

The American Presidents and Shakespeare

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PAUL F. BOLLER JR.

ON APRIL 23, 1932, SHAKESPEARE-LOVERS FROM AROUND THE COUNTRY FLOCKED TO Washington, D.C., to attend the dedication of the handsome new Folger Shakespeare Library, with President Herbert Hoover and and First Lady Lou Henry Hoover (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/lou-hoover>) sitting on a platform to watch the ceremony. The main speaker was Joseph Quincy Adams Jr., a descendant of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams who taught English literature at Cornell University and adored William Shakespeare. Professor Adams announced that with the new Folger Library, the capital city now had three great memorials that “stand out, in size, dignity and beauty, conspicuous above the rest: the memorials to Washington, Lincoln, and Shakespeare.” He went on to point out that for the American people, the “great English dramatist” had become, through the years, “the supreme thinker, artist, poet. Not Homer, not Dante, not Goethe, not Chaucer, not Spencer, not even Milton, but Shakespeare was made the chief object of their study and veneration.”¹

Professor Adams knew his history. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, when England's Shakespeare performers began coming to the United States to make the rounds, citizens of the new republic gradually became ardent fans of the great playwright, and some Americans came close to making him an honorary citizen. In the nineteenth century they quoted him in letters, read his plays aloud, and turned out in large numbers, even in the newly settled West, whenever presentations of his plays were available. Many a household owned just two books: the Bible and Shakespeare. Some Americans, still fiercely anti-British after the American Revolution and the War of 1812 (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/america-under-fire>), thought that the way Americans spoke English was closer to Shakespeare's language than the way the snobbish British spoke. The American people, according to the Shakespeare scholar Lawrence Levine, “were able to fit Shakespeare into their culture so easily because he *seemed* to fit it —because so many of his values and tastes were, or at least appeared to be, close to their own.”²

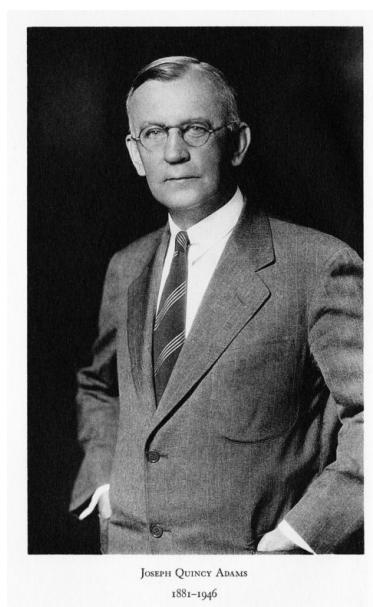


A crowd gathers around the car of President and Mrs. Herbert Hoover outside of the Folger Shakespeare Library on April 23, 1932. The Hoovers attended the dedication of the library at which Professor Joseph Quincy Adams Jr., a descendant of two presidents who would be the Folger's first director, was the main speaker.

FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY

Some of America's presidents were enchanted by Shakespeare, too. George Washington (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/george-washington>) had a collection of the Great Bard's plays in his library at Mount Vernon, and he attended at least two of the plays when he was in New York and Philadelphia. His successors varied widely in their interest. Some—James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, Warren G. Harding—seem to have had little or no interest in Shakespeare. Others—Rutherford B. Hayes, Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy—read and studied him in school and college, and as adults attended his plays from time to time without becoming passionate devotees. James A. Garfield took Shakespeare more seriously. He called him “the great William” and took his children to see the plays after reading Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* to them. Bill Clinton liked to quote a passage from *Macbeth* that he memorized as a boy, because as an adult the words were “still full of power for me.” And George W. Bush, it was reported, “did three Shakespeares” one summer when he was president. ³

Theodore Roosevelt (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/theodore-roosevelt>) was a singularity. He began his career by dismissing Shakespeare's plays as crude and vulgar; and, then, in 1909, when he was on a safari in Africa after leaving the White House, he began dipping into the Shakespeare collection he took along with him and, almost to his own surprise, was soon swept into the Shakespeare orbit. “You will be both amused to hear that at last, when fifty years old, I have come into my inheritance in Shakespeare,” he wrote Henry Cabot Lodge and his wife. “I have never before really cared for more than one or two of his plays; but for some inexplicable reason the sealed book was suddenly opened to me on this trip. I still balk at three or four of Shakespeare's plays; but most of them I have read or am reading over and over again.” ⁴



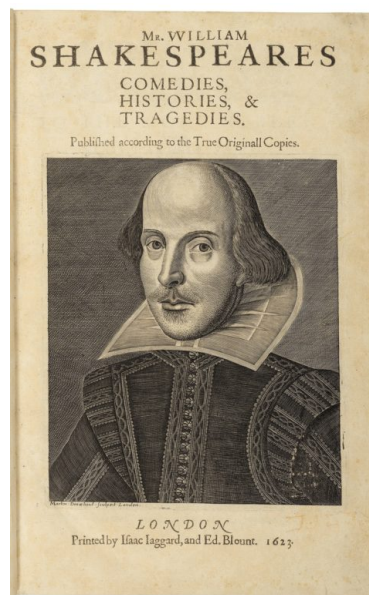
Professor Joseph Quincy Adams Jr., a descendant of two presidents, would be the Folger Shakespeare Library's first director.

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Four presidents—John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Abraham Lincoln—may be called Shakespeare-lovers. Unlike Theodore Roosevelt, they were drawn to his plays when they were young and remained ensorcelled the rest of their lives. They read and reread Shakespeare with mounting appreciation and went out of their way to attend productions of his plays time and again. More than that, they looked to him not only for good stories, fascinating characters, and a wondrous literary style, but also for insights into social behavior, political institutions, varied customs, and the meaning of life itself. John Adams called Shakespeare “the great master of nature” and the “great teacher of morality and politics,” pronouncing him “that great Master of every Affection of the Heart and every Sentiment of the Mind as well as of all the Powers of Expression.” In one of Adams's writings, he quoted at length passages from one of Shakespeare's plays that he found less striking than usual, but, he explained: “The style in these quotations from Shakspeare [*sic*] has little of that fluency, and less of that purity which sometimes appears in his writings, but the sense is as immortal as human nature.” ⁵ For John Adams, Shakespeare was almost never lacking in substance and style.

John Adams (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/john-adams>)'s search for wisdom in the Great Bard began early. "Let me search for the Clue, which Led great Shakespeare into the Labyrinth of mental Nature!" he wrote in his diary during December 1758. "Let me examine how men think. Shakespeare had never seen in real Life Persons under the Influence of all those Scenes of Pleasure and distress, which he has described in his Works, but he imagined how a Person of such a Character would behave in such Circumstances, by analogy from the Behaviour of others that were most like that Character in nearly similar Circumstances, which he had seen." ⁶

Shakespeare helped Adams out on one occasion when he was an undergraduate at Harvard. Somewhat shy as a student, he was surprised and pleased to be invited to join the Harvard Discussion Club when he was a junior and instructed, as a kind of initiation, to read Oedipus's speech from Alexander Pope's translation of *Thebais* (the Thebes) to the club members. Young Adams practiced furiously, pacing the floor as he declaimed the speech over and over again, but when the time came for him to perform before fifty or so students and some faculty members in the college library, he was so nervous that he mangled the words and bungled the gestures, to the great amusement of the audience. When he reached the end of Oedipus's speech, he raised his hand high, then lowered it slowly, and pointed it at the students. "Don't shoot, Adams!" yelled one of his classmates. "For God's sake, spare a mother's son!" At that, the students exploded into wild laughter, and Adams rushed frantically out of the room. Afterward, he found the teasing he received extremely humiliating, and he vowed never to be caught in such a trap again. ⁷



This portrait of William Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout is printed on the title page of the First Folio (1623), number 68, now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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Several months later young Adams had another chance. This time he did the choosing: a passage from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* that contained the force, strength, and defiance he thought he needed to get even with his tormentors. He was more sure of himself as he began reading Coriolanus's speech, but when there were some titters in the audience, he lost his temper, slammed the book down, walked to the front, threw back his chest, and began reciting the speech ferociously to his classmates:

"Look, sir, my wounds!

I got them in my country's service, when,

Some certain of your brethren roar'd and ran

From the noise of our own drums."

He increased his intensity:

"You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate

As reed o' the rotten fens . . .

For you, the city, thus I turn my back:

There is a world elsewhere."

At that point Adams stood staring sternly at his audience for a moment, and then walked to his seat. To his astonishment, the students began clapping, pounding their shoes, and tossing compliments at the day's orator. "Adams!" they cried, "You'll make the best speaker of us all." Remarked one student at the end of this meeting: "Coriolanus angry is surely better than Oedipus scared."⁸

In his college years Adams mastered the ancient classics and the best writers of his day, and he came to love John Milton's poetry. For understanding human nature, however, he put Shakespeare first. Adams was forever referring to Shakespeare or quoting lines and passages from the plays in his diary, letters, and chats with friends. In his journal he once observed that a fellow who got drunk at a party he attended had "railed and foamed" in "as wild mad a manner as King Lear." In a letter he mentioned a woman friend who reminded him of Shakespeare's "Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief." There was a scene in *Henry VIII* that he liked and thought it "may be very properly recommended to modern Monarchs, Queens, and Favourites." When a question came up at a town meeting, he remarked that it was raised for the first time "since Wm. the Conquerer, nay, since the Days of King Lear." of a woman he knew whose husband abused her, he declared: "Bela really acts the Part of the Tamer of the Shrew in Shakespeare." one of Adams's favorite quotations was:

"If I would but go to hell for an eternal moment or so, I could be knighted." Another favorite was:

"Take but degree away, untune that string

And hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets

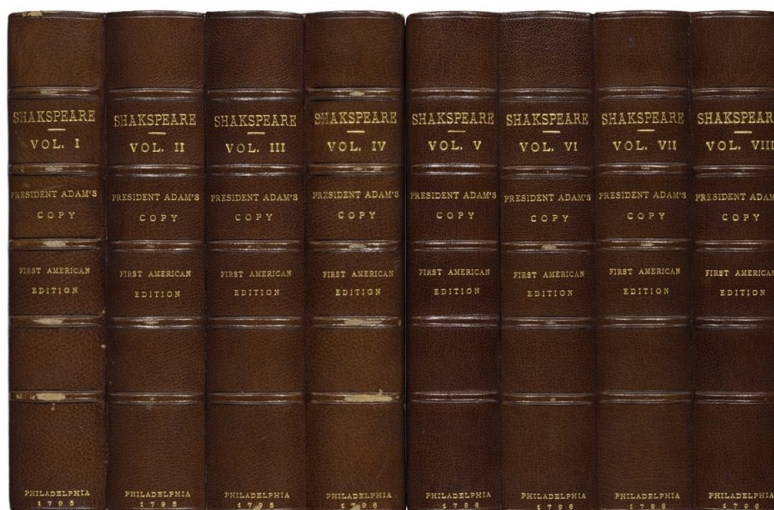
In mere oppugnancy . . .

Then everything includes itself in power,

Power into will, will into appetite,

And appetite an universal wolf."

Each of these quotations, he was convinced, contained a deep understanding of social and ethical matters.⁹



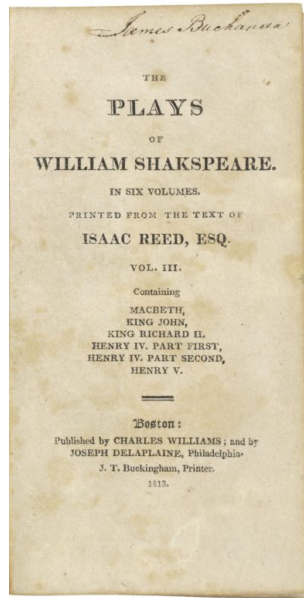
This volume is one of a set belonging to Adams housed in two leather cases, now the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

In a series of articles Adams wrote for the *Gazette of the United States* in 1790 and 1791, later published as *Discourses on Davila* (1805), he used a translation of the Italian historian Enrico Caterino Davila's history of the French civil wars in the sixteenth century, published in 1650, as a springboard for setting forth some of his own views on social and political institutions. To emphasize his ideas, he quoted seventy lines from *Troilus and Cressida*, in which Ulysses talks about the importance of "degree," or status, in human societies. In rejecting equality, Adams also stressed the need for a strong executive to avoid the anarchy he thought unbridled democracy was likely to produce.¹⁰ Adams's views upset his friend Thomas Jefferson and his republican followers (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/dressing-down-for-the-presidency>); they thought he was leaning dangerously toward monarchism. He was not, of course, but he did think that his—and Shakespeare's—view of human behavior was more realistic than that of the Jeffersonian Republicans.

