

“Together, Edwin and John Wilkes Booth enacted one of the strangest stories in American history, one with twists and turnings as improbable as any saga from Shakespeare,” writes Nora Titone in the prologue to her new book, *My Thoughts Be Bloody: The Bitter Rivalry Between Edwin and John Wilkes Booth That Led to an American Tragedy*. The sons of Shakespearean actor Junius Brutus Booth, the brothers followed him into the acting profession with starkly different results. Edwin became a star, with the power to ensure that the admittedly less talented John Wilkes did not cast a shadow into his limelight. Titone spent a week researching the book in the Folger’s collection of Booth family papers. In the excerpt below, she relates how John is enjoying the rare adulation of admiring audiences in Richmond, Virginia—until Edwin comes to town.

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# The Bayling Booths:

**E**dwin arrived by train at the Seventh Street Station on September 26, 1858, one month after John started work with the Dramatic Star Company. His arrival was a citywide event. As the star, he stayed in a comfortable hotel. He was given his own dressing room at the Marshall. Edwin now traveled with a personal valet who took charge of his costumes and served his meals. It was the star’s role to dictate what plays would be produced during his stay; Edwin was empowered to make casting decisions and to rehearse the company.

By all accounts, Edwin was acting the part of “the great man” off stage that autumn. Under [writer and critic Adam] Badeau’s influence over the past year, Edwin dispensed with the aura of modesty he previously had found useful, and now he conducted himself like a famous artist. Every time he finished a performance, one supe[rnumerary] recalled, Edwin would stagger off the stage in an attitude of drooping exhaustion. The star’s valet would rush to his side, picking up the velvet train of the actor’s costume, and assisting him to his private dressing room, where Edwin could be seen through the half-open door “sink[ing] into a big easy chair, almost breathless.” Edwin set the Marshall’s supporting actors on a demanding schedule, asking them to take their places for *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice* in quick succession, as well as leading the cast in the rarely seen and difficult to perform *Henry V*.

The tour de force program drew record-breaking business to the Marshall. “Edwin Booth’s engagement is one of the most successful we have ever known there,” a newspaper reported. “The audiences

are large and highly intelligent—the plays performed there are of the most elevated character—and the best order is maintained throughout the house. Mr. Booth’s playing commands the highest mark of admiration: silence. His exhibition of that terrible passion—Remorse—so difficult to counterfeit—produced almost breathless silence: a silence which was not broken at the close of the scene.”

A respected Richmond sculptor, Edward Valentine, about to leave the United States to study in Rome, begged Booth to model for a portrait bust. On October 4, the star consented to sit several hours in Valentine’s studio, so the impression might be taken “from life.” Edwin received adulation of this kind with an almost kingly detachment. Good looks ran in the Booth family, but no one in Richmond was clamoring to make a statue of John Wilkes. As one historian of the Marshall Theatre has written, John Wilkes Booth was “an unclaimed member” of that company, useful only in walk-on parts, an actor whose existence was “almost totally obscured” by his brother’s fame.

