

Essay by John Channing Briggs

STEEPED IN SHAKESPEARE



SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS WERE UBIQUITOUS IN antebellum America. They inhabited the schoolbooks, including Scott's *Lessons in Elocution*, which Lincoln read as a boy. Dozens of editions circulated through the states and territories. The plays visited rural and urban stages in scenes and declamatory excerpts as well as larger productions, and crystallized a turning point in the Webster-Hayne debate of 1830, in which senators disputing the future of the union and the territories alleged blame for the political crisis by fighting over the significance of Banquo's ghost.

Senator Hayne said the ghost was a manifestation of Senator Webster's uncontrollable desire to revive Whig power by means of "dark visions of broken hopes, and honors lost forever, still floating before his heated imagination." Webster's counter, that Hayne had seriously misread *Macbeth*, is an impressive demonstration of the degree to which readings of Shakespeare could shape political debate. Banquo's "gory locks were shaken," Webster spoke in correction, "at those who had begun with caresses and ended with foul and treacherous murder." The great orator followed with a shrewdly hyperbolic exposition of the entire scene, in which Hayne and the Democrats were indicted instead:

The ghost of Banquo, like that of Hamlet, was an honest ghost. It disturbed no innocent man. It knew where its appearance would strike terror, and who would cry out, A ghost! It made itself visible in the right quarter, and compelled the guilty and the conscience-smitten, and none others, to start, "Pr'ythee, see there! —look!

Lo,/ If I stand here, I saw him!" Their eyeballs were seared (was it not so, Sir?) who had thought to shield themselves by concealing their own hand, and laying the imputation of the crime on a low and hireling agency in wickedness; who had vainly attempted to stifle the workings of their own coward consciences by ejaculating through white lips and chattering teeth, "Thou canst not say I did it!"

Americans took their Bard seriously, even as they sought to distance themselves from Britain. In her book, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (2004), Kim C. Sturgess reports that at the time of the 1849 theater riots in New York—provoked in part by a British actor's allegedly haughty rendition of *Macbeth*—three theaters in the city were presenting divergent interpretations of Shakespeare's assassin-turned-tyrant. Visions of kingship and tyranny, heroic resistance and rebellion, high virtue and depravity, animated the waking dreams of the young republic. A new order had triumphed—for the ages, it was hoped—over the history of tyranny, mortal discord, and self-destruction that Shakespeare had distilled in tragic drama. Yet the ghosts of the old order returned with their vanquishers, animating republican spirits anxious to perpetuate the founders' accomplishments. The American adoption of Shakespeare was therefore no simple domestication. The plays accessed political and moral depths and high places to which the American experiment might descend or aspire. They offered a way to purify and incorporate the new nation's British heritage.

The Thought Suffices

LINCOLN READ AND REREAD SHAKESPEARE in his New Salem years. In his campaign autobiography, he noted that a literate man in that part of the frontier was a prodigy; if he understood Latin, a "wizard." There were a number of highly literate persons in the New Salem neighborhood; they lent him books and read the newspapers that passed through his store. But Lincoln's knowledge of Shakespeare, in depth if not in breadth, was prodigious. He was steeped in Shakespearean language and Shakespearean preoccupations by the time he arrived in Springfield. His Lyceum Address, delivered soon after, is in its subject and some of its phrasing a meditation on *Macbeth*. Herndon recalls his partner's frequent immersion in the plays. During his years in Washington, Lincoln is reported to have kept a collection of them on his White House desk, from which he would read passages aloud. He saw hundreds of plays of all kinds in Washington, many by Shakespeare. He once saw four history plays in one week, and conversed and corresponded with the actor who played Falstaff. He is said to have recited several Shakespearean soliloquies with unsettling force and conviction. In his last days, in the suspenseful period when Union armies closed in on the remaining Confederate resistance, he read from *Macbeth* to members of his cabinet on the presidential yacht.