Adams and Jefferson drifted apart for a time after *Davila* and especially after Jefferson's triumph over Adams in the presidential election of 1800. But they had once been close friends, and they had long agreed on their respect and admiration for Shakespeare (and, years later, they famously renewed their friendship). In April 1786, before *Davila*, when the two men were in London, they had gone on a sightseeing trip to Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon. Adams was deeply moved by the visit and wrote in detail about it afterward. "Stratford upon Avon is interesting as it is the Scene of the Birth, Death and Sepulcher of Shakspeare [*sic*]," he began. Then came disappointment! "Three Doors from the Inn, is the House where he was born, as small and mean, as you can conceive. They shew Us an old Wooden Chair in the Chimney Corner, where He sat. We cut off a Chip according to the Custom. A Mulberry Tree that he planted has been cutt down, and is carefully preserved for Sale. The house where he died has been taken down and the Spot is now only Yard or Garden." Adams's disgust mounted. "The curse upon him who should remove his Bones, which is written on his Grave Stone, alludes to a Pile of some Thousands of human Bones, which lie exposed in that Church." It got worse. "There is nothing preserved of this great Genius which is worth knowing—nothing which might inform Us what Education, what Company, what Accident turned his Mind to Letters and the Drama. His name is not even on his Grave Stone. An ill sculptured Head is sett up by his Wife, by the Side of his Grave in the Church. But painting and Sculpture would be thrown away upon his Fame. His wit, and Fancy, his Taste and Judgment, His Knowledge of Nature, of Life and Character, are immortal."¹¹ Adams was thoroughly upset, even angered, by the tawdry tribute the British paid to the writer he admired so much.

Jefferson (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/thomas-jefferson>) surely shared Adams's disgust. Still, the entry he made in his record of the sightseeing trip was about the fees he paid: "for seeing house where Shakespeare was born, 1 shilling; seeing his tomb, 1 shilling; entertainment, 4 shillings, 2 pence; servants, 2 shilling."¹² Yet he owned more copies of Shakespeare's plays than Adams did, as well as four different commentaries on the plays, and he also sought to acquire pictures and busts of his hero. In Shakespeare, Jefferson insisted, there are "new sublimities which we had not tasted before." Years later, when he was president, he told John Bernard, the famed British actor, that Shakespeare, as well as Alexander Pope, "gave him the perfection of imagination and judgment, both displaying more knowledge of the human heart—the true province of poetry—than he could find elsewhere."¹³

Like Adams, Jefferson came to Shakespeare early. As a boy, he delved into the plays in his father's library, and as a college student he headed for the playhouse in Williamsburg to see Shakespeare's plays and plays by others as often as he could. In 1760, when he was 15, he began writing in his literary commonplace book, filling it with quotations from Shakespeare and other favorites. An early entry, from Julius Caesar, seemed to display a bit of rebellion against his mother's rule after his father's death: "Do not presume too much upon my love; / I may do that I shall be sorry for."¹⁴



The library of fifteenth president, James Buchanan, included *The Plays of William Shakspeare in Six Volumes*. The set is now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

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A gifted violinist (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/music-dance-at-the-white-house>), Jefferson also copied a passage from Shakespeare about music into his commonplace book:

"The Man who has not Music in Soul

or is not touch'd with Concord of sweet Sounds,

Is fit for Treasons, Strategems and Spoils,

The Motions of his Mind are dull as Night,

And his Affections dark as Erebus:

Let no such Man be trusted."

Jefferson also liked political passages from plays such as *Henry IV*, *Coriolanus*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, and the comment on cowardice from *Julius Caesar*: "Cowards die many times before their deaths; / The valiant never taste of death but once." ¹⁵

After Jefferson became a lawyer, he could not resist mentioning Shakespeare in his legal writing. In a case involving the gradual transformation of seven units of land to nearly seventeen, he enjoyed himself by comparing it to Falstaff's mischievous exchange with Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, Part 1, during which the two rogues whom he proudly boasted he had bested became four, then seven, and then eleven. ¹⁶

Jefferson once said he could not live without books, and Shakespeare's plays were certainly among the indispensables. The reading schedule he once recommended was heavy: "From twelve to one read politics. . . . In the afternoon read history. . . . From dark to bedtime: belles lettres, criticism, rhetoric, oratory. . . . Read the best of the poems. . . . But among these Shakespeare must be singled out by one who wishes to learn the full powers of the English language." For Jefferson, reading Shakespeare not only helped form one's "style and taste"; it also produced insights into the English language itself. ¹⁷

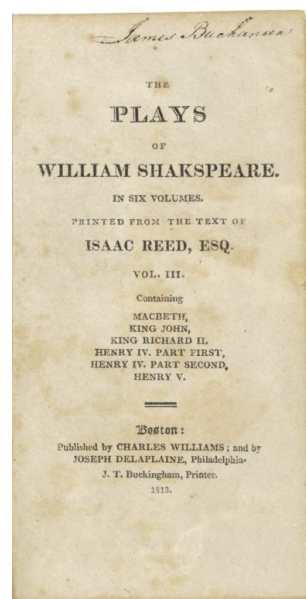


John Adams shared Jefferson's view that reading Shakespeare sharpened one's moral sense. So did his son, John Quincy Adams, who met and admired Jefferson when he was in London as a youngster and was already deep into Shakespeare's plays at the time.