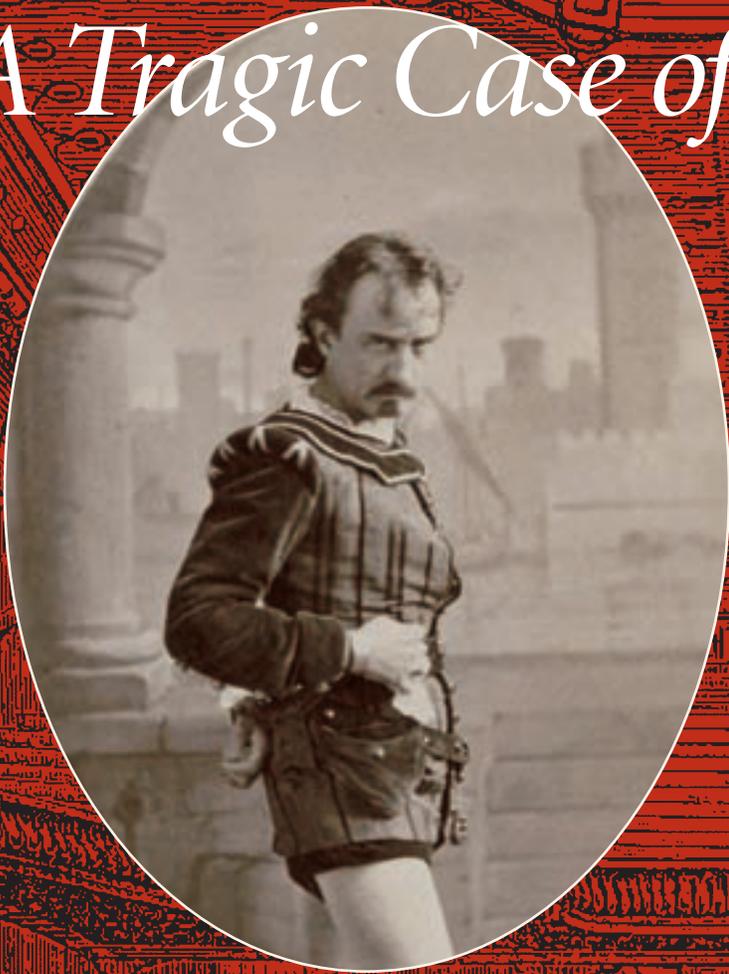
In a letter to his brother June in San Francisco, Edwin evaluated John Wilkes’s slim chance for success on stage. “I don’t think he will startle the world,” he wrote with palpable condescension, but conceded John “looks beautiful on the platform.”

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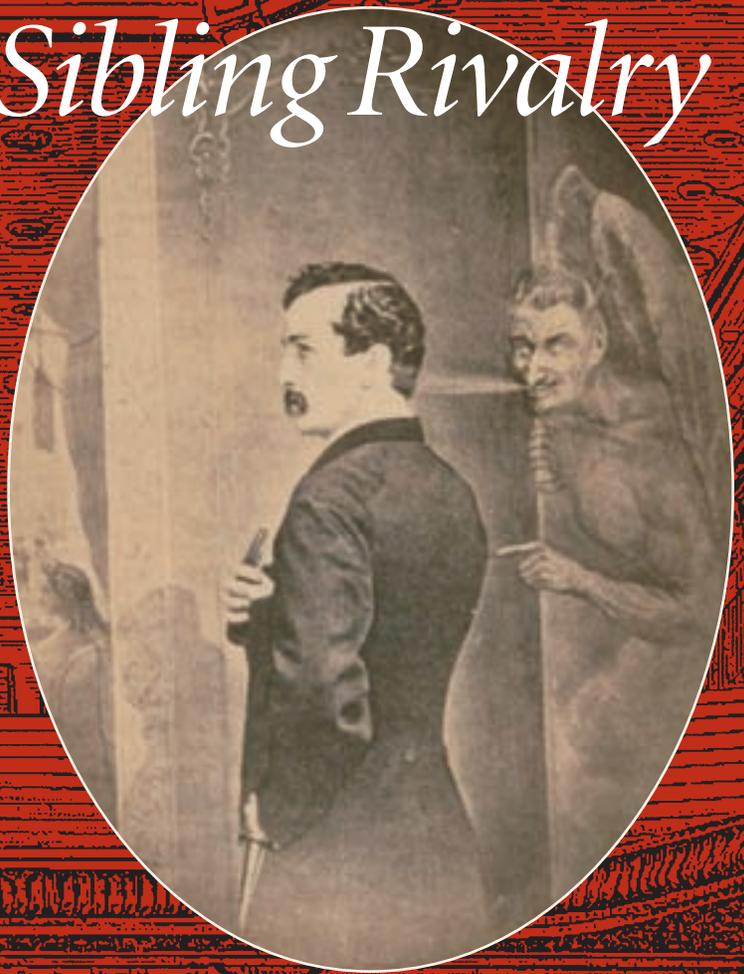
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# A Tragic Case of Sibling Rivalry

