and minstrelsy costume, sleeping nearby. The ghost of Caesar is an imposing black man, albeit with a stereotypically “comical” face, who tells Lincoln, “I am dy ebl gen, massa Linking. Dis child am awful Inimpressional.” Though the general thrust of the cartoon perhaps refers to the failure of Lincoln’s emancipation policies, the exact context is unclear. That this cartoon was reprinted in the Southern Illustrated News on October 31 suggests that, whatever its precise meaning, Southerners found Tenniel’s satire useful to their cause.

Whether experienced in the context of politics and oratory or in the privacy of the parlor or study, the language of Shakespeare’s plays was in the atmosphere Lincoln breathed while he lived on what was still considered to be the American frontier. It is possible, as Fred Kaplan suggests,57 that Lincoln and Mary Todd read Shakespeare to each other when they were courting. In an 1841 letter to a friend, Mary, presumably alluding to Lincoln’s mental state in the winter of 1840–1841, expresses the wish that “he [Lincoln] would once more resume his Station in Society, that ’Richard should be himself again,’ much, much happiness would it afford me.”58 (She is, however, quoting not from Shakespeare’s Richard III but from one of the most famous passages in Colley Cibber’s adaptation.) By the time Lincoln became president, he benefited from, but was not intimidated by, being surrounded by men who were better educated than he and whose knowledge of literature exceeded his own. To take only one example, young John Hay, graduate of Brown University (where he was elected Class Poet), alluded to Shakespeare, directly or indirectly, in letters, in speeches, and even in the privacy of his diary. Commenting on a meeting between Lincoln and some Maryland disunionists, he joked that “their [the Marylanders’] roaring was exquisitely modulated.” On second thought, he crosses out the whole phrase and writes, “They roared as gently as twere any nightingale,” a surprising but apt use of a line from A Midsummer Night’s Dream.59 Writing to John Nicolay, his friend and Lincoln’s chief secretary, he quotes from Richard III (incorporating the words of Colley Cibber): “Blair says Armstrong shall eat dirt or ’off goes his head, so much for Buckingham.”60 In a letter to the writer Nora Perry, a Brown Uni-
versity friend, he remarks, commenting on the dreariness of Springfield, that Shakespeare’s Dogberry “ought to have been an Illinoisan.” In the course of his 1871 obituary remarks for Tad Lincoln, he remembered that as a boy Tad “was always a ‘chartered libertine,’ and after the death of his brother Willie, a prematurely serious and studious child,” the quoted phrase a rather obscure allusion to Henry V (act 1, scene 1). Of a California senator killed in a duel, Hay directly alludes to Hamlet: “But there was that within the hearts of Broderick’s friends, like the anguish of the royal Dane, ‘passing show.’” Citing or referring to Shakespeare came naturally to Hay.

By midcentury, educated Americans like Hay had become so familiar with Shakespeare that some of them wanted to adopt him as an honorary citizen. “During the nineteenth century,” Kim Sturgess writes, “Americans learnt to use the possessive pronoun ‘our’ when referring to Shakespeare, something not done with other foreign writers.” The poet William Cullen Bryant believed that “Americans may . . . claim an equal property in the great English poet with those who remained in the Old World.” An 1850 English edition of Shakespeare, reprinted in New York, contains this appeal to the American reader: “Shakespeare—a name which belongs as much to Saxon America as Saxon England—especially adapted to the American public.” Charles King Newcomb, who was associated with Emerson and other New England transcendentalists, believed Shakespeare to be, “in some respects, more of an American than he is of an Englishman.” Shakespeare, Newcomb added,

belonged to the age in which the tide of principles began to turn & swell, that, at its full, in the next age, surged to New England & was there received on the congenial shores of nascent democracy, whilst it subsided in the relatively uncongenial & hardened spheres of old England. In his English Historical Plays he showed English loyalty, English tenderness for royal tradition, & English conservatism, but, also, unbiased regard for the energy & general fitness for office which is one of the early prognostics of republicanism.