Language fascinated Jefferson; he was something of a linguist. In his essay "Thoughts on English Prosody," he quoted at length from Shakespeare to show where he put the accent on words when giving a speech. But he was even more interested in the sources of the English language. He thought that if people knew something about the development of the language, they would appreciate Shakespeare's genius all the more. "We shall then read Shakespeare," he wrote, "with a superior degree of intelligence and delight, heightened by the new and delicate shades of meaning developed to us by a knowledge of the original sense of the same words." It was Jefferson's belief that research into the various county dialects spoken in England would reveal the development of the English language in all its richness. "When these local vocabularies are published and digested into a single one, it is probable we shall find that there is not a word in Shakespeare which is not now in use in some of the counties of England, from which we may obtain its true sense." ¹⁸

Like Adams, however, Jefferson was more struck by the moral truths he found in Shakespeare's plays than by their linguistic skill. These plays, he was convinced, like all the great works of fiction, help "fix us in the principles and practices of virtue" and in "an abhorrence" of vice. "I appeal to every reader of feeling and sentiment whether the fictitious murder of Duncan by Macbeth does not excite in him as great a horror of villainy, as the real one of Henry IV [of France] by Ravaillac as related by Davila." In the same way, "a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written." ¹⁹

John Adams shared Jefferson's view that reading Shakespeare sharpened one's moral sense. So did his son, John Quincy Adams, who met and admired Jefferson when he was in London as a youngster and was already deep into Shakespeare's plays at the time. When he was only 10, the younger Adams had already discovered the Shakespeare collections in his mother's bedroom closet and devoured *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *King Lear*. "The humors of Falstaff scarcely affected me at all," he recalled, "but the incantations of Prospero, the loves of Ferdinand and Miranda, the more than ethereal brightness of Ariel, and the worse than beastly grossness of Caliban, made for me a world of revels, and lapped me in Elysium." Adams soon came to appreciate Shakespeare's clowns, too, and his youthful attraction to Shakespeare developed into deep appreciation as an adult. "My admiration for Shakespeare as a profound delineator of human nature and a sublime poet," he once wrote, "is but little short of idolatry." ²⁰



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As an undergraduate at Harvard, John Quincy Adams (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/john-quincy-adams>) joined an informal club of about ten students who met every Saturday night to drink wine, exchange witticisms, and toss nicknames at each other, many of them coming from Shakespeare. Since he planned to become a lawyer, he decided, as his father had done, to get some practice in public speaking, since he really was not very good at it. As a junior, he got to recite Shakespeare's famous "All the world's a stage" passage one night before all the students in the college chapel. When he described the learned justice in the play "with fair round belly," everyone laughed because he was a bit plump himself. By the time he graduated John Quincy Adams had written and delivered seventeen orations, before various student organizations, that the students apparently liked. One of them dealt with *Othello*, his first venture into a Shakespeare critique.²¹

When John Quincy Adams decided to talk about *Othello*, he must have known that his mother, Abigail Adams (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/abigail-adams>), disliked the play. Mrs. Adams was as warm an admirer of Shakespeare as her husband and son were, but when she saw the great English actress Sarah Siddons play Desdemona in a production of *Othello* in London in 1786, she had mixed feelings. As Desdemona, she found Siddons as "interesting beyond any actress I have ever seen," but to see her in the arms of Othello, a black man, came as a shock. Othello, played by John Kemble, in blackface, "was represented blacker than any African," she wrote afterward, and whether it was from "the prejudices of education" or from a "natural antipathy" to blacks, "my whole soul shuddered whenever I saw the sooty heretic Moor touch the fair Desdemona." Othello was "manly, generous, noble" in character, she admitted, but his color put her off. Her husband, who saw the play with her, was impressed by her "horror and disgust" every time the "sooty" actor touched Desdemona, even though she knew they were acting in a play. Mrs. Adams deeply regretted her feelings; she reminded herself that there was "something estimable" in every human being. The "liberal mind," she reminded herself, "regards not what nation or climate it springs up in, not what *color* or *complexion* the man is."²²



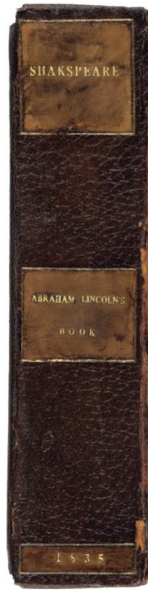
Hamlet seems to have been [John Quincy] Adams's favorite play. He thought it represented "the heart and soul of man in all their perfection and all their frailty." He quoted from it, commented on passages in it, and even published an article, "The Character of Hamlet," explaining his liking for the play in some detail

Years later, when Mrs. Adams's son gave his speech about Othello at a meeting of one of the student organizations at Harvard, he pointed out that the play was regarded as "the most perfect of all, that we owe to the immortal Shakespeare," and that "if we attend merely to the conduct of it, we may readily confess that few dramatic performances are better." Still, he went on to announce grimly that "the very foundation upon which the whole fabric is erected" was "injurious, disgusting, and contrary to all probability." Like his mother, he simply could not believe that "a young woman so virtuous and chaste as Desdemona" would, in Shakespeare's words, "Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom" of a Negro. John Quincy Adams praised the parts of the play he liked, but he seemed to think that the play's human improbabilities destroyed the pleasure one usually derived from Shakespeare's plays.²³

John Quincy Adams felt so strongly about *Othello's* shortcomings that years later he published an article in the *New England Magazine* (1835) in which he expanded on his dislike for the play. Who can sympathize with Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian nobleman, he wanted to know, who "falls in love and makes a runaway match with a blackamoor for no better reason than that he has told her a braggart story of his hairbreadth escapes in war. For this, she not only violates her duties to her father, her family, her sex, and her country, but she makes the first advance. . . The blood must circulate briskly in the veins of a young woman, so fascinated, and so coming to the tale of a rude, unbleached African soldier."²⁴

For John Quincy Adams, the "great moral lesson" of Othello was that "black and white blood cannot be intermingled in marriage without a gross outrage upon the law of Nature." On the stage, he wrote, Desdemona's "fondling" with Othello "is disgusting." The way she behaves is so repelling, he concluded, "that when Othello smothers her in bed, the terror and the pity subside immediately into the sentiment that she has her deserts." A

few years later, when the British actress Fanny Kemble met Adams on her first trip to Boston, she recalled that he began “talking to me about Desdemona” and “assured me, with a most serious expression of sincere disgust, that he considered all her misfortunes as a very just judgment upon her for having married a ‘nigger.’” Kemble was deeply offended by Adams’s language. She told a friend that if some antiabolitionist Americans produced the play, they might well change Iago’s first soliloquy, “I hate the Moor!” to “I hate the nigger!”²⁵



The Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare, now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library, is inscribed “A Lincoln” in pencil near the top right edge of the title page.