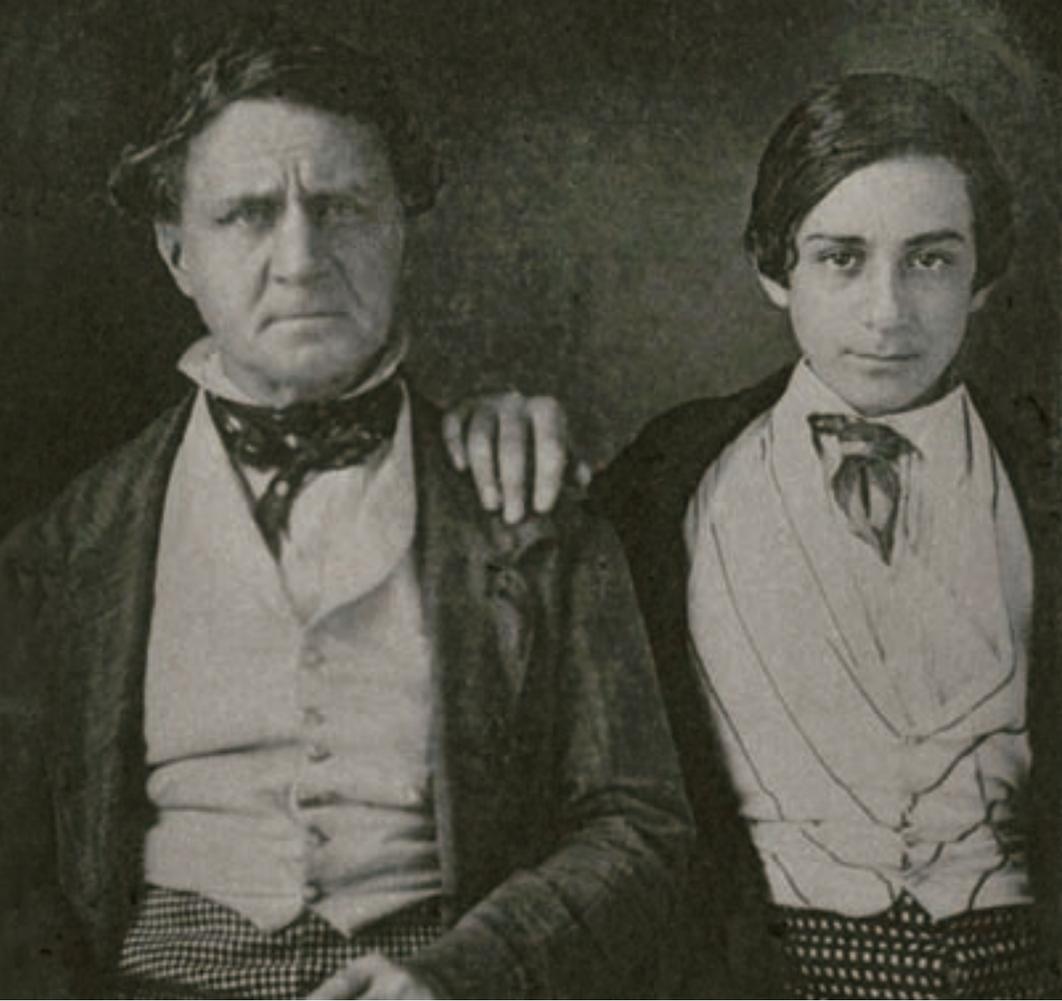


Napoleon Sarony, *Edwin Booth as Iago in Shakespeare's "Othello."*  
Photograph, mid- to late-19th century, Folger Shakespeare Library.



John Wilkes Booth, *the Assassin.*  
Print, mid-19th century, Folger Shakespeare Library.

When the curtain rang down, the older brother apparently made a show of leading the younger by the hand out before the audience, asking in a loud and jovial voice, "I think he's done well, don't you?"



*J.B. Booth and son Edwin Booth. Photograph, mid-19th century. Folger Shakespeare Library.*

Next to his brother, John Wilkes seemed like a second-rate artist. Yet it was hardly fair for the younger man to measure his modest attainments against his brother's runaway success: their backgrounds and training, their relative opportunities, even their personal abilities, had been unequal from the beginning. Much of the hard labor Edwin invested in his rise to stardom was invisible to John. His years of servitude on the road with their father had looked like a holiday to Edwin's younger siblings, and the actor's five years in California and Australia seemed equally like a lark. Only his brother's meteoric ascent once he landed on the Atlantic Coast, aided by Adam Badeau's worshipful reviews, appeared to John's eyes. The younger Booth may have been aggravated by his older brother's lack of interest in helping him to make similar advancements in the profession. Edwin seemed content for John Wilkes

to make his way on his own.