Lincoln was a dedicated reader of Shakespeare most of all. He intimated that he preferred the plays in print: "the thought suffices," a visitor heard him say, no matter how poorly the parts were acted. As a deep reader, he was

his own best actor. In his self-effacing, declarative letter to the actor James Hackett (the insistent admirer who tried to play Falstaff to Lincoln's Hal), he wrote that there were some plays he had "never read," but that he had "gone over" some plays "as frequently as any unprofessional reader." These included "Lear, Richard Third, Henry Eighth, Hamlet, and especially Macbeth." He went on to express the unpopular opinion that Claudius's often omitted speech (in *Hamlet*) beginning "O, my offence is rank" was more arresting than Hamlet's "To be, or not to be." For Lincoln, the king's agony of tyrannical desire struggling with conscience trumped the prince's restive argument that "conscience does make cowards of us all."

Lincoln's disclosure of his Shakespearean preferences resonated in the American republic. When Hackett published the letter without Lincoln's permission, the *New York Herald* satirized the president as "the latest and greatest of Shakespeare's Commentators," a negligent and pretentious emulator of Claudius "to double business bound." In response, the *Liverpool Post* printed an editorial (which was reprinted in the *Herald* with a satirical headline) defending Lincoln's disclosure as characteristic of the president's self-effacing heroism. The unpopular choice of Claudius over Hamlet, the *Post* argued, was evidence that Lincoln made "incisive use of his own wits." It called Lincoln's testimo-

ny admirable "for its simplicity and candor...as fresh and delightful as new mown hay...: [F]ar better for a man to read one play twenty times, because he loves it, than to read twenty plays once, because they constitute the author's works and must be gone through." What Lincoln said and what he wrote about Shakespeare were interpreted as an enactments of his character, and in several ways they were.

Rebellion Illustrated

ALL THE PLAYS LINCOLN LISTED HAVE TO do with tyrannical rebellion and deposition, both psychological and political. His interest in such reversals, and the inner beings of those caught up in them, was deep. When Hackett visited the White House after a Henry IV play, John Hay reports that the president asked why that work's mock deposition scene (presumably the one in Henry IV, Part 1, involving Hal and Falstaff changing places as prince and king on a tavern throne) had been left out. Hackett resorted to an incredible explanation: the scene did not work on stage. Whether Lincoln was referring to the tavern scene or perhaps an interpolation of the preceding deposition in *Richard II* (which had discomfited Queen Elizabeth I), the important thing is that he wanted to see an enactment of royal overthrow in the midst of the country's civil

war. He wanted to see deposition and rebellion repeated feelingly in a Shakespearean frame he could study.

Lincoln's reflective analysis of the South's rebellion was evident in his attachment to the opening speech of *Richard III*. As reported in 1866 by the painter F. B. Carpenter, the president referred in 1864 to misinterpretations by "sophomoric" actors who did not appreciate the depth and complexity of Richard's "bitterness and satire." In 1854, he had used echoes from the play to identify Stephen Douglas's most important legislative innovation with Richard III. The Douglas-sponsored Kansas-Nebraska Act, he argued, was a manifestly cynical breach of faith: "It could not but be expected by its author, that it would be looked upon as a measure for the extension of slavery, aggravated by a gross breach of faith. Argue as you will, and long as you will, this is the naked FRONT and ASPECT, of the measure." The act's "front" and "aspect" (like Richard's "smooth-visaged front," "ugly and unnatural aspect," and "naked villainy") had allegedly ruined the comity of the 1850 compromise under the guise of preserving it.

In Carpenter's White House recollection, Lincoln analyzed Richard's motives as though in profound reflection upon the South's rebellious purposes:

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

Lincoln then performed from memory Richard's Cain-like impatience, and Carpenter recalls the performance's "force and power." By chance or design, Carpenter's account, which was published just after Lincoln's death, links Richard's hidden rage to the union-destroying, conspiratorial anger of a rebellious South that Lincoln described in the opening of the Second Inaugural:

While the [first] inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to saving the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to destroy it without war—seeking to dissolv[e] the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive...

