

SHAKESPEARE  
*in* AMERICA

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AN ANTHOLOGY FROM THE REVOLUTION TO NOW

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JAMES SHAPIRO, EDITOR  
FOREWORD BY PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON



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## William Winter

(1836–1917)

### *The Art of Edwin Booth: Hamlet*

In 1821 a British actor named Junius Brutus Booth abandoned his wife and son and moved to the United States, starting a new family and spending the next three decades on tour, performing major Shakespeare roles. He would also establish a Shakespeare dynasty, for three of his sons from his second family followed him onto the stage: Junius Brutus Jr., John Wilkes, and Edwin. Edwin Booth was by many accounts the finest American actor of his day (and certainly the best loved), celebrated for his cerebral and naturalistic portrayals of Richard III, Iago, and especially Hamlet, a role he first played in 1853 and continued to perform until his retirement from the stage in 1891. Booth famously played the part a hundred times at New York's Winter Garden during the 1864–65 season, hailed as "the great Shakespearean event of the century" (one that Booth himself grew weary of). Shortly after, his career almost came to an end when his brother John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln and the entire Booth family came under suspicion. Edwin Booth also built one of the greatest American theaters. It stood on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 23rd Street in Manhattan and was adorned with a statue of Shakespeare. But Booth was unable to sustain his vision for it as a cutting-edge theatrical space where a resident company would attract America's leading actors; a decade after the 1873 financial crash and Booth's subsequent declaration of bankruptcy, Booth's Theatre was torn down and replaced by a department store. In 1876 Booth invited William Winter, the distinguished drama critic for the New York *Tribune*, to collaborate on a set of Shakespeare promptbooks, with Winter doing the editing and providing introductory essays. Shortly after Booth died in 1893, Winter published *The Life and Art of Edwin Booth*, in which he recalled Booth's particular gifts in each of his major roles—most notably his Hamlet, which Winter, like many others of the day, considered his greatest.



BOOTH'S impersonation of Hamlet was one of the best known works of the dramatic age. In many minds the actor and the character had become identical, and it is not to be doubted that Booth's performance of Hamlet will live, in commemorative dramatic history, with great representative embodiments of the stage—with Garrick's Lear, Kemble's Coriolanus, Edmund Kean's Richard, Macready's Macbeth, Forrest's Othello, and Irving's Mathias, and Becket. That it deserved historic permanence is the conviction of a great body of thoughtful students of Shakespeare and of the art of acting, in Great Britain and Germany as well as in America. In the elements of intellect, imagination, sublimity, mystery, tenderness, incipient delirium, and morbid passion, it was exactly consonant with what the best analysis has determined as to the conception of Shakespeare; while in sustained vigour, picturesque variety, and beautiful grace of execution, it was a model of executive art,—of demeanour, as the atmosphere of the soul,—facial play, gesticulation, and fluent and spontaneous delivery of the text; a delivery that made the blank verse as natural in its effect as blank verse ought to be, or can be, without ever dropping it to the level of colloquialism and commonplace.

In each of Booth's performances a distinguishing attribute was simplicity of treatment, and that was significantly prominent in his portrayal of Hamlet. The rejection of all singularity and the avoidance of all meretricious ornament resulted in a sturdy artistic honesty, which could not be too much admired. The figure stood forth, distinct and stately, in a clear light. The attitudes, movements, gestures, and facial play combined in a fabric of symmetry and of always adequate expression. The text was spoken with ample vocal power and fine flexibility. The illustrative "business" was strictly accordant with the wonderful dignity and high intellectual worth of Shakespeare's creation. The illusion of the part was created with an almost magical sincerity, and was perfectly preserved. Booth's Hamlet was—as Hamlet on the stage should always be—an imaginative and poetic figure; and yet it was natural. To walk upon the stage with the blank verse stored in memory, with every particle of the business pre-arranged, with

every emotion aroused yet controlled, and every effect considered, known, and preordained, and yet to make the execution of a design seem involuntary and spontaneous,—that is the task set for the actor, and that task was accomplished by Booth.