There was one piece of advice Edwin gave to aspiring actors that he never offered to his brother John: "to get into a N.Y. theater as soon as possible." Manhattan was then, as it is now, the best place for dramatic talent to find its reward. There was more money in New York, more parts, bigger and more sophisticated audiences, and greater chances for recognition. The one thing Edwin was determined to prevent was his brother's acting in New York; that city was Edwin's domain, and no other Booth would be allowed to knock him from his pedestal there. The star wanted no competition from a younger, handsomer copy. He knew he could beat John in the realm of talent—his brother lacked a natural gift—yet Edwin could see ahead to a time when John might try his luck in New York anyway. No matter how poorly John acted, if two sons of the great tragedian

were peddling Shakespeare in the city, curious crowds would go to see him, and Edwin's own business would suffer.

Edwin Booth left Richmond on October 16, 1858, leaving his brother subdued in spirit. John Wilkes wrote home to Mary Ann perturbed at his lack of prestige, complaining that he was "anxious to get on faster." Asia Booth recalled her brother complaining to her at this time how much he felt the need for a teacher or mentor to help him rise in the profession. Perhaps John Wilkes envisioned the kind of apprenticeship Edwin served with their older brother Junius in San Francisco in 1852. With the more experienced June taking the lead and casting young Edwin in good parts, those two Booth brothers had worked well together, dividing profits and taking care of each other's careers. What John didn't know was that San Francisco theater-goers had shown signs of Booth fatigue after two years of joint brotherly work.



*Edwin Booth. Photograph. Folger Shakespeare Library.*

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Perhaps under pressure from Mary Ann and Asia to be more helpful to his brother, Edwin behaved differently to John the next time he acted in Richmond. When the star returned to the Marshall in April 1859, he lifted John Wilkes momentarily from his supe[rnumerary]'s obscurity. The youth was invited to play Horatio to Edwin's Hamlet, and on the last night of the star's visit, John Wilkes acted Othello to Edwin's Iago. This last performance was billed as a "benefit of J. Wilkes Booth," meaning he would be the sole recipient of the night's proceeds. Roughly four hundred dollars came to John that night. Critics were silent on his work; they had been warned in advertisements that J. Wilkes Booth was trying out the role "for the first time." He would return to his old billing as "J.B. Wilkes" at the Marshall thereafter.

It was almost a cruel trick on Edwin's part, to force a compari-

son between his own ability and his brother's inexperience. A critic for the *New York Evening Post* wrote that Iago "has always, and rightfully, been considered one of Edwin Booth's masterpieces." The actor was the "incarnation of smooth, eager, supple and fathomless devilry." As Othello's murderous tormentor, Booth appeared "entirely plausible, with no hint of venomous intrigue except in soliloquies, he somehow seemed to be enveloped in an aura of evil. There was a suggestion of infernal enjoyment in the zest with which he marked each progressive step in the fabric of his plot."

Edwin owned the final scene. At the close of the play, Desdemona and John Wilkes's stiff, blockish Othello were dead at last, victims of Iago's conspiracy. Chained and manacled before representatives of the law, about to be brutally interrogated, Edwin's Iago, a critic recalled, "with a horrible gritting of clenched teeth," revealed the soul of "a callous and malignant fiend." The actor spat out Iago's famous line: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know. Hereafter will I never more speak word."

When the curtain rang down, the older brother apparently made a show of leading the younger by the hand out before the audience, asking in a loud and jovial voice, "I think he's done well, don't you?" Whatever applause John received must have felt patronizing.

The perceptive Adam Badeau knew well that tensions were growing between the brothers. In an 1859 letter to Edwin, he commented on John Wilkes's increasing feelings of jealousy and resentment. Learning

that the sculpture Edward Valentine had finished his bust of Edwin Booth and that the resulting bronze cast was "superb," Adam suggested someone rescue the statue from Valentine's Richmond studio immediately, before John Wilkes did it harm. "Send word to your brother not to smash it," Badeau joked.



John Wilkes Booth. Photