

INDIANA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

VOLUME XXXI

DECEMBER, 1935

NUMBER 4

Lincoln Knew Shakespeare

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Abraham Lincoln first became acquainted with the works of William Shakespeare while a youth in Southern Indiana.¹ At this time, he read several books belonging to David Turnham one of which was Scott's *Lessons in Elocution*. This volume contained many selections from Shakespeare.² A study of reminiscences of Lincoln leads to the conclusion that many of his favorite selections from the great English playwright were the speeches and soliloquies that he first learned in the old text book by Scott. His appreciation of these passages indicates an intensive study of the book.³

Since Lincoln must have read Scott's book from beginning to end, there is every probability that the first literature of Shakespeare to come to his attention was the poem entitled "Description of Mab, Queen of the Fairies."⁴ Other Shakes-

¹ Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 37 (Note 1). "He . . . read at Turnham's house Scott's *Lessons and Sindbad the Sailor*."

² M. L. Houser *The Books that Lincoln Read*, No. IV, 7, 9. "The larger part of one whole section of Scott's *Elocution* is devoted to Shakespearian Gems."

³ Letter of M. L. Houser, Dec. 21, 1934, in Lincoln National Life Foundation, Correspondence Files. "I would guess that Lincoln not only read all of the Scott book, but that he re-read it until he knew it thoroughly. People of the present generation, how country boys without benefit of public libraries used to devour the comparatively small number of books to which they had access, or how they read such books over and over again—time after time."

⁴ The description of Queen Mab is from near the end of the fourth scene of Act I of *Romeo and Juliet*. Houser, in his letter of December 21, 1934, above cited, says:

"I have no idea whether or not this was the first thing by Shakespeare that Lincoln read. If, as some suppose, he first read that author in this book, and he read the articles in this book consecutively, it then, of course, would be. It is an interesting speculation.

"It appears that Queen Mab was first mentioned by Irish poets, probably Shakespeare got the idea from them, and later poets, generally, notably Shelly, got the thought from Shakespeare. In Celtic folk-lore, we are told Queen Mab was midwife of the fairies. In the lines omitted in Scott's work (Robert Bailey, Lancaster, Pa., 1805) Mercutio speaks of her more as a witch, saying:

This is the very Mab
That plats the manes of horses in the night.

This would interest Lincoln because many, if not most, of the unlettered people with whom he associated believed that witches rode the horses at night, and tangled their manes."

pearian matter contained in this old book of elocution included selections from Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Henry IV, Othello, Henry V, Richard III, and As You Like It. They are grouped under section five of the book, the heading being "Speeches and Soliloquies."

One selection in Scott's work made an unusually lasting impression upon the mind of the youthful Lincoln. It was the "Soliloquy of Hamlet's Uncle on the Murder of his brother" taken from the Tragedy of Hamlet. It seems to have been Lincoln's favorite:

Oh! My offence is rank; it smells to heaven;
 It hath the primal, eldest curse upon it!
 A brother's murder!—Pray I cannot,
 Though inclination be as sharp as t'will—
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;
 And like a man to double business bound,
 I stand in pause where I shall first begin—
 And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood—
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
 To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy,
 But to confront the visage of offence?
 And what's in prayer, but this twofold force;
 To be forestalled ere we come to fall—
 Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up.
 My fault is past. But, oh. What form or prayer
 Can serve my turn? Forgive me my foul murder,
 That cannot be, since I am still possess'd
 Of those effects for which I did the murder—
 My crown, my own ambition, and my queen.
 May one be pardoned, and retain th' offence?
 In the corrupted currents of this world,
 Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice;
 And oft 'tis seen, the wicked prize itself
 Buys out the laws, but 'tis not so above.
 There is no shuffling—there the action lies
 In its true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
 E'en to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
 To give in evidence. What then? What rests?
 Try what repentance can, what can it not?
 Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?
 Oh, wretched state! Oh, bosom black as death!
 Oh, limed soul, that struggling to be free,
 Art more engaged! Help angels! Make assay!
 Bow, stubborn knees—and, heart, with strings of steel
 Be soft, as sinews of the new born babe
 All may be well.

