Review

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As historical evidence, biographical reminiscences about the infamous must be peculiarly suspect. Terry Alford’s selections for his new biography of John Wilkes Booth are judicious, but he often presents contradictory testimony, and the reader perceives the mass through which he has had to sift. When people offered to history their long-nurtured impressions of Abraham Lincoln’s murderer, there was surely a great temptation to endow memory with prophetic significance, whether self-exculpating or sinister. To examine a man who left relatively few textual traces of his own but inspired so much comment (often rendered long after the event), Alford has had to address an accumulation of legend, speculation, and wild surmise. Perhaps the most extraordinary rumors were those which suggested that Booth was not killed on Richard Garrett’s Virginia farm eleven days after the assassination but that he escaped and, like Elvis Presley, was sighted around the world for twenty years after his official demise. In 1995 some modern adherents of this theory applied for an exhumation order for the body buried in the Booth family plot; they were opposed in court by Green Mount Cemetery but gave way only after Maryland’s Court of Special Appeals upheld the original finding against disinterment.

As this episode suggests, it would be only too easy to make Booth’s story ludicrous and bizarre, and biographical treatments have also tended to confine their focus either to his crime or to his stage career, alone or in relation to those of his father and brothers. Commendably, Alford avoids these traps, and his claim that *Fortune’s Fool* is the first full-length biography is perhaps justifiable in that he has attempted to assess the man rather than just the murderer (as did Philip Van Doren Stern’s 1939 *The Man Who Killed Lincoln*), the actor (Gordon Samples’s 1982 *Lust for Fame*), or the brother (Asia Booth Clarke’s *The Unlocked Book*, 1938). But despite Booth’s famous tragedian father

Junius and almost equally renowned brother Edwin, it is unlikely that there would have been many books about John Wilkes had he not instigated a conspiracy to kidnap Lincoln in August 1864 and, when it fizzled out, replaced it with a plan to kill the president while an accomplice attacked Secretary of State William Seward. The shock and horror of the assassination, even if it had not peculiarly compounded the devastation left by the war, have ever since demanded some understanding of its perpetrator.

Popular assessments of Booth’s own motivations could be reduced to headlines: Michael Burlingame’s 2008 Lincoln biography damned him in a subheading—“John Wilkes Booth: Mad Racist.” Gordon Samples’s title, Lust for Fame, sums up one strong argument, suggesting that a perversion of the actor’s craving for notoriety drove him. Michael Kauffman’s 2008 title American Brutus alludes to Booth’s version of the republicanism in his family, expressed in his belief that Lincoln’s government during the war showed that he wished to be king. The Booth family’s regular performances of Julius Caesar, according to this line, fueled Booth’s sense that it would be a noble destiny to emulate Brutus and kill a would-be tyrant. Alford recognizes something in all these lines of thought, with perhaps the least emphasis placed on the last.

Other Booth questions are perennially topical. Was he mad? Alford finds plenty to suggest that he was at least unsteady (“unsettled” is Alford’s finely judged word), though he suggests nothing like the alarming antics of John’s father, Junius, who stabbed, shot, and assaulted various people, attempted suicide three times, and was jailed in four states. Was Booth instead the agent of a larger conspiracy, or a Confederate plot? Alford plays down the possibility of official Confederate involvement, certainly in the assassination, as he does most of the kidnap plotters’ role in it. He reckons the conspirators were neither the hapless bunch characterised by some immediate contemporaries nor the skilled Confederate “action team” imagined by some modern writers. Alternatively, was Booth motivated by career


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disappointments—less popular than Edwin, was he also losing his voice? Alford is skeptical about the voice theory, though he politely cites the evidence. Booth appeared with both his brothers in a special performance of *Julius Caesar* in November 1864 (to raise funds for a statue of Shakespeare in Central Park), and he took on only two further stage performances in 1865. Alford suggests that his reluctance to work in these months was not final. Booth had been ill in the fall of 1864; he did find touring lonely, the sheer grind of regular performance didn’t suit his mercurial temperament, and the great roles were exhausting. But Alford doesn’t believe that his voice was permanently damaged or that he was constrained to give up his career—and so it’s unlikely that the plotting was straightforward compensation for exile from the stage. Another suggestion is that Booth was piqued by the dissolution of his engagement to Lucy, daughter of the abolitionist Senator John P. Hale. Alford doesn’t add much weight to this argument. One new connection he does raise is that Charles J. Colchester, a spiritualist medium consulted by Mary Todd Lincoln, may have inadvertently passed on some useful information about the presidential household, but this detail seems relatively slight.

What of Booth’s character? This is where Alford’s patient assessment of the morass of anecdotes and memoirs is most evident and most useful. He remains admirably low-key, even where it would be hard not to sensationalize (for instance, the stories of John’s torturing cats told by a boyhood friend). It is here that we sense the source of the mystery, though it is a mystery that still can’t entirely be fathomed. John Wilkes Booth was evidently impulsive, profligate, insecure, and status-driven. He sounds utterly selfish, and yet he charmed people easily (not least women). He seems to have had textual learning difficulties (Alford calls him an ‘auditory learner’); in the little writing he left, the spelling is eye-watering, and it once sabotaged his challenge to a duel because the errors in the note made him such a laughing-stock. He didn’t sign up for the war, apparently because of a promise to his mother, and yet he seemed desperately to need acclaim and to be thought heroic. One anecdote linked this need to both his fixation with Lincoln and his theatrical inheritance: in it, he told theater manager James McVicker that killing Lincoln would immortalize the murderer, and he (mis)quoted in support of this thought Colley Cibber’s adaptation of *Richard III*:

*Fame not more survives from good than evil deeds. The ambitious youth who fired the Ephesian Dome Outlives in fame the pious fool who reared it.*
This attestation to the amorality of his drive for fame comes from an 1891 newspaper interview, and like so many of the Booth anecdotes, it almost seems to explain too much to be credible. Booth attacked the president to upstage him. But there is much to support this suggestion. In 1859 Booth deserted his engagement with George Kunkel’s theater company without a word to his employer, tagging along to Harper’s Ferry with the Richmond Grays in the run-up to John Brown’s execution. Booth’s disregard for the consequences to those around him would reach even farther after the assassination. His closest accomplices, David Herold and Lewis Powell, were found guilty of conspiracy and hanged on July 7, 1865—and so were George Atzerodt, who had backed out of attacking Andrew Johnson, and Mary Suratt, whose son John had drawn her into the kidnap plot. (John Suratt fled the country, was captured a year later, but was ultimately freed.) Others connected with it—Samuel Arnold, Michael O’Laughlen, and Samuel Mudd—were sentenced to life and hard labor; many more were arrested and questioned. These included John’s brothers, Junius Jr. and Joe, and his brother-in-law, John Sleeper Clarke; Edwin escaped arrest but was summoned to Washington. Their sister Asia, whose marriage to Clarke was nearly ruptured by it all, wrote of the disgrace being harder to bear than the sorrow. And it wasn’t just the family who were shamed: Alford doesn’t mention this, but for some time afterward the theater and actors were popularly tainted with Booth’s crime, and Laura Keene, whose production of Our American Cousin he had exploited, was affected badly by her connection with it. The trail of destruction was a wide one.

It also snared the people Booth and Herold took shelter with on their flight from Washington, most of whom probably harbored the fugitives unwittingly. This section of Alford’s book reads like a thriller, and so it should, for it has the suspense, irony, and human strangeness of a first-rate drama. There could even be something like tragedy in Booth’s dawning realization that the deed he thought would make him a hero had repulsed almost everyone, even the Confederates he appealed to. Or else melodrama: one detail of the aftermath of Booth’s death echoed a staple of the form, where long-lost relatives were often confirmed by marks on the body. Dr. John Frederick May, one of the five official witnesses to identify Booth’s corpse, identified him from a surgical scar on his neck. Booth’s profession had in any case made him easier to find—a theatrical publicity photograph was supplied to guards at the Aqueduct Bridge, leading from Washington to Virginia.

Alford is not very interested in the theater. His discussions of Booth’s career are dutiful but rarely more. He wonders how well
Mary Mitchell played Juliet, given that she was nearing thirty (I’d suggest it would depend how good an actress she was; he assumes that parts with allegorical names must have been limited ones; he finds it absurd that a performance of *Richard III* was followed by an acrobat (in fact, it was not untypical of the nightly variety then provided in most programming). Alford doesn’t comment on one of the strangest theatrical symmetries of the assassination: the fact that it was *Our American Cousin* that Booth interrupted, and that he broke in on a line that almost echoed his own republican obsessions. *Our American Cousin* has been almost universally ignored, if not denigrated, in the assassination commentaries. David Herbert Donald’s *Lincoln*, for example, calls it “a creaky farce.” It was in fact a comedy (a more substantial piece than a farce, with less slapstick humor). More interesting is that the much-quoted line Booth took as his cue is a retort to a corrupt aristocrat from the American cousin who represents the egalitarian ways of his own nation, and the American sports something like the unpretentious country manners that Lincoln himself was famous for. Some eyewitnesses reported that for a moment the audience thought that Booth’s leap to the stage, and his shout of “Sic Semper Tyrannis” was a deliberate addition to the script. Uncannily, it did indeed repeat the sentiment the American cousin had just uttered on stage: “Don’t know the manners of good society, eh? Well, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal—you sockdologizing old man-trap.” This may not tell us much about the assassination, but it does indicate how even apparently frivolous theatricals may reflect offstage preoccupations.

Conversely, the assassination brought to the fore another curious aspect of 1860s culture. Alford doesn’t labor this point, but I was struck in his account by the intensity of interest in the physical remnants of the dead. At the autopsy, the surgeon general warned bystanders not to take souvenirs from Booth’s body, but he removed three vertebrae for the Army Medical Museum, and presented his messenger George Hallowell with a piece of muscle tissue. Despite the prohibition, Marine sergeant John Peddicord also clipped some hair. Great efforts were made to ensure that the body did not become a Confederate shrine: Booth was buried in a secluded room within the Arsenal Penitentiary, and in 1867, when the Arsenal was renovated, the body was reburied in a different part of it. This curious combination of acquisitiveness and anxiety about others’ interest in the body was also true of Booth’s family, when in 1869, after much

petitioning, they received permission to rebury Booth in the family plot. The removal of his body to an undertaker’s premises in Baltimore prompted a gathering of family, friends, and hangers-on, not all of whom had even known Booth. The skull was passed from hand to hand; hair was clipped for his mother, and she allotted some to two young women, who were there only because of their connection with the theater opposite the funeral home. One of these women also purloined a bit of the blanket he was wrapped in, as did other members of the gathering crowd. At the same time, Edwin refused to permit a stone memorial to be erected over the grave. Some of this behaviour now seems macabre, as the period’s enthusiasm for keepsakes and mementoes shades into something more like relics or, especially in the case of the soldiers, trophies or spoils. The collection for the museum and the anxiety about the headstone perhaps also foreshadow the complicated politics of the ensuing memorialization of the war.

Perhaps we readers should feel queasy about ourselves too. Like the arsonist in his favorite Cibber lines, this vain, self-deluded man lived up to his own inflated sense of self by choosing infamy. In trying to understand him, we can’t help continuing to supply him with an audience.