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Brother against Brother: John Wilkes and Edwin Booth

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Abstract

When John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln, he became one of the most infamous figures in American history almost overnight. This rapid fall from grace took quite a toll on his family, especially his brother, Edwin. Edwin Booth was one of the most accomplished and successful actors of the Civil War era. He became famous for his portrayals of Shakespearian roles, especially Hamlet, which became his signature role. The Booths were an illustrious family of actors, though Edwin would become the most critically acclaimed and famous for his acting ability.

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Brother against Brother: John Wilkes and Edwin Booth

By [Laurel Wilson '19](#)

When John Wilkes Booth assassinated President Lincoln, he became one of the most infamous figures in American history almost overnight. This rapid fall from grace took quite a toll on his family, especially his brother, Edwin. Edwin Booth was one of the most accomplished and successful actors of the Civil War era. He became famous for his portrayals of Shakespearian roles, especially Hamlet, which became his signature role. The Booths were an illustrious family of actors, though Edwin would become the most critically acclaimed and famous for his acting ability.



John, Edwin, and Junius Booth, Jr. 1864. Via Wikimedia Commons.

Edwin was four years older than John Wilkes, and had had to prove his acting chops through his own efforts over many years onstage, especially in the theatres of the North. John Wilkes, on the other hand, wanted to become known as a great actor like his

brother, but was never quite able to match his older brother in talent or level of success. John Wilkes was able to use the notoriety of the Booth name, as well as his good looks, in order to get acting jobs, especially in southern cities. John Wilkes had been relegated to working in southern cities because Edwin felt that having two Booth brothers competing for audiences in the northern cities would not be an ideal situation. By sending his brother south, Edwin unwittingly shaped his brother's future and the future of the country.

During the war, Edwin and John Wilkes Booth found themselves on opposite sides of the war ideologically. Edwin, who had been living and working in New York and Boston for most of his adult life, sided with the Union cause. He was an ardent supporter of President Lincoln and was proud to proclaim that he had voted for him in the previous election. John Wilkes, on the other hand, was a secessionist who detested Lincoln and sided with the Confederacy during the war.

Though he was well aware of his brother's dislike of President Lincoln, Edwin Booth probably never imagined that his brother would carry out the assassination of the president himself. When the news of his brother's crime reached him in Boston, Edwin reacted in shock and utter horror. He initially vowed that he would retire from acting permanently, which he saw as the worst possible penance he could impose on himself in order to help pay for his brother's crime. His self-imposed retirement did not last long, however, as he still needed to support his family financially.



Edwin Booth as Hamlet, circa 1870. J. Gurney & Son, N.Y. Via Wikimedia Commons.

Edwin's initial fears that the public would blame him for his brother's actions proved to be largely unfounded. Though his brother's crime did tarnish the family name to a certain degree, Edwin's personal reputation and popularity as an actor did not really suffer. When Edwin did make his return to the stage after his brief retirement, he was greeted with a standing ovation that allegedly lasted nearly four minutes.

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