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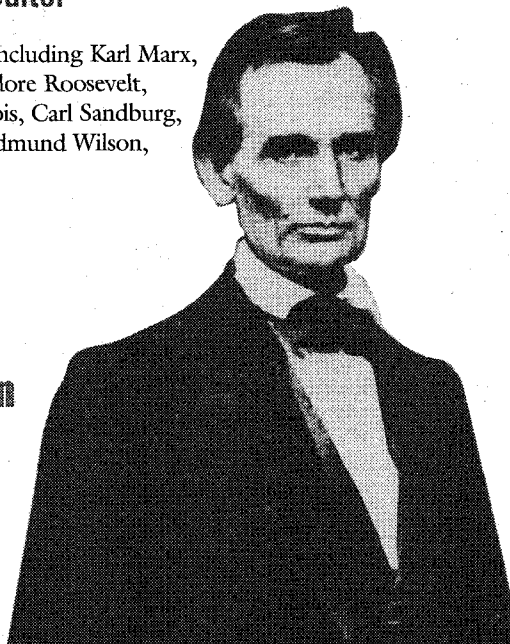
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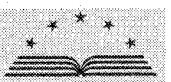
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Engaged in civil war against that spirit and yet anticipating reconciliation, the Civil War president in Carpenter's story shows himself capable of inhabiting Richard's character with empathy as well as critical control. Lincoln's admiration for Claudius's failing prayer in Hamlet conforms to this pattern.

O, my offence is rank, it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as 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 two-fold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up:
My fault is past. But O, what form of 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, mine own ambition and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?

The brother-murderer wrestles with his soul while possessing the very things for which he did the murder, his inner struggle enacting the antebellum dilemma. Blood stains the republican soul, both north and south. Slavery corrupts the slaveholder as well as the slave. In the North, the indefinite toleration of slave laws for the good of the Union cannot put down the belief that the republic is a participant in a primal crime. On the one hand, the dilemma is intractable. Self-righteous slaveholders and abolitionists cannot escape their own entanglement in what all have inherited. On the other hand, Claudius's prayer—failing, yet thirsting for what it knows it lacks—aspires toward release while creating the grounds for more desperate acts, even as it surprises us into an appreciation of his divided, flawed humanity.

It seems likely Lincoln was attached to Claudius's speech because it embodied this vertiginous dilemma, not merely as a confession of guilt or an expression of hypocrisy but as a struggling soul's effort to be free even as it becomes (in Claudius's words) "more engaged" in its tyrannies. He once linked Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act to Claudius's failed prayer for forgiveness: "It hath no relish of salvation in it." Douglas had sought to overcome the nation's political dilemma by appealing to popular sovereignty, but in Lincoln's estimation had only inflamed sectional conflict. Presuming to win the blessing of the ballot box, Douglas had ex-

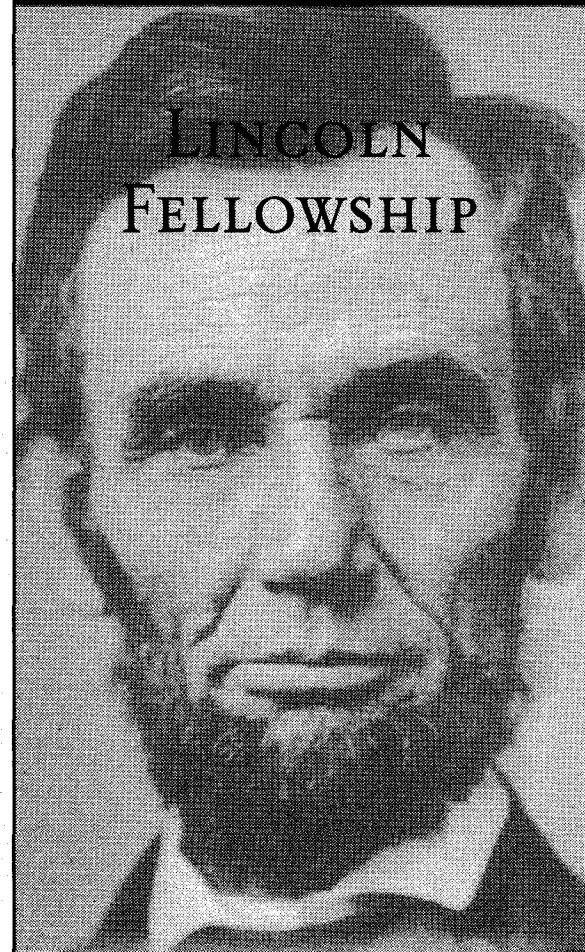
perienced Claudius's disappointment without possessing Claudius's self-knowledge or recognizing the perverse effects of his own ambition.

A Threat and a Warning

THE WONDROUS CONTRAST BETWEEN these loaded psychological and political understandings of Shakespeare and modern expectations—especially modern academic expectations—is difficult to underestimate. The plays to which Lincoln was drawn were not about slavery, at least not the chattel slavery that moderns now generally assume to be the focus of the Civil War. To be sure, they had profound implications for that slavery. Frederick Douglass posed a moral challenge to a slave-owning and -tolerating nation by quoting frequently from the plays' affirmation of a common humanity and the power of justice. Lincoln's tendency, on the other hand, was to consult and invoke Shakespeare rarely, indirectly, and by diffuse means, in an almost disorienting, haunting manner, to illuminate slavery's potential in the republican soul. From the Lyceum Address of 1838 to the Second Inaugural, this was his Shakespearean preoccupation. Above all, he was interested in the soul of the real and would-be tyrant, and the ways in which the American character and American polity might resist and overcome the onslaught of tyrannical government from within.

For Lincoln, crucial aspects of the plays were especially edifying and curative in this light. As inoculations of a living pathogen, they were to be *undergone*: read and reread, pondered, taken to heart. The leading American Shakespeareans of the stage, the famous Edwin and his later-notorious brother John (sons of Junius Brutus Booth), were not alone in being caught up in theatrical recreations of tyranny and resistance. Like them, Lincoln invoked Caesar's name with Alexander's and Napoleon's in the Lyceum Address, warning against that "towering genius" who might destroy the founders' work. He cautioned that such a man would liberate the slaves in defiance of the Constitution or enslave all free men, if he thought it necessary to achieve distinction. But what most interested Lincoln were the tyrannical fevers and circumstances that gave birth to such an ambition. Shakespeare's most prominent king-killers—Richard III, Claudius, and Macbeth, not the enigmatic and undemonstrative Julius Caesar or Hamlet—were therefore his favorites. All three are enmeshed in implosive psychological dramas as well as political revolt. They draw audiences in, not simply as exemplars of tyranny but as attractive, dangerous potentialities within a republic, temptations that cannot be resisted successfully by reason alone or even by reason vehemently warned.

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Lincoln concedes that the threat is invisible as long as a free people fails to recognize such tendencies within itself, especially in its confidence borne of success. Mere speech and the desire to give warning do not regulate the pathology of tyrannical rule by one man or a mob, or submission to political and moral slavery. We detect in retrospect that Lincoln is contemplating the challenge of overcoming that potentiality in himself, not only in his audience, since he is the political genius who sees, and understands sympathetically from within, the mortal threat that is invisible to others.

We see in the Lyceum Speech and Lincoln's love of Shakespeare the assumption that tyranny cannot be resisted without a sympathetic appreciation of the genius-tyrant's power to seduce a free people, and perhaps himself, with measures that subvert a self-governing republic. What better examples of this phenomenon in Shakespeare than Richard Duke of Gloucester's successful wooing of his suspicious yet fatally naïve victims; Claudius's secret yearning to confess his murder while conspiring to keep Gertrude and kill Hamlet; Macbeth's falling back before his bloody dagger yet doing the deed anyway and then acting the part of a savior king visiting judgment on the unfaithful?

Nothing Equals Macbeth

IT SEEMS DOUBLY APPROPRIATE, THEN, THAT Lincoln found *Macbeth* "wonderful." His preference was emphatic: "I think nothing equals Macbeth." *Macbeth* is indeed Shakespeare's most dramatic portrayal of absorption into tyranny, and of the struggle to resist its pathological forces. Macbeth is a killer whose deeds metastasize with his exercise of conscience. Those who struggle to resist him (remember the mutual testing in Malcolm's interview of Macduff) must learn how to overcome their profound psychological unreadiness, in-

cluding their conscience-ridden fear that Macbeth's triumph might overtake them all.

Macbeth is not prepared, and indeed is never quite prepared (Lady Macbeth knows him well) for what he discovers he is capable of wreaking upon others and upon his own soul. His horror at what he has done and what he sees he can do wins our empathic understanding. The accelerating brutality he is surprised to find in himself as he tries to quiet his conscience horrifies us with its preternatural speed and ruthlessness.

It is hard to think of a protagonist more remote from the American Adam, and yet Macbeth is a haunting reminder of the potentialities of the post-Revolutionary generation that Lincoln addressed in his Lyceum speech. In the play's first act the witches' prophetic webs tempt Macbeth's indiscriminate thirst for distinction at the moment he seems most safe, in triumph over all his king's enemies. His king and other nobles rest in the assurance that Duncan's dynasty will reign in peace. The possibility that one of their number—indeed, the most trusted for his victory over other threats—might seize far greater power, invulnerable in the seeming knowledge that his success has been preordained and that victory protects him from all opposition, bursts upon them unsuspected, even though Macbeth's precedent in the rebellion of Cawdor is before their eyes. Merely invoking the "better angels of our nature" (Seward's appropriation from the dramatic Sonnet 144, which Lincoln changed and embedded in the charged sublimity of the First Inaugural's final lines) is not enough. Shakespeare's sonnet is about the good and bad angels engaged in conflict and mutual seduction.

In 1842 Lincoln was thinking of a means of overcoming Macbeth's tyranny when he wrote his Temperance Address about the power of drink. Alcohol induced "fury" most tellingly in "the brilliant and the warm-blooded." Sympathy for drink's victims, rather than the vain con-

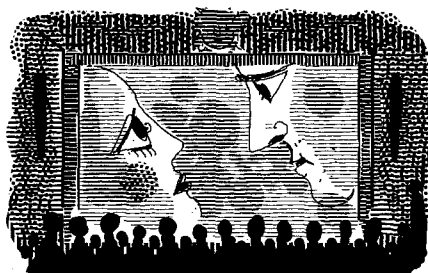
demnations of preachers and the overreaching legislation of lawyers, was appropriate. And yet drink must be resisted: drunkenness was a great evil. The ravages of alcohol, Lincoln argued, were best overcome with the help of those who knew them personally and had somehow risen above their addiction: the Washingtonians (a society of reformed alcoholics). How did they rise? For one thing, they remembered Washington's example of temperance. Recalling Weems's biography, Lincoln urges a similar approach for others. The hero of the Revolution was heroically temperate, an embodiment of political temperance who fixed his virtue in the nation's memory when he retired from the presidential chair. No mere teetotaler or rule-maker, Washington overcame the potentiality of furious ambition in himself. As the indispensable man of the Revolution and the early republic, he knew the desire to rule absolutely but overcame it.

In the conclusion of the Temperance Address, Lincoln uses *Macbeth* to expound this idea. He quotes and transforms the witches' greeting to Macbeth—who famously drinks to steel himself before carrying out the prophecy by murdering the good king Duncan. Lincoln changes Shakespeare's phrasing, commending the Washingtonians' temperance by praising their struggle for sobriety in full knowledge of their own power to destroy: "Hail fall of fury! Reign of Reason, all hail!" Washingtonian reason cannot by itself dictate the fall of tyrannical fury. That liberation is for Lincoln an achievement of reason and temperament embodied in a flawed yet perfectible soul, and immersed in the American experiment in self-government. For Lincoln that soul and temperament were alive, ready to be adapted, in the works of Shakespeare.

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• SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Unfinished Work

NANCY HANKS LINCOLN, THE “ANGEL mother” of Abraham Lincoln, died of milk sickness when her son was nine. But she has many proud descendants, including actor Tom Hanks, who co-produced the recent HBO series, *John Adams* (see my “A Monument to Adams,” *CRB*, Summer 2008). Hanks has spoken of a comparable effort for his illustrious ancestor, but that doesn’t seem to be happening this bicentennial year. Instead, Steven Spielberg will direct a feature film based upon Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (2005), starring Liam Neeson and written by Tony Kushner.

I wonder whether Kushner, the author of *Angels in America* and a gay icon, will base his interpretation on C.A. Tripp’s *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln* (2005), which argues that Lincoln was the original Log Cabin Republican. A “sex researcher” not a historian, Tripp has been faulted for skewing the evidence. For instance, he places great emphasis on Lincoln’s youthful bond with Joshua Speed, which included sharing a bed and signing letters “yours forever.” But as several historians (Goodwin among them) have noted, bed-sharing and sentimental friendship were both common in 19th-century America. It is well known that young Lincoln was awkward around women and preferred the company of men. But in all the inherited gossip, there is no hint that his sex life followed suit.

Walt Whitman wrote that “the complete limning of...[Lincoln’s] future portrait” would require “the eyes and brains and finger-touch of Plutarch and Aeschylus and Michelangelo, assisted by Rabelais.” Yet even that dream team would find it hard, in the space of a two-hour movie, to do justice to Lincoln’s political genius. In an eight- or ten-hour TV series, perhaps, it

might be possible for ordinary gifted mortals (such as Tom Hooper, who directed *John Adams* and, before that, *Elizabeth I*) to scratch the surface, at least. Yet in Lincoln’s phrase from the Gettysburg Address, the cinematic record of America’s greatest president remains “unfinished work.”

Early Efforts

THE REAL LINCOLN WAS NEVER CAPTURED on magic lantern, zoetrope, or any other motion-picture device invented during the 1860s. But beginning in 1908 he was a favored subject in silent films, with impersonators like Ben Chapin later portraying him pardoning condemned soldiers and doing other good deeds in an extension of what historian Merrill D. Peterson calls Lincoln’s “apotheosis.” Typically these films did not show Lincoln freeing the slaves, or if they did, it was to show that he freed them in order to deport the entire black population to an overseas colony. Such was the message of Thomas Dixon’s best-selling novel and play, *The Clansman* (1905), and of D.W. Griffith’s much admired and abhorred film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).

Early 20th-century America had two Lincolns, one for the white folks and one for the black. Griffith never accepted the latter, but his 1930 film, *Abraham Lincoln* (one of only two “talking pictures” he ever made), contains none of the racist riffs found in *The Birth of a Nation*. Starring Walter Huston, the celebrated stage actor and father of director John Huston, *Abraham Lincoln* dutifully pauses at each Station of the Lincoln Cross, including the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. And it has two other saving graces: an undercurrent of sardonic humor and the look of a 19th-century photo-

graph brought to life. When these converge, the result is an eerie but wonderful illusion: the real Abraham Lincoln cracking up at one of his own droll stories.

The next major dramatization of Lincoln was *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, a 1938 play by Robert E. Sherwood, adapted for the screen in 1940. During World War II Sherwood wrote speeches for FDR and served as director of the Office of War Information, and afterward he distinguished himself by writing the screenplay for the 1946 classic, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Because of these achievements, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* is frequently lauded, not least because its star, Raymond Massey, bears a strong physical resemblance to Lincoln. And Massey certainly brings out Lincoln’s folksy, yarn-spinning side, as in the invented scene where he is traveling down the Sangamon River on a flat-bottom boat loaded with pigs, only to run aground in New Salem, Illinois. The pigs get loose and ol’ Abe gives chase, and when he’s jus’ about to grab a-holt of the last squealer, he spies the purtiest gal in town, Ann Rutledge. Folks, I don’ mind tellin’ you, this is one of the cutest gosh-darn meetin’s them movie fellers ever throwed up on the screen.

Unfortunately, Sherwood’s hayseed lacks certain essential parts, such as a thick hide, an iron will, and a belly burning with ambition. It is sometimes said of Lincoln that he was “passive,” meaning he sat back and waited for events to shape themselves. But according to Republican Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois, this was because he “communicated no more of his own thoughts and purposes than he thought would subserve the ends he had in view.” Lincoln was a master poker player, not a Raggedy Abe doll needing a woman, Mary Todd (Ruth Gordon), to supply him with spunk. In the words of his law partner, William Herndon,