“How wondrous, how universal is the fame of Shakespeare!” a newspaper theater reviewer wrote in 1855. “Generation after generation is enthralled by his genius. Nation after nation rejoices in celebrating his works. . . . But in no land, not even in his own, is he so deeply loved and so deeply reverenced by so large a number as in America.” We can sense here an oddly divided attitude toward this greatest of English poets: on the one hand, he represents the culture and refinement of the Old World and reminds some Americans
of the relative poverty of their own literary culture; on the other hand, Shake-
speare is seen as not really English at all, and his plays in fact offer a cri-
tique of the undemocratic, stultifying culture of Great Britain. So Richard
III, which presents a damning view of the English monarchy, was a perennial
favorite on American stages, whereas Henry V, with its seeming jingoism, was
seldom performed.

The question of Shakespeare’s “nationality” exploded dramatically in
what has come to be known as the Astor Place Riot. On the evening of May
10, 1849, the popular American-born actor Edwin Forrest (whom Lincoln
would see as Lear in 1864) was playing Macbeth at the Broadway Theatre
while an English visitor, William Charles Macready, was playing the same role
at the Astor Opera House (a theater at that time comanaged by Lincoln’s fu-
ture acquaintance James H. Hackett). Not only was there personal bad blood
between the two Shakespearean tragedians (Forrest had, three years earlier,
loudly hissed a Macready performance of Hamlet in Edinburgh), but their
rivalry also reflected the combustible class division that roiled Manhattan life
at the time. Simplifying things considerably, one can suggest that Forrest, a
hero of Jacksonian democracy, was popular with the working class and with
immigrants, while Macready was favored by the older, nativist element and
the well-to-do of the city.69 For several nights, Forrest’s followers mobbed the
Astor Opera House, both inside and out, creating such a disturbance that
Macready’s Macbeth could not be heard. By the night of May 10, the rioting
had become sufficiently threatening that the militia was called in and, in
the ensuing confusion, some twenty-five to thirty or more (accounts differ)
protestors were killed and many others were wounded. The Astor Place Riot
has gone down in history as the most destructive public protest in the United
States up to that time, and was also the first time a militia was called out to
put down a civic disturbance. (It is probably no coincidence that this riot
took place in the wake of the 1848 revolutions in Europe.) That such a tragic
event could have been brought about by the performances of two actors in
Macbeth says much about both the centrality and the contested nature of
Shakespeare in nineteenth-century American life.70

Both Emerson and Whitman, eminent nineteenth-century literary and
cultural figures who in different ways have been associated with Abraham
Lincoln,71 commented directly on the value of Shakespeare for America. Em-
erson believed that Shakespeare “wrote the text of modern life; the text of
manners: he drew the man of England and Europe; the father of the man
in America: he drew the man, and described the day, and what is done in
it.”72 Though the syntax is somewhat obscure, Emerson seems to be claiming
Shakespeare for America and for the modernity that America exemplified. Whitman, whose comments and observations on Shakespeare, formal and informal, stretch over more than a half century, could not decide if the English poet could have value for America. On the one hand, Whitman writes, while “it seems a shame to pick and choose from the riches Shakspere has left us—to criticise his infinitely royal, multiform quality—to gauge, with optic glasses, the dazzle of his sun-like beams,” Shakespeare nevertheless represented the feudal, aristocratic world that was the antithesis of America: “For all [Shakespeare] stands for so much in modern literature, he stands entirely for the mighty aesthetic sceptres of the past, not for the spiritual and democratic, the sceptres of the future.”

Ultimately, this ambivalence, which was not Whitman’s alone (Herman Melville, too, worried that an “absolute and unconditional adoration of Shakespeare [had] grown to be a part of our Anglo Saxon superstitions”), would be resolved, in the words of Gail Kern Paster, in favor of “the quintessentially American belief that England’s National Poet, properly understood, was a spokesman for republican values and a symbol, in his life’s remarkable history and achievement, of the American commonplace that extraordinary talents might have unexpected origins.”

Although Lincoln was perhaps unconscious of the tension at the heart of America’s embrace of Shakespeare, he would, over time, find his own way of adopting Shakespeare’s imaginative world into a program of self-education and personal resource that began with his boyhood on the frontier and would continue to the end of his life.