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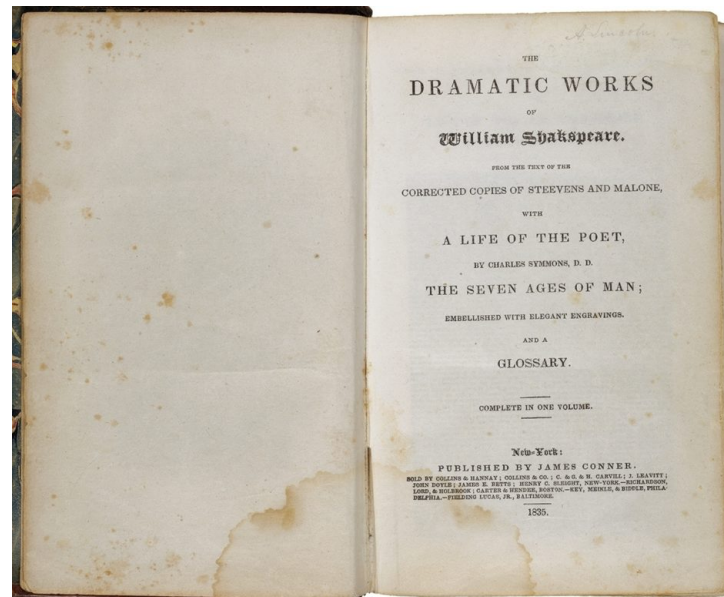
John Quincy Adams contributed significantly to the antislavery cause in America when he served in Congress after leaving the White House, and, in 1841, he won freedom for slave mutineers aboard the Spanish ship *Amistad* in a case he argued before the U.S. Supreme Court. Still, he remained proud of his piece on *Othello*. When the actor, James H. Hackett, with whom he exchanged letters about *Hamlet*, wrote to say he had heard about Adams’s article on *Othello* and wanted to know whether he could procure it, John Quincy Adams happily decided that this “extension of my fame is more tickling to my vanity than it was to be elected President of the United States.”²⁶

Othello was not the only play that Adams disliked. He also had little liking for *King Lear*. The “old king,” he complained, was “nothing less than a dotard.” The “dotage of an absolute monarch may be a suitable subject of tragedy,” he conceded, “and Shakespeare made a deep tragedy of it. But, as exhibited on the stage, it is turned into a comedy.” He also complained that producers of *Romeo and Juliet* got into the habit of raising Juliet’s age, 14 in the play, to 19 on the stage, thus spoiling Shakespeare’s portrayal of an innocent young girl, accompanied by a nurse, by turning her into a mature young woman who knew her way around.²⁷ For the rest, though, Adams’s love for Shakespeare was mainly unrestrained. Like his father and Jefferson, he was forever quoting him in his diaries, letters, articles, and books, including the earnest *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* (1810).

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John Quincy Adams liked the way Coriolanus called Valeria the “moon of Rome,” for he thought it conveyed the idea of “extraordinary chastity.” He thought the advice given in *The Taming of the Shrew* was excellent: “Talk logic with acquaintance that you have / And practice rhetoric in your common talk.” He adored these lines in *Titus Andronicus* “She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d; / She is a woman, therefore may be won.” There were other passages in Shakespeare Adams cited time and again, insisting that no repetition could make these lines “uninteresting.” He regarded the passage in *Measure for Measure* commencing “Ay, but to die, and go we know not where,” as one of the most thoughtful accounts ever written on how people feel at the end of their lives. As for his chances of becoming president in 1824, he followed what he called “The Macbeth Policy”: “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir.”²⁹

Hamlet seems to have been Adams's favorite play. He thought it represented "the heart and soul of man in all their perfection and all their frailty." He quoted from it, commented on passages in it, and even published an article, "The Character of Hamlet," explaining his liking for the play in some detail. For Adams, the play focused on the clash between Hamlet's mind and heart, and revealed "every part of the character and conduct" of the young prince. Hamlet "reflects upon life, upon death, upon the nature of man, upon the physical composition of the universe," Adams noted; "he indulges in minute criticism upon the performance of the players; he comments upon a satire in Juvenal; he quibbles with a quibbling grave digger; he commemorates the convivial attractions of an old jovial table companion . . . and philosophized upon the dust of imperial Caesar, metamorphized into the bung of a beer barrel." Adams himself thought that man's passions and appetites placed him "on a level with the heads of the forests," but that "by our reason we participate of the divine nature itself." He adored Hamlet's soliloquy with Guildenstern, commencing, "What a piece of work is man!" In short, for John Quincy Adams, *Hamlet* was "the Master Piece of the drama—the Master Piece of Shakespeare—I had almost said the Master Piece of the human mind."³⁰



The Dramatic Works of William Shakspeare, now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library, is inscribed "A Lincoln" in pencil near the top right edge of the title page.

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If John Quincy Adams's favorite play was *Hamlet*, Abraham Lincoln (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/abraham-lincoln>)'s was *Macbeth*, though he liked *Hamlet* and *Othello*, too. The reasons for his choices were the same as those of Adams: the stunning insights into the way people feel, think, and behave. Of all the plays Lincoln read, he turned most often to *Macbeth*; he cherished it.

Unlike the other White House Shakespeareans, Lincoln had a meager education; he spent a few months in a "blab" school, where the pupils recited their lessons aloud. But from almost the beginning, he took to books the way the Adamses and Jefferson did, and as a young man he seemed to be reading all the time, when standing, sitting, and even when walking. He devoured the selections from Shakespeare included in William Scott's *Lessons in Elocution* (1825) and committed them to memory. And in New Salem, Illinois, he befriended Jack Kelso, a friendly fellow "with the soul of a poet," who took him farther down the road to Shakespeareland. Kelso loved Shakespeare and fishing "above all else," it was said, and Lincoln loved Shakespeare, "but not fishing." Still, the two sat for hours on the bank of the Sangamon River, fishing, quoting Shakespeare, and arguing about the plays.³¹

Later on, when Lincoln was a clerk in a general store in New Salem, he sneaked in some Shakespeare when he was not waiting on customers. And when he became a lawyer and rode the circuit, he usually carried a much-used copy of *Macbeth* with him. He even mentioned Shakespeare in some of his court cases. Defending some minors who had signed a contract they could not pay for, he "slowly got up" in the courtroom, and "in his strange, half-erect attitude and clear, quiet accent began: 'Gentlemen of the Jury, are you willing to allow these boys to begin life with this shame

and disgrace attached to their character? The best judge of human character that ever wrote has left these immortal words for all of us to ponder.”

Then he quoted:

”Good name in man, or woman, dear my lord,

Is the immediate jewel of their souls.

Who steals my purse steals trash;

’Tis something, nothing;

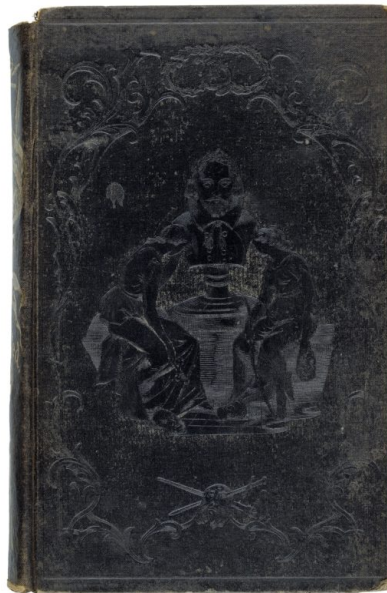
’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slaves for

thousands;

But he that filches from me my good name

Robs me of that which not enriches him,

And makes me poor indeed.”³²



President James A. Garfield owned an illustrated set of *Shakespeare's Complete Works*, bound in tooled leather. The volumes are labeled with Garfield's bookplate and feature illustrations of Shakespeare's plays and characters.

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Lincoln's first speech in Congress in December 1847 contained Shakespeare, too. He was responding to [President James K. Polk](https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/james-polk) (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/bios/james-polk>)'s call for a declaration of war. Lincoln spoke for the antiwar congressmen who were convinced that Polk provoked the war himself by sending troops into land belonging to Mexico (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-president-and-washington-during-the-war-with-mexico>). In his speech in the House of Representatives, the young congressman from Illinois demanded to know exactly where the “spot” was where Polk said American blood was shed. He posed eight questions about the “spot,” and his queries came to be known as the “Spot Resolutions.” Lincoln was of course thinking of Macbeth when he emphasized the word “spot.”³³ In the play, the guilt-ridden Lady Macbeth rubs her hands to remove the red traces of her crime and cries out: “out, damned spot! out, I say! . . . What, will these hands ne'er be clean?”

When Lincoln became president in March 1861, he now had access, for the first time, to theaters in Washington that presented the plays he had come to admire so much, with distinguished performers, British and American, playing the parts he knew so well. If he liked the performance of

an actor, he usually invited him to visit the presidential box for a chat and later entertained some actors in the White House. During his presidency he attended more than a hundred plays in Washington (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/presidents-passion-for-music>), many of them Shakespeare's, sometimes with his wife Mary and son Tad and sometimes with his secretaries. The plays—comedies, histories, tragedies—gave him peace and respite from the stresses and strains of the Civil War presidency. once, one of his assistants saw him in a Washington theater entranced by the gifted James H. Hackett's performance as Falstaff in *Henry IV*, and he could not help thinking: "He has forgotten the war. He has forgotten Congress. He is out of politics. He is living in Prince Hal's time."³⁴ Lincoln came to believe that Shakespeare's comedies were best seen on the stage, while reading the tragedies was perhaps even more important than seeing them staged.

Lincoln loved reading Shakespeare to his friends and associates. His secretary John Hay recalled the time the president took him to the Soldiers' Home and "read Shakespeare to me, the end of *Henry VI* and the beginning of *Richard III*, until my heavy eyelids caught his considerate notice and he sent me to bed." During his private entertainments at the White House, Lincoln liked to sit by the fire and read Shakespeare aloud for the guests. once, at Fort Monroe, he began reading *King John* to one of the officers there and when he reached the passage where Constance bewails the loss of her child, "his voice trembled," according to the officer, and "he was deeply moved." Putting the book down, he asked the officer: "Did you ever dream of a lost friend and feel that you were having a sweet communion with that friend, and yet a consciousness that was not a reality?" "Yes," replied the officer. "I think almost anyone may have had such an experience." "So do I," said Lincoln thoughtfully. "I dream of my dead boy, Willie, again and again." He bowed his head and wept.³⁵



President James A. Garfield owned an illustrated set of *Shakespeare's Complete Works*, bound in tooled leather. The volumes are labeled with Garfield's bookplate and feature illustrations of Shakespeare's plays and characters.

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One of Lincoln's favorite plays was *Othello*. He was eager to see it performed in Washington, and when he did get to see it, one of his secretaries who was with him was struck by "the keen interest with which he followed the development of Iago's subtle treachery. One would have thought that such a character would have had few points of attraction for a man to whose nature all its peculiar traits were so utterly foreign. Perhaps he was fascinated by the very contrast." Lincoln insisted on talking to the Iago performer between acts, with "a very near approach to excitement."

³⁶

Lincoln had none of the revulsion that John Quincy Adams had for the character of Othello. Later on, when newly formed black regiments distinguished themselves in the siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864, the president was enormously pleased. He recalled a story some of his friends in Chicago told him about the reaction of their black servant to a presentation of the play, "with the distinguished actor, Edwin Forrest playing Othello. Asked afterward what he thought of the play, the servant said thoughtfully: 'Well, layin' aside all sectional prejudices and any partiality I may have for the race, derned ef I don't think the nigger held his own with any on 'em.'" Lincoln thought the black soldiers had bravely "held their own" on the battlefield.³⁷

Lincoln made friends with several Shakespearean actors—Edwin Booth (Hamlet), Edwin Forrest (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/edwin-forrest-as-king-lear>) (Lear), John McCullough (Edgar)—but the one he got to know best was James H. Hackett. He liked Hackett’s portrayal of Falstaff so much that he let the actor know of his admiration. Extremely pleased by the recognition, Hackett sent the president an autographed copy of a book he had written about Shakespeare, with a note of appreciation. When Lincoln wrote back, to thank him, he made some comments of his own on some of Shakespeare’s plays. “For one of my age I have seen very little of the Drama,” he told Hackett.



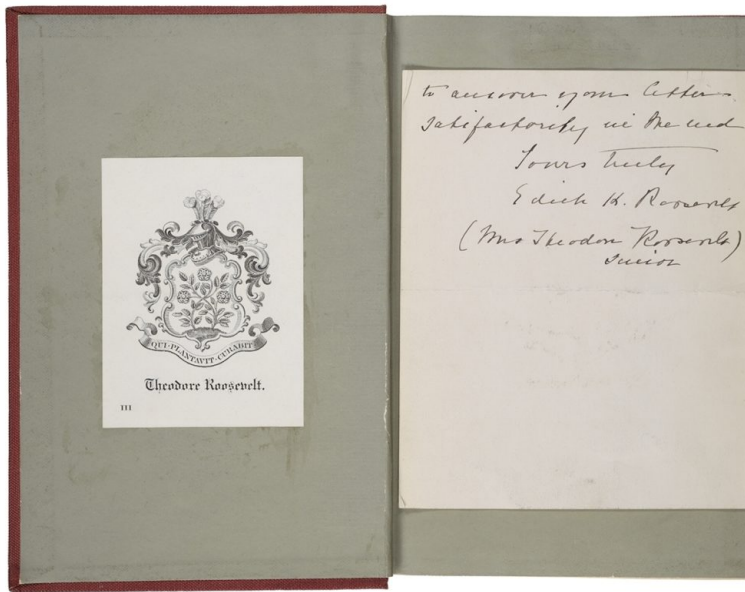
The actor Edwin Booth in costume as Hamlet was a friend of President Abraham Lincoln and the brother of Lincoln’s assassin John Wilkes Booth.

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"The first presentation of Falstaff I ever saw was yours, here last winter or spring. Perhaps the best compliment I can pay, is, to say, as truly as I can, I am very anxious to see it again. Some of Shakespeare’s Plays, I have never read, whilst others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth. I think none equals Macbeth. It is wonderful. Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in Hamlet commencing “o, my offense is rank,” surpassed that commencing “To be; or not to be.” But pardon this small attempt at criticism. I should like to hear you pronounce the opening speech of Richard the Third.”³⁸

Delighted by Lincoln’s praise, Hackett had the letter printed as a broadside entitled “A Letter from President Lincoln” to be circulated in Washington. But the newspapers got wind of it and began making snide remarks about Lincoln’s comments on some of Shakespeare’s plays. The *New York Herald* was particularly nasty. The editor dismissed the letter as an “awkward speech,” written in “decidedly self taught grammar” by a man who was one of a “crowd of arrogant pretenders to taste,” and then added sarcastically that the president “has displayed a variety of attainment, a depth of knowledge, a fund of anecdotes, a power of analysis and correct judgement that stamp him as the most remarkable man of the age. It remained for him to be a dramatic critic of the first order and the profound commentator on Shakespeare. The Falstaff of our age has been honored with an autograph letter from the American autocrat just as Shakespeare was honored with an amicable letter from King James the First and which we are told that most learned prince and great patron of learning was pleased with his own hands to write.”³⁹

Greatly embarrassed by the assaults on Lincoln, Hackett wrote the president to apologize, and in his return the president refrained from chiding the actor for publicizing his letter. “Give yourself no uneasiness on the subject,” he wrote. “I certainly did not expect to see my note in print; yet, I have not been much shocked by the comments on it. They are a fair specimen of what has occurred to me through life. I have endured a great deal of ridicule, without much malice; and have received a great deal of kindness, not quite free from ridicule. I am used to it.”⁴⁰ For Lincoln, the pleasure of seeing Hackett play Falstaff far outweighed the pain of abuse from the press.



The Riverside Shakespeare, once in the library of twenty-sixth president Theodore Roosevelt, was given to the Folger Shakespeare Library by Edith Roosevelt. The edition was edited by American theater critic Richard Grant White, whose son, the architect Stanford White, was a friend of Mrs. Roosevelt.

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But Lincoln was not silenced by the sneers. His love of Shakespeare was so deep that he could not help expressing his opinions about the plays he knew to the actors he chatted with in the theater and sometimes invited to the White House for talks. Not only did he let them know that he preferred a later soliloquy in *Hamlet* to the famous "To be, or not to be," passage; he also criticized players who he thought misinterpreted lines in the plays or omitted lines he considered essential to the mood of the scene. The fact is that Shakespeare had become such an inextricable part of Lincoln that it is hard to imagine him without the great English writer. ⁴¹

Sometimes Lincoln had fun with Shakespeare. Since he regarded himself as ugly, he once singled out a passage in *King Richard the Third* that he thought fit himself perfectly. At the outset of the play, he noted, Richard complains bitterly about his homeliness:

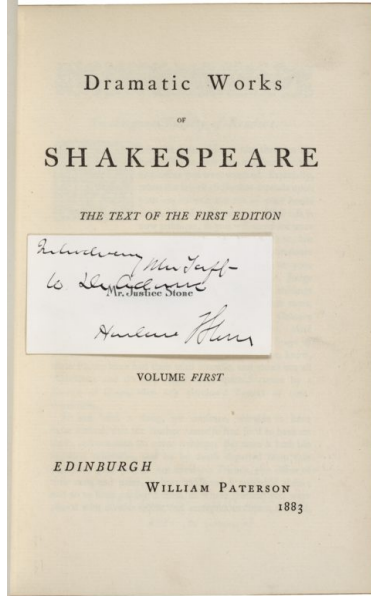
"Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,

Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time,

Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,

And that so lamely and unfashionable

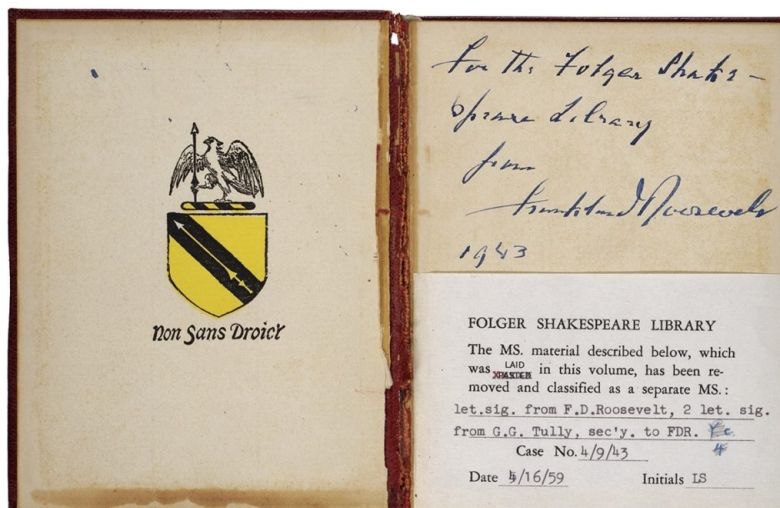
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them."



The *Dramatic Works of Shakespeare* once owned by First Lady Helen Taft and now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library contains the calling card of Supreme Court Justice Harlan Stone inscribed with a note introducing Mrs. Taft to Dr. Adams (Joseph Quincy Adams).

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In March 1864, when the painter Francis B. Carpenter met with Lincoln to do a large painting of the president reading the Emancipation Proclamation to members of his cabinet, he was struck by the president's immersion in Shakespeare during the days he spent with him. "It matters not to me whether Shakespeare be well or ill acted," he quoted Lincoln as telling him, "with him the thought suffices." Later Lincoln mentioned his favorite soliloquy in *Hamlet*—that of King Claudius about murdering his brother—and then, throwing himself into the spirit of the scene, he "repeated this entire passage from memory, with a feeling and appreciation unsurpassed by anything I witnessed on the stage." When Lincoln finished, he turned to the opening of *King Richard the Third*, where Richard appears on the stage and commences, "Now is the winter of our discontent." Most actors playing the part, he told Carpenter, begin with "a flourish" and proceed in "sophomore style." They get it wrong, he insisted, for Richard appears just after the crowning of Edward, and he is "burning with repressed hate and jealousy." To prove his point, Lincoln took over the role himself, repeated Richard's soliloquy from memory, and rendered it "with a degree of force and power that made it seem like a new creation to me," Carpenter remembered. The painter simply could not help putting down his palette and brushes when Lincoln finished, applauding him heartily, and telling him that he "was not sure that he had made a mistake in the choice of a profession," to Lincoln's great amusement. ⁴³



President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Shakespeare collection. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt owned the 40-volume collection of the Temple Shakespeare, Israel Gollancz edition. The title page of the *Hamlet* volume is seen here. With his 1943 inscription on the flysheet, President Roosevelt gave the set to the Folger Shakespeare Library.

But Carpenter saw Lincoln's melancholy side, too. "In repose," he wrote, "it was the saddest face I ever knew. There were days when I could scarcely look into it without crying. The first week of the battle of the Wilderness he scarcely slept at all." Carpenter knew also that Shakespeare's comedies always raised Lincoln's spirits. "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*." ⁴⁴

Yet even Shakespeare's comedies could not help during the bloody battle of the Wilderness. One day, John W. Forney, a Philadelphia journalist, overheard Lincoln cry out: "My God! My God!" when he learned that 20,000 men had been killed and wounded during the fighting. "I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!" Later that week, Forney found him "ghastly pale, dark wings under his caverned eyes, hair brushed back from his temples," hunched in a chair reading his favorite tragedy. "Let me read you this from *Macbeth*," Lincoln exclaimed when he saw Forney. "I cannot read it like Forrest, but it comes to me tonight like a consolation," and he quietly read the passage:

"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." ⁴⁵



President Calvin Coolidge's personalized bookplate is affixed to a volume of Shakespeare's works now in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library. The illustration features a view of Coolidge's homestead in Vermont.

Shakespeare was with Lincoln to the end. On Sunday, April 9, 1865, with the war over, he was returning to Washington on the River Queen from City Point, Virginia, where he had visited the front, and he talked Shakespeare to his companions, read aloud to them, and recited his favorite passages from memory. He spent most of his time on *Macbeth*. “The lines after the murder of Duncan,” recalled the Marquis de Chambrun, a foreign visitor, “when the new king falls a prey to moral torment, were dramatically dwelt on. Now and then he paused to expatiate on how exact a picture Shakespeare here gives of a murderer’s mind when, dark deed achieved, its perpetrator already envies his victim’s calm sleep.” Lincoln’s companions were struck by the slow, quiet way he read the lines:

"Duncan is in his grave;

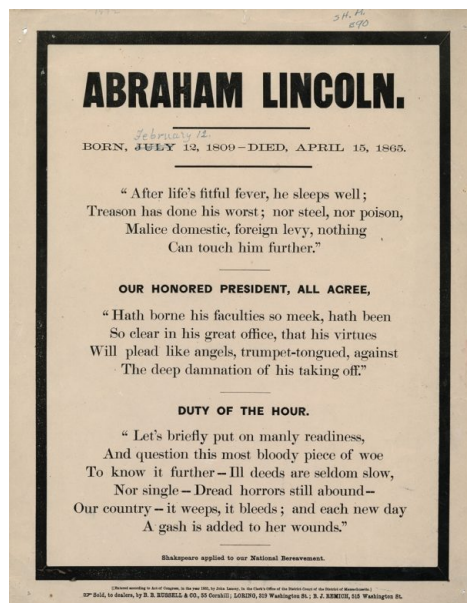
After life’s fitful fever, he sleeps well,

Treason has done his worst; not steel, nor poison,

Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing can touch

him farther."

When Lincoln finished, he paused for a moment, and then read the lines slowly over again. “I then wondered,” reflected one of his friends, “whether he felt a presentiment of his approaching fate. (<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/fords-theater-and-the-white-house>)” ⁴⁶



This black-bordered funeral broadside published following President Lincoln’s death and titled “Shakespeare applied to our National Bereavement” included a passage from *Macbeth* that the president read aloud to his companions just days before his assassination.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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