

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN—SHAKESPEAREAN CRITIC

The approach of William Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd, recalls the ridicule which was heaped upon Lincoln when he expressed an appreciation for some certain lines of Shakespeare in preference to some other excerpts of the author which were more widely accepted.

James H. Hackett, the famous actor, chose April 23, 1862, as the date on which to bring to a close the concluding chapter in his book "Notes, Criticisms, and Correspondence upon Shakespeare's Plays and Actors." Hackett, like many other authors, wrote his preface last, as it was dated December, 1862, many months after the final paragraph of the text. The book bears the date, 1863, on its title page.

The contents of the book contains comments on Hamlet's Soliloquy on Suicide—Hamlet—King Lear—Actors of Hamlet—Correspondence on Shakespearean Subjects—Falstaff.

It was this publication which was indirectly responsible for the adverse comments which were made about Lincoln's qualifications as a critic of literature. Hackett sent Lincoln a complimentary copy of the book, and the President acknowledged it with the following appreciative letter:

Executive Mansion, Washington,
August 17, 1863.

James H. Hackett, Esq.

My dear Sir: 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 Shakspeare'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." It is wonderful.

Unlike you gentlemen of the profession, I think the soliloquy in "Hamlet" commencing "Oh, my offense 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.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln

This letter which Lincoln wrote to Hackett found its way into print, and Lincoln's reaction to its appearance may be observed in a letter written to Hackett on November 2nd:

Executive Mansion, Washington,
November 2, 1863.

James H. Hackett

My dear Sir: Yours of October 22 is received, as also was in due course that of October 3. I look forward with pleasure to the fulfillment 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.

Yours truly,

A. Lincoln

Lincoln was not the first president to appear in the roll of a Shakespearean critic. John Quincy Adams wrote some lengthy letters to Hackett about Shakespeare's works, one of seven pages. Later he prepared a long discussion on "Misconceptions of Shakespeare upon the Stage," and another on "The Character of Desdemona." In commenting on Hamlet, he said:

"I look upon the tragedy of Hamlet as the masterpiece of drama—the masterpiece of Shakespeare—I had almost said the masterpiece of the human mind."

Hackett, however, disagreed with President Adams in many of his deductions, especially about Hamlet, as did many others who had an opportunity to review the manuscript of Adams. In the first paragraph in his book, Hackett says:

"The Soliloquy in Hamlet, which we have often heard extolled in terms of admiration, is, in our opinion, a heap of absurdities, whether we consider the situation, the sentiment, the argumentation, or the poetry."

Lincoln clearly states in his first letter to Hackett, "I think nothing equals 'Macbeth.' It is wonderful."

Lord Carlisle, a famous Shakespearean critic, wrote a letter to Hackett in which he voiced much the same sentiment as Lincoln: "I see none of your criticisms are addressed to the play of Macbeth, in my mind the very highest in order of all the few which seem to me indisputably higher than all the rest."

One of Shakespeare's characters which appealed to Lincoln, due to his own sense of humor, was Falstaff. W. O. Stoddard attended a performance with President Lincoln in which Hackett played the part of Falstaff and this is Stoddard's account of Lincoln's reaction to the play:

"I was with him the first night, and expected him to give himself up to the merriment of the hour, although I knew that his mind was very much pre-occupied by other things. To my surprise, however, he appeared even gloomy, although intent upon the play, and it was only a few times during the whole performance that he went so far as to laugh at all, and then not heartily. He seemed for once to be studying the character and its rendering critically, as if to ascertain the correctness of his own conception as compared with that of the professional artist.

"Had his earlier education been of a sort to develop more perfectly his literary tastes, his keen insight into human nature, and his appreciation of humorous and other eccentricities of character, would have enabled him to have derived the highest degree of enjoyment from the creations of the great masters. As it was, he probably understood Shakespeare, so far as he had read him, far better than many men who set themselves up for critical authorities."