Much is heard about "nature" in acting, and about the necessity of "feeling," on the part of an actor. The point has been too often obscured by ignorant or careless reasoning. An actor who abdicates intellectual supremacy ceases to be an actor, for he never can present a consistent and harmonious work. To yield to unchecked feeling is to go to pieces. The actor who makes his audience weep is not he who himself weeps, but he who seems to weep. He will have the feeling, but he will control it and use it, and he will not show it in the manner of actual life. Mrs. Siddons said of herself that she had got credit for the truth and feeling of her acting, when she was only relieving her own heart of its grief; but Mrs. Siddons knew how to act, whatever were her personal emotions,—for it was she who admonished a young actor, saying, "You feel too much." Besides, every artist has a characteristic, individual way. If the representative of Hamlet will express the feelings of Hamlet, will convey them to his audience, and will make the poetic ideal an actual person, it makes no difference whether he is excited or quiescent. Feeling did not usually run away with Dion Boucicault: yet he could act Daddy O'Dowd so as to convulse an audience with sympathy and grief. Jefferson, the quintessence of tenderness, has often accomplished the same result with Rip Van Winkle. In one case the feeling was assumed and controlled; in the other, it is experienced and controlled. Acting is an art, and not a spasm; and when you saw Booth as Hamlet you saw a noble exemplification of that art,—the ideal of a poet, supplied with a physical investiture and made actual and natural, yet not lowered to the level of common life.

The tenderness of Hamlet toward Ophelia—or, rather, toward his ideal of Ophelia—was always set in a strong light, in Booth's acting of the part. He likewise gave felicitous expression to a deeper view of that subject—to Hamlet's pathetic realisation that Ophelia is but a fragile nature, upon which his love has been

wasted, and that, in such a world as this, love can find no anchor and no security. The forlorn desolation of the prince was thus made emphatic. One of the saddest things in Hamlet's experience is his baffled impulse to find rest in love—the crushing lesson, not only that Ophelia is incompetent to understand him, but that the stronger and finer a nature is, whether man or woman, the more inevitably it must stand alone. That hope by which so many fine spirits have been lured and baffled, of finding another heart upon which to repose when the burden of life becomes too heavy to be borne alone, is, of all hopes, the most delusive. Loneliness is the penalty of greatness. Booth was definite, also, as to the "madness" of Hamlet.\* He was not absolutely mad, but substantially sane,—guarding himself, his secrets, and his purposes by assumed wildness; yet the awful loneliness of existence to which Hamlet has been sequestered by his vast, profound, all-embracing, contemplative intellect, and by the mental shock and wrench that he has sustained, was allowed to colour his temperament. That idea might, in its practical application, be advantageously carried much further than it ever was by any actor; for, after the ghost-scene, the spiritual disease of the Dane would augment its ravages, and his

\* In reply to a question on this subject, Booth wrote the following letter, which was printed by its recipient, in the *Nashville (Tenn.) Banner*.—

DEAR SIR: The subject to which you refer is, as you well know, one of endless controversy among the learned heads, and I dare say they will "war" over it "till time fades into eternity." I think I am asked the same question nearly three hundred and sixty-five times a year, and I usually find it safest to side with both parties in dispute, being one of those, perhaps, referred to in the last line of the following verse:—

"Genius, the Pythian of the beautiful,  
Leaves her large truths a riddle to the dull;  
From eyes profane a veil the Isis screens,  
And fools on fools still ask what Hamlet means."

Yet, I will confess that I do not consider Hamlet mad,—except in "craft." My opinion may be of little value, but 'tis the result of many weary walks with him, "for hours together, here in the lobby."

Truly yours,  
EDWIN BOOTH.

figure should then appear in blight, disorder, dishevelment, and hopeless misery. Poetic gain, however, may sometimes be dramatic loss. To Hamlet the dreamer, Booth usually gave more emphasis than to Hamlet the sufferer—wisely remembering therein the value of stage effect for an audience. His Hamlet was a man to whom thoughts are things and actions are shadows, and who is defeated and overwhelmed by spiritual perceptions too vast for his haunted spirit, by griefs and shocks too great for his endurance, by wicked and compelling environments too strong for his nerveless opposition, and by duties too practical and onerous for his diseased and irresolute will. That was as near to the truth of Shakespeare as acting can reach, and it made Hamlet as intelligible as Hamlet can ever be.

To a man possessing the great intellect and the infinitely tender sensibility of Hamlet, grief does not come in the form of dejection, but in the form of a restless, turbulent, incessant agonising fever of vital agitation. He is never at rest. The grip that misery has fastened upon his soul is inexorable. Contemplation of the action and reaction of his spirit and his anguish is, to a thoughtful observer, kindred with observance of the hopeless suffering of a noble and beloved friend who is striving in vain against the slow, insidious, fatal advance of wasting disease, which intends death, and which will certainly accomplish what it intends. The spirit of Hamlet is indomitable. It may be quenched, but it cannot be conquered. The freedom into which it has entered is the awful freedom that misery alone can give. Beautiful, desolate, harrowed with pain, but ever tremulous with the life of perception and feeling, it moves among phantom shapes and ghastly and hideous images, through wrecks of happiness and the glimmering waste of desolation. It is a distracted and irresolute spirit, made so by innate gloom and by the grandeur of its own vast perceptions. But it is never supine.

That pathetic condition of agonised unrest, that vitality of exquisite torture in the nature and experience of Hamlet, was indicated by Booth. He moved with grace; he spoke the text with ease, polish, spontaneous fluency, and rich and strong significance.

The noble ideal and the clear-cut execution were obvious. But he crowned all by denoting, with incisive distinctness and with woful beauty, the pathetic vitality of the Hamlet experience. His impersonation had wealth of emotion, exalted poetry of treatment, and a dream-like quality that could not fail to fascinate; but, above all, when at its best, it had the terrible reality of suffering. There was no "realism" in it, no fantastic stage business, no laboured strangeness of new readings: it was a presentment of the spiritual state of a gifted man, whom nature and circumstance have made so clear-sighted and yet so wretchedly dubious that his surroundings overwhelm him, and life becomes to him a burden and a curse. Hamlet is a mystery. But, seeing that personation, the thinker saw what Shakespeare meant. Many a human soul has had, or is now enduring, this experience, confronted with the duty of fulfilling a rational life, yet heartbroken with personal affliction, and bewildered with a sense of the awful mysteries of spiritual destiny and the supernal world. This is the great subject that Booth's performance of Hamlet presented—and presented in an entirely great manner. His scenes with the Ghost had a startling weirdness. His parting from Ophelia had the desolate and afflicting and therefore right effect of a parting from love, no less than from its object. His sudden delirium, in the killing of the concealed spy upon Hamlet's interview with the Queen, was wonderfully fine, and it always evoked a prodigious enthusiasm.

Booth's Hamlet did not love Ophelia. He had left behind not only that special love, but love itself—which was something that he remembered but could no longer feel. His Hamlet retained, under all the shocks of spiritual affliction, and through all the blight of physical suffering, a potent intellectual concentration and a princely investiture of decorous elegance: it was not a Hamlet of collapse and ruin: it was neither "fat" nor "scant of breath"—neither lethargic with the languor of misery, nor heavy with the fleshly grossness of supine sloth and abject prostration. The heart was corroded with sorrow, but the brain stood firm. Yet there were moments when the sanity of Booth's Hamlet lapsed into transient frenzy. A pathetic, involuntary tenderness played

through his manner toward Ophelia, whom once he has loved and trusted, but whom he now knows to be a frail nature, however lovely and sweet. The pervasive tone of the embodiment was that of a sad isolation from humanity, a dream-like vagueness of condition,—as of one who wanders upon the dusky confines of another world,—and a drifting incertitude, very eloquent of the ravages of a terrible spiritual experience. The latter attribute was the poetic charm of Booth's Hamlet, and the poetic charm, the fine intellectuality, and the graceful execution of the work gave it at once extraordinary beauty and remarkable influence.

Acting, at its best, is the union of perfect expression with a true ideal. Booth's ideal of Hamlet satisfied the imagination more especially in this respect, that it left Hamlet substantially undefined. The character, or rather the temperament, was deeply felt, was imparted with flashes of great energy, and at moments was made exceedingly brilliant; but, for the most part, it was lived out in a dream, and was left to make its own way. There was no insistence on special views or on being specifically understood. And this mood mellowed the execution and gave it flexibility and warmth. Booth was an actor of uncertain impulses and conditions, and he was rightly understood only by those who saw him often, in any specified character. Like all persons of acute sensibility, he had his good moments and his bad ones—moments when the genial fire of the soul was liberated, and moments when the artistic faculties could only operate in the hard, cold mechanism of professional routine. Sometimes he seemed lethargic and indifferent. At other times he would put forth uncommon power, and in the ghost scenes and the great third act, would create a thrilling illusion and lift his audience into noble excitement. At its best his performance of Hamlet exalted the appreciative spectator by arousing a sense of the pathos of our mortal condition as contrasted with the grandeur of the human mind and the vast possibilities of spiritual destiny; and therein it was a performance of great public benefit and importance.

Booth's Hamlet was poetic. The person whom he represented was not an ancient Dane, fair, blue-eyed, yellow-haired, stout,

and lymphatic, but was the dark, sad, dreamy, mysterious hero of a poem. The actor did not go behind the tragedy, in quest of historical realism, but, dealing with an ideal subject, treated it in an ideal manner, as far removed as possible from the plane of actual life. Readers of the play of Hamlet are aware that interest in the Prince of Denmark is not, to any considerable extent, inspired by the circumstances that surround him, but depends upon the quality of the man—his spirit and the fragrance of his character. There is an element in Hamlet no less elusive than beautiful, which lifts the mind to a sublime height, fills the heart with a nameless grief, and haunts the soul like the remembered music of a gentle voice that will speak no more. It might be called sorrowful grandeur, sad majesty, ineffable mournfulness, grief-stricken isolation, or patient spiritual anguish. Whatever called, the name would probably be inadequate; but the power of the attribute itself can never fail to be felt. Hamlet fascinates by his personality; and no man can succeed in presenting him who does not possess in himself that peculiar quality of fascination. It is something that cannot be drawn from the library, or poured from the flagon, or bought in the shops. Booth possessed it—and that was the first cause of his great success in the character.

Booth's Hamlet was likewise spiritual. Therein the actor manifested not alone the highest quality that can characterise acting, but a perfectly adequate intuitive knowledge of the Shakespearian conception. It is not enough, in the presentation of this part, that an actor should make known the fact that Hamlet's soul is haunted by supernatural powers: he must also make it felt that Hamlet possesses a soul such as it is possible for supernatural powers to haunt. In Shakespeare's pages it may be seen that—at the beginning, and before his mind has been shocked and unsettled by the awful apparition of his father's spirit in arms—Hamlet is a man darkly prone to sombre thought upon the nothingness of this world and the solemn mysteries of the world beyond the grave; and this mental drift does not flow from the student's fancy, but is the spontaneous, passionate tendency of his soul—for, in the very first self-communing passage that he utters, he is found

to have been brooding on the expediency of suicide; and not long afterwards he is found avowing the belief that the powers of hell have great control over spirits as weak and melancholy as his own. A hint suffices. The soul of Hamlet must be felt to have been—in its original essence and condition, before grief, shame, and terror arrived, to burden and distract it—intensely sensitive to the miseries that are in this world; to the fact that it is an evanescent pageant, passing, on a thin tissue, over what Shakespeare himself has greatly called “the blind cave of eternal night;” and to all the vague, strange influences, sometimes beautiful, sometimes terrible, that are wafted out of the great unknown. Booth’s embodiment of Hamlet was so thoroughly saturated with this feeling that often it seemed to be more a spirit than a man.

The statement of those felicities indicates Booth’s natural adaptability and qualification for the character. Nature made it in him “a property of easiness” to be poetic and spiritual, according to the mood in which Hamlet is depicted. Hence the ideal of Shakespeare was the more easily within his grasp, and he stood abundantly justified—as few other actors have ever been—in undertaking to present it. The spiritualised intellect, the masculine strength, the feminine softness, the over-imaginative reason, the lassitude of thought, the autumnal gloom, the lovable temperament, the piteous, tear-freighted humour, the princely grace of condition, the brooding melancholy, the philosophic mind, and the deep heart, which are commingled in the poet’s conception, found their roots and springs in the being of the man. Booth seemed to live Hamlet rather than to act it. His ideal presented a man whose nature is everything lovable; who is placed upon a pinnacle of earthly greatness; who is afflicted with a grief that breaks his heart and a shock that disorders his mind; who is charged with a solemn and dreadful duty, to the fulfillment of which his will is inadequate; who sees so widely and understands so little the nature of things in the universe that his sense of moral responsibility is overwhelmed, and his power of action arrested; who thinks greatly, but to no purpose; who wanders darkly in the borderland between reason and madness, haunted now with sweet strains

and majestic images of heaven, and now with terrific, uncertain shapes of hell; and who drifts aimlessly, on a sea of misery, into the oblivion of death. This man is a type of beings upon the earth to whom life is a dream, all its surroundings too vast and awful for endurance, all its facts sad, action impossible or fitful and fruitless, and of whom it can never be said that they are happy till the grass is growing on their graves. That type Booth displayed, with symmetry and grace of method, in an artistic form which was harmony itself. If to be true to Shakespeare, in that vast, complex, and difficult creation, and to interpret the truth with beautiful action, is to attain to greatness in the dramatic art, then surely Booth was a great actor.

Booth’s method in the scenes with the Ghost would endure the severest examination, and in those sublime situations he fully deserved the tribute that Cibber pays to the Hamlet of Betterton. Those are the test scenes, and Booth left his spectators entirely satisfied with the acting of them.

If I were to pause upon special points in the execution,—which, since they illumine the actor’s ideal and vindicate his genius, are representative and deeply significant,—I should indicate the subtlety with which, almost from the first, the sense of being haunted was conveyed to the imagination; the perfection with which the weird and awful atmosphere of the ghost-scenes was preserved, by the actor’s transfiguration into tremulous suspense and horror; the human tenderness and heartbreaking pathos of the scene with Ophelia; the shrill, terrific cry and fate-like swiftness and fury that electrified the moment of the killing of Polonius; and the desolate calm of despairing surrender to bleak and cruel fate, with which Hamlet, as he stood beside the grave of Ophelia, was made so pitiable an object that no man with a heart in his bosom could see him without tears. Those were peaks of majesty in Booth’s impersonation.

Thought is not compelled, in remembering Booth’s Hamlet, to stop short with the statement that the thing was well done. It may go further than that, and rejoice in the conviction that the thing itself was right. There are in the nature of Hamlet—which is grace,

sweetness, and grandeur corroded by grief and warped by incipient insanity—depths below depths of misery and self-conflict; and doubtless it was a sense of this that made Kemble say that an actor of the part is always finding something new in it; but Booth's ideal of Hamlet possessed the indescribable poetic element which fascinates, and the spiritual quality which made it the ready instrument of "airs from heaven or blasts from hell." The heart had been broken by grief. The mind had been disordered by a terrible shock. The soul,—so predisposed to brooding upon the hollowness of this fragile life and the darkness of futurity that already it counsels suicide before the great blow has fallen and the prince confronts his father's wandering ghost,—was full of vast, fantastic shapes, and was swayed by strange forces of an unknown world. The condition was princely, the manner exalted, the humour full of tears, the thought weighed down with a wide and wandering sense of the mysteries of the universe; and the power of action was completely benumbed. That is Shakespeare's Hamlet, and that nature Booth revealed;—in aspect, as sombre as the midnight sky; in spirit, as lovely as the midnight stars. That nature, furthermore, he portrayed brilliantly, knowing that sorrow, however powerful in the element of oppression, cannot fascinate. The Hamlet that is merely sorrowful, though he might arouse pity, would not inspire affection. It is the personality beneath the anguish that makes the anguish so stately, so awful, so majestic. By itself the infinite grief of Hamlet would overwhelm with the monotony of gray despair; but, since the nature that shines through it is invested with the mysterious and fascinating glamour of beauty in ruin, the grief becomes an active pathos, and the sufferer is loved as well as pitied. Nor does it detract from the loveliness of the ideal, that it is cursed with incipient and fitful insanity. Thought is shocked by the word and not the thing, when it rejects this needful attribute of a character otherwise eternally obscure. No one means that Hamlet needs a strait-jacket. The insanity is a cloud only, and only now and then present—as with many sane men whom thought, passion, and suffering urge at times into the border-land between reason and madness. That lurid gleam was the first conspicuously

evident in Booth's Hamlet after the first apparition of the Ghost, and again after the climax of the play scene; but, flowing out of an art-instinct too spontaneous always to have direct intention, it played intermittently along the whole line of the personation, and added weight and weirdness and pathos to remediless misery.

Booth's embodiment of Hamlet was a pleasure to the eye, a delight to the sense of artistic form and moving, a thrilling presence to the imagination, and a sadly significant emblem to the spiritual consciousness. Booth was never at any time inclined, when impersonating Hamlet, to employ those theatrical expedients that startle an audience and diffuse nervous excitement. Except at the delirious moment when the prince rushes upon the arras, and stabs through it the hidden spy whom he wildly hopes is the king, his acting was never diverted from that mood of intellectual concentration which essentially is the condition of Hamlet. In that moment his burst of frenzied eagerness—half horror, and half-exultant delight—liberated the passion that smoulders beneath Hamlet's calm, and it was irresistibly enthralling. There were indications of the same passion, in the delivery of the soliloquy upon the artificial grief of the player, at the climax of the play scene, and in the half-lunatic rant over Ophelia's grave. But those variations only served to deepen the darkness of misery with which his embodiment of Hamlet was saturated, and the gloomy grandeur of the haunted atmosphere in which it was swathed.

Booth's ideal of Hamlet was a noble person overwhelmed with a fatal grief, which he endures, for the most part with a patient sweetness that is deeply pathetic, but which sometimes drives him into delirium and must inevitably cause his death. In the expression of that ideal, which is true to Shakespeare, he never went as far as Shakespeare's text would warrant. He never allowed his votaries to see Hamlet as Ophelia saw him, in that hour of eloquent revelation when,—without artifice and in the unpremeditated candour of involuntary sincerity,—his ravaged and blighted figure stood before her, in all the pitiable disorder of self-abandoned sorrow. To show Hamlet in that way would be to show him exactly as he is in Shakespeare; but in a theatrical representation that

expedient, while it might gratify the few, would certainly repel the many. Real grief is not attractive, and the grief of Hamlet is real; it is not simply a filial sorrow for the death of his beloved father; a mournful shame at his mother's hasty marriage with his uncle; an affliction of the haunted soul because it knows that his father's spirit is condemned to fast in fires and to walk the night. It is deeper still. It is an elemental misery, coexistent with his being; coincident with his conviction of the utter fatuity of this world and with his mental paralysis of comprehension,—awe-stricken and half insane,—in presence of the unfathomable mystery that environs man's spiritual life. Entirely and literally to embody the man whose nature is convulsed in that way would be to oppress an audience with what few persons understand, and most persons deem intolerable, the reality of sorrow. Hamlet upon the stage must be interesting, and, in a certain sense, he must be brilliant; and Booth always made him so. But that noble actor—so fine in his intuitions, so just in his methods—could not be otherwise than true to his artistic conscience. He embodied Hamlet not simply as the picturesque and interesting central figure in a story of intrigue, half amatory and half political, in an ancient royal court, but as the representative type of man at his highest point of development, vainly confronting the darkness and doubt that enshroud him in this pain-stricken, transitory mortal state, and—because his vision is too comprehensive, his heart too tender, and his will too weak for the circumstances of human life—going to his death at last, broken, defeated, baffled, a mystery among mysteries, a disastrous failure, but glorious through it all, and infinitely more precious, to those who even vaguely comprehend his drift, than the most successful man that ever was created.

Treating Hamlet in that spirit Booth was not content merely to invest him with symmetry of form, poetry of motion, statuesque grace of pose, and the exquisite beauty of musical elocution, and to blend those gracious attributes with dignity of mind and spontaneous, unerring refinement of temperament and manner. He went further, because he illumined the whole figure with a tremulous light of agonised vitality. That was the true ideal of

Hamlet—in whose bosom burns the fire that is not quenched. Students of Shakespeare,—who are, of course, students of human life and of themselves, and who think that perhaps they are in this world for some higher purpose than the consumption of food and the display of raiment,—could think upon it, and gather strength from it. Booth's art, in the acting of Hamlet, was art applied to its highest purpose, and invested with dignity, power, and truth.

(1893)