So well did Lincoln like the soliloquy of Hamlet's Uncle that on August 17, 1863, he wrote a letter to James H. Hackett, a Shakespearean actor, regarding the passage. In this letter he expressed this contention: "Unlike you gentlemen of the profession I think the soliloquy in 'Hamlet' commencing 'Oh! my offence is rank' surpasses that commencing 'To be or not to be.'"⁵

While a youth, Lincoln memorized many selections, and upon reciting them to his associates in later years he naturally created much surprise.⁶ Contemporaries of Lincoln in Illinois have stated that he usually kept a copy of Shakespeare's plays in his pocket when he was traveling the circuit, and that he read them during spare moments.⁷ Jack Kelso, Lincoln's New Salem friend, may have been responsible for Lincoln's appreciation of Shakespeare. His Illinois literary environment was sadly deficient, but through association with this village philosopher who could recite Shakespeare and Burns by the hour, Lincoln came to have an early appreciation of good literature. It was said by New Salem residents that Kelso drew Lincoln after him with his talk.⁸

The recent discovery of Lincoln's own copy of Shakespeare's works has thrown additional light on the subject.⁹ The edition that Lincoln owned while living in Illinois, and with considerable probability the book contemporary historians have mentioned, was published by James Conner in New York in the year, 1835. This original work contained the autograph of Lincoln on the title page.¹⁰ On the first page there is also written: "From Dr. Smith's Library." In another hand there is written: "Bought by him or presented to him by Abraham Lincoln." This particular copy shows many signs of rough usage and is now in very poor condition.¹¹

The title page of Lincoln's own autographed copy is as follows:

⁵ John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln; Complete Works* (2 vol. ed.), II, 392-393.

⁶ Rufus Rockwell Wilson, *What Lincoln Read*, 45; Francis F. Browne, *The Everyday Life of Lincoln*, 466. Browne writes: "He [Lincoln] had studied Shakespeare dilligently in his youth, and portions of the plays he repeated with singular accuracy."

⁷ Houser, *Books Lincoln Read*, No. 52, 16.

⁸ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln, the Prairie Years*, 16.

⁹ Letter of John Howell, San Francisco, California, May 10, 1930. Lincoln National Life Foundation, Correspondence Files. M. L. Houser, *Abraham Lincoln Student, His Books*, 81, says: "In an alphabetical list of authors of books Lincoln studied compiled by Esther Cowles Cushman, Lincoln's copy of Shakespeare is shown not to be extant."

¹⁰ The signature is written—A. Lincoln.

¹¹ Letter of John Howell, cited in footnote 9, above, contains statement that Howell sold Lincoln's own copy of this work to a New York collector for approximately \$3000.

The Dramatic Works of William Shakespèare from the text of the Corrected copies of Steevens and Malone with A Life of the Poet By Charles Symmons, D.D. The Seven Ages of Man Embellished with Elegant Engravings and a Glossary. Complete in one volume New York Published by James Conner Sold by Collins & Hannay; Collins & Co.; C & G. & H. Carvill; J. Leavitt; John Doyles; James E. Betts; Henry C. Sleight, New York,—Richardson Lord & Holbrook; Carter & Hendee, Boston,—Key, Meikle, & Biddle, Philadelphia,—Fielding Lucas, Jr., Baltimore 1835.

The first page of the work is headed "The Life of William Shakespeare" by Charles Symmons, D.D.

Little evidence is available concerning Lincoln's study of Shakespeare while he was a member of Congress. However, it is known that he used much of his spare time in the Congressional Library. One author has described his residence there:

In Washington, Mr. Lincoln had been a puzzle and a subject of amusement to his fellows. He did not drink, or use tobacco, or bet or swear. It would seem that he must be a very rigid churchman; but no, he did not belong to any church; and he soon became reckoned an 'unbeliever.' How did he occupy his spare time? He was mousing among the books of the old Congressional Library. . . . He was doing what John Fiske, Bach McMaster, Dr. Von Holst, and others have done. "Bah!" said his fellow Congressmen, "He is a book-worm!"¹²

It is not too much to suppose that, while studying in the Library of Congress, he further acquainted himself with the works of the master poet.

While Lincoln served the nation as President in Washington, he continued his interest in Shakespeare.¹³ Ample testimony of Francis W. Carpenter, Noah Brooks, and others to Lincoln's habit of quoting Shakespeare in his conversation is available. Carpenter, who was a noted artist and a reliable writer, spent considerable time with the President in the White House while making a portrait of Lincoln and his

¹² Hubert M. Skinner, in *The Lincoln Centenary, 1909*. This volume is made up of several articles, the one dealing with the "Lincoln-Douglas Debates" being written by Professor Skinner.

¹³ Major J. B. Merwin, *Lincoln's Study of Shakespeare*. In this broadside, Merwin quoted some purported sayings of Lincoln that were published in an issue of the Rochester (N. Y.) *Democrat and Chronicle*. These included the following statements from Lincoln: "Shakespeare had an unerring moral sense; a sense of justice, of what is due to others, a sense of what is kind, of what is polite, of what is proper under all circumstances." Lincoln is quoted as believing that no preparation was needed for a study of Shakespeare. With the exception of a good edition containing footnote explanations of obsolete words, no aids were necessary. Says Merwin: "This is the way Lincoln studied him. Every jewel of thought, every beauty of sentiment was gathered by Lincoln. On his words will the leading minds of the world always be nourished."

Cabinet.¹⁴ In his book entitled *Six Months at the White House*, he records the following interesting incident:

Edwin Booth was playing an engagement at this time at Grover's Theatre. He had been announced for the coming evening in his famous part of Hamlet. The president had never witnessed his representation of this character, and he proposed being present. The mention of this play, which I afterwards learned had at all times a peculiar charm for Mr. Lincoln's mind, worked up a train of thought I was not prepared for. Said he,—and his words have often returned to me with a sad interest since his own assassination—"There is one passage of the play 'Hamlet' which is very apt to be slurred over by the actor, or omitted altogether, which seems to me the choicest part of the play. It is the soliloquy of the king after the murder. It always struck me as one of the finest touches of nature in the world."

Then, throwing himself into the very spirit of the scene, . . . he repeated the entire passage from memory, with a feeling and appreciation unsurpassed by anything I ever witnessed upon the stage.¹⁵

When Lincoln spent several days in the year 1862 at Fortress Monroe viewing military operations, his favorite diversion was reading Shakespeare.¹⁶ Carpenter gives a very interesting incident of Lincoln's deeper appreciation of Shakespeare which occurred during his stay at the fort. The artist-historian's reminiscence is as follows:

One day (it chanced to be the day before the capture of Norfolk) as he sat reading alone, he called to his aide, Colonel LeGrand Cannon of General Wool's staff in the adjoining room,—“You have been writing long enough, Colonel; come in here; I want to read you a passage in Hamlet.” He read the discussion on ambition between Hamlet and his courtiers, and the soliloquy, in which conscience debates of a future state. This was followed by passages from 'Macbeth.' Then opening to 'King John' he read from the third act the passage in which Constance bewails her imprisoned, lost boy.

Closing the book, and recalling the words,—

“And, father Cardinal, I have heard you say

That we shall see and know our friends in heaven:

If that be true, I shall see my boy again;”

Mr. Lincoln said: “Colonel, did you ever dream of a lost friend, and feel that you were holding sweet communion with that friend, and yet have a sad consciousness that it was not a reality?—just so I dream of my boy Willie.”¹⁷

¹⁴ In 1863, Francis B. Carpenter, an artist, was commissioned to paint a picture of Lincoln and his Cabinet to commemorate the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

¹⁵ Francis B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln*, 49-51.

¹⁶ Browne, *Everyday Life of Lincoln*, 386. Browne states that early in May, 1862, President Lincoln accompanied by Stanton and Chase made a visit to Fortress Monroe to obtain first hand knowledge of conditions there and in the vicinity.

¹⁷ Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House*, 115-116.

The editor of the Philadelphia Press, John W. Forney, called upon Lincoln just at the time he was greatly concerned over the tremendous losses of men engaged in the Battles of the Wilderness. Word had been received by him that during the two-day undecided struggle, twenty thousand men on both sides had been killed or wounded. This shock caused Lincoln to give way to an uncontrollable sorrow. While conversing with Forney, he said:

Let me read you this from 'Macbeth.' I cannot read it like Forrest, who is acting at the theatre, but it comes to me tonight like a consolation:

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
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."¹⁸

In the year 1862 records show that a copy of Shakespeare's works was borrowed by the Lincoln family from the Congressional library. The library entry is as follows: "Shakespeare 12 mo. 1 vol. July 23, 1862 to Dec. 24, 1862."¹⁹ This book was undoubtedly used by the President because of his intense interest in the contents. John Hay, the President's secretary, stated that Lincoln read Shakespeare more than all other authors together.²⁰

Because of worry and strain occasioned by the War, many people sought diversion and relaxation in the theatre. As a result of increased attendance the theatrical profession reaped a golden harvest.²¹ Lincoln's frequent attendance on Shakespearian plays caused him to be known as an admirer of Shakespeare's works. James Henry Hackett, the actor, wrote a book entitled *Notes and Comments on Certain Plays and Actors of Shakespeare, with Criticisms and Comments,*

¹⁸ Robert N. Reeves, "Abraham Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," in *Overland Monthly*, April, 1904, 337.

¹⁹ *Lincoln Lore*, No. 129, Sept. 28, 1931 (Bulletin of Lincoln National Life Foundation).

²⁰ William Roscoe Thayer, *The Life of John Hay*, I, 187. "He [Lincoln] would read Shakespeare for hours with a single secretary for audience." *Ibid.*, 334.

²¹ Raymond Warren, "Lincoln the Shakespearian Student," in *The Prairie Farmer*, Feb. 14, 1931.

which he published early in the year 1863.²² Knowing Lincoln's interest in the subject, he presented him with a copy. After considerable delay, the President, on August 17, sent Hackett the following letter:

Months ago I should have acknowledged the receipt of your book and accompanying kind note; and I now have to beg your pardon for not having done so.

For one of my age I have seen very little of the drama. 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 I truly can, I am very anxious to see it again. Some of Shakespeare's plays I have never read, while others I have gone over perhaps as frequently as any unprofessional reader. Among the latter are Lear, Richard III, Henry VIII, Hamlet and especially Macbeth. I think nothing equals Macbeth; I think it is wonderful.

Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in Hamlet commencing "Oh, my offence is rank," surpasses 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 III. Will you not soon visit Washington again? If you do, please call and let me make your personal acquaintance.²³

This letter found its way to the press and Lincoln's "small attempt at criticism" proved to be his last and only venture into this field. He was severely criticised by some of the newspapers for contrasting and commenting on the relative merits of Shakespeare's lines.²⁴ Such a discussion continued the Lincoln-Hackett correspondence and on November 2, 1863, he closed the discussion with the following letter:

Yours of October 22, is received as also was in due course that of October 3. I look forward with pleasure the fulfilment of the promise made in the former.

Give yourself no uneasiness on the subject mentioned in that of the 22d.

My note to you I certainly did not expect to see in print; yet I have not been much shocked by the newspaper comments upon it. Those comments constitute 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.²⁵

²² *A Catalogue of Elizabethan Literature*, published by the John Howell Book Shop, San Francisco, in 1928, gives this book the title: *Notes, Criticisms and Correspondence upon Shakespeare's Plays and Actors*.

²³ Nicolay and Hay, *Works of Lincoln*, II, 392-393.

²⁴ *Addresses of John Hay*, 382. The *New York Herald* was particularly active in criticizing Lincoln's comments on Shakespeare's plays.

²⁵ Nicolay and Hay, *Works of Lincoln*, II, 435.

On December 13, 1863, Hackett spent the evening with Lincoln at the White House.²⁶ During their discussion of Falstaff in the play "Henry IV," the President showed a remarkable knowledge of the characterization. He questioned the actor concerning the omission of the part of the play where Falstaff and Prince Hal alternately assume the character of the king. Lincoln's principal criticism concerning the acted plays was that important parts were omitted, while too great emphasis was placed on less important passages.

On many occasions while conversing with friends, Lincoln quoted from Shakespeare. In order to divert conversation from the War he would say, "What do you say now to a scene from Macbeth or Hamlet." At other times, while in the midst of a conference and wishing to change the subject he would send his son, Tad, to the library for a copy of Shakespeare.²⁷ At one time during his presidency, a discussion arose as to Lincoln's probable career had he gone to Oregon in 1849. His reflection was:

I have all my life been a fatalist, what is to be will be, or rather, I have found all my life as Hamlet says:

"There is a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will."²⁸

Carpenter has given further information on the subject of Lincoln's study of Shakespeare.²⁹ He quotes Lincoln as asserting:

The opening of the play of "King Richard the Third" seems to me often entirely misapprehended. It is quite common for an actor to come upon the stage and in a sophomoric style, to begin with a flourish:—

"Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York,
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house,
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried!"

Now, this is all wrong. Richard, you remember, had been, and was then, plotting the destruction of his brothers, to make room for himself. Outwardly, the most loyal to the newly crowned king, secretly he could scarcely contain his impatience at the obstacles still in the way of his own elevation. He appears upon the stage just after the crown-

²⁶ Thayer, *John Hay*, 208-209.

²⁷ Reeves, "Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," in *Overland Monthly*, April, 1904, 338-339.

²⁸ Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (fifth ed.), 81.

²⁹ For matter pertaining to Lincoln's interest in Shakespeare, see Carpenter, *Six Months in the White House*, 49, 115, 150, 162.

ing of Edward, burning with repressed hate and jealousy. The prologue is the utterance of the most intense bitterness and satire.

In his comments upon Lincoln's keen interest and feeling concerning his favorite selections of Shakespeare, Carpenter makes the following comments:

Then, unconsciously assuming the character, Mr. Lincoln repeated, also from memory, Richard's soliloquy, rendering it with a degree of force and power that made it seem like a new creation to me. Though familiar with the passage from boyhood, I can truly say that never till that moment had I fully appreciated its spirit. I could not refrain from laying down my palette and brushes, and applauding heartily, upon his conclusion, saying, at the same time, half in earnest, that I was not sure but that he had made a mistake in the choice of a profession, considerably, as may be imagined, to his amusement. Mr. Sinclair has since repeatedly said to me that he never heard these choice passages of Shakespeare rendered with more effect by the most famous of modern actors.

The passages of Shakespeare which depict great grief and sorrow seem to have fastened themselves in the mind of the President with a firm hold. "Richard II" has many such passages and Lincoln often read and recited to his friends, one in particular in the third act where Richard gives way to his pent-up grief, he was prone to quote:

. . . Of comfort no man speak:
Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth.
Let's choose executors and talk of wills:
And yet not so, for what can we bequeath
Save our deposed bodies to the ground?
Our lands, our lives and all are Bolinbroke's,
And nothing can we call our own but death,
And that small model of the barren earth
Which serves as paste and cover to our bones.
For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings:
How some have been deposed; some slain in war;
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed;
Some poison'd by their wives; some sleeping killed;
All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,

Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
 As if this flesh which walls about our life
 Were brass impregnable, and humor'd thus
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin
 Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!
 Cover your heads and mock not flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence: throw away respect,
 Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
 For you have but mistook me all this while:
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus:
 How can you say to me, I am a king?³⁰

During the latter period of Lincoln's administration he occasionally carried a well-worn copy of the play "Macbeth," and another of "The Merry Wives of Windsor." On his visits to the telegraph office he would recite passages of Shakespeare's plays to the operators, during the time between the sending and receiving of important military messages.³¹ After seeing Hackett in his performances he became very familiar with the character Falstaff, and would repeat the character's amusing sallies. On one occasion earlier in his administration in discussing the merits of the "Christian Commission," Lincoln stated that in "these days of villany" the commission had made a notable record. He continued, "I believe, however, it is old 'Jack Falstaff' who talks about 'villany' though of course Shakespeare is responsible."³²

Alexander K. McClure somewhere in his writings speaks of President Lincoln's love of Shakespeare, and mentions a meeting between the President, Judge William D. Kelley, Reverend Benjamin Miller, and an actor named John E. McDonough.³³ This actor had played Othello in the Metropolitan Theater at San Francisco, California.³⁴ During the progress of this informal conversation, the President's callers bantered

³⁰ Reeves, "Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," in *Overland Monthly*, April, 1904, 338-339. John Hay says that among the plays of Shakespeare Lincoln "never tired of Richard II. The terrible outburst of grief and despair into which Richard falls in the third act had a peculiar fascination for him. I have heard him read it at Springfield, at the White House, and at the Soldiers' Home." *Addresses of John Hay*, 334.

³¹ David Homer Bates, *Lincoln Stories*, 44-45.

³² Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, 162.

³³ Judge William D. Kelley was a member of the National House from Pennsylvania. The Rev. Benjamin Miller was a devoted Wesleyan minister who was then serving as Chaplain with the One Hundred Nineteenth Pennsylvania Volunteers. John E. McDonough was an eminent actor and an intensely partisan Democrat. He was at this time playing Mrs. Pluto at the National Theatre. Kelley playfully introduced his friends as Parson Miller and Mrs. Pluto, which led Lincoln to remark that there was likely to be discord in a household that embraced a Mrs. Pluto and an orthodox clergyman. See Reeves, "Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," in *Overland Monthly*, April, 1904, 340.

³⁴ Thomas A. Brown, *History of the American Stage* (New York, 1870), 230.

him in a friendly way concerning the pulpit and the stage.³⁵

Lincoln took from his shelf a worn copy of Shakespeare and turning to "Henry IV," read a favorite passage which he described as not being surpassed in wit and humor by anything else in literature. The omission of this passage in the acted play was not understood by Lincoln. He continued his discussion concerning such omissions as follows:

Thus, take the stage edition of Richard III. It opens with a passage from Henry VI, after which some portions of Richard III, then another scene from Henry VI, and the finest soliloquy in the play, if we may judge from the many quotations it furnishes, and the frequency with which it is heard in amateur exhibitions, was never seen by Shakespeare, but was written after his death by Colley Cibber.³⁶

Thus the friendly interview with the President closed, and his three callers departed with a very high regard for Lincoln's knowledge of Shakespeare.

On one occasion while witnessing the play "King Lear," Lincoln was so pleased with the performance of John E. McCullough as the character "Edgar" that he asked the actor to come to his box between the acts. Clad in his fantastic costume of rags and straw the actor received great praise from the President because of his fine performance.³⁷

Lincoln's attendance at theatres presenting Shakespearian plays increased his knowledge of the comedies and tragedies in actual production. At Ford's Theatre he first saw Edwin Booth as Shylock in the "Merchant of Venice."³⁸ Among others, he witnessed James H. Hackett in the "Merry Wives of Windsor," and Edwin Forrest and John McCullough in "King Lear."

Lincoln particularly admired the play "Richard II."³⁹ Among the tragedies, "Richard II" is not considered one of the best. However, for Lincoln it always contained a certain degree of interest. His favorite Shakespearian charac-

³⁵ Raymond Warren, "Lincoln the Shakespearian Student," in *The Prairie Farmer*, Feb. 14, 1931. Warren states that during this meeting Lincoln pointed out comparisons between Shakespeare and Byron, Rogers, Moore, Campbell, and other English poets.

³⁶ Reeves, "Lincoln's Knowledge of Shakespeare," in *Overland Monthly*, April, 1904, 341.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

³⁸ Elihu Wimer, *New York Tribune*, Feb. 11, 1934. Wimer mentions that the President was very fond of Edwin Booth and usually went to see him perform when the actor was in Washington. Once after a presentation of the Merchant of Venice, Lincoln remarked: "It was a good performance but I had a thousand times rather read it at home if it were not for Booth's playing." John Wilkes Booth was a brother of Edwin Booth.

³⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge was of the opinion that Richard II was the best of Shakespeare's purely historical plays.

ter was Falstaff. He was particularly fond of James H. Hackett's performances in this character. Nevertheless, it is known that on several occasions he severely criticised Hackett's presentations. He thought the actor misread one of Falstaff's lines by placing the emphasis on the wrong word. Hackett read the line "Mainly *thrust* at me," which, according to Lincoln, should have been read "Mainly thrust at *me*."⁴⁰ So interested was the President in the lines of Falstaff that he took his two secretaries to Ford's Theatre to witness the play "Henry IV" and to note the inflection of Hackett on the wrong word. It was also the President's opinion that the speech of Hotspur in the play was an unnatural and unworthy thing. In Lincoln's opinion a comedy was best played and a tragedy was best read. He once remarked: "It matters not to me whether Shakespeare be well or ill acted; with him the thought suffices."⁴¹

That Lincoln was particularly interested in Shakespeare up to the time of his death has been brought out in the reminiscences of the Marquis de Chamburn:

On Sunday, April 9th, we were steaming up the Potomac. That whole day the conversation dwelt upon literary subjects. Mr. Lincoln read to us for several hours passages taken from Shakespeare. Most of these were from "Macbeth," and in particular the verses which follow Duncan's assassination. I cannot recall this reading without being awed at the remembrance, when Macbeth became King after the murder of Duncan, he fell a prey to the most horrible torments of mind.

Either because he was struck by the weird beauty of these verses, or from a vague presentiment coming over him, Mr. Lincoln paused here while reading and began to explain to us how true a description of the murderer that one was, when, the dark deed achieved, its tortured perpetrator came to envy the sleep of his victim; and he read over again the same scene.⁴²

One author has stated that while on the steamer returning from Richmond, Lincoln read to Charles Sumner⁴³ the following lines from Macbeth's speech on the murdered king:

. . . . Besides this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking off.

⁴⁰ Thayer, *John Hay*, 209.

⁴¹ Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House*, 49.

⁴² Lincoln National Life Foundation, Correspondence Files.

⁴³ Wilson, *What Lincoln Read*, 45. Lincoln was accompanied to Richmond by Mrs. Lincoln and Senators James Harlan and Charles Sumner.

Isaac N. Arnold in his *Life of Abraham Lincoln* mentioned an edition of Shakespeare that was in his possession. It was the book which Lincoln used while returning from his visit to Richmond and City Point. In a foot-note of the above-mentioned biography the following statement is made: "The author [Isaac N. Arnold] has a quarto edition of Shakespeare, with the name of Lincoln on a blank page, and believes it to be that from which he then read"

It is well known that Lincoln was exceedingly conversant with Shakespeare's works. However, it is unusual that so few quotations from the poet should be included in his letters and speeches. Lincoln made fewer quotations from Shakespeare than from the Bible, yet his conversation was replete with references to Shakespeare's works. His vocabulary was greatly enriched by reading the Bible and Shakespeare.⁴⁴

Lincoln has commonly been represented as one whose literary education was deficient, yet he always considered Shakespeare the greatest of the master poets. In all probability Lincoln had a deeper appreciation of Shakespeare than any other American statesman of his time. This appreciation, which was started in his early life in Indiana, lasted until his untimely death in 1865. Lincoln's intensive study of Shakespeare was made before his election to the presidency. While president he reflected on what he had learned earlier in life of the works of the great master playwright.⁴⁵

Little did Lincoln realize, while first studying Shakespeare in the home of David Turnham, that his name would some day be engraved with that of Shakespeare in stone on the walls of Indiana University, as one of the five great characters of the world. In the Memorial Union Building at the University, the following names appear on the walls: Jesus Christ, Aristotle, Galileo, Shakespeare, and Lincoln.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Merwin, *Lincoln's Study of Shakespeare*. Lincoln asked: "What point is there of morals, of manners, of economy, of religion, that Shakespeare has not settled, what maiden has not found his teachings something finer than her own delicacy? What lover is there whom Shakespeare has not out-loved? What sage that he has not outseen?" Lincoln believed that Shakespeare's plays bring more hope to the common people than any other writings. The poet predicted the future, and Mr. Lincoln sensed this, for nothing escaped him: "If all other books were destroyed excepting the Bible and Shakespeare the world would still have the best literature preserved. Shakespeare's mind was like a sea to which all others in the world were as tributaries, and why should we not drink from this inexhaustible fountain." His words, thought Lincoln, teach more for our use today than this year's almanac, but we must understand how to get it. One can warm his hands and his heart both by the light of his genius for his plays are filled with the "sap of life." He was indeed "one of those geniuses God leaves unbridled, that he might dip into the infinite as far and as deep as he liked!" Merwin, "Lincoln's Study of Shakespeare."

⁴⁵ *Lincoln Lore*, No. 200, February 6, 1933.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 281, August 27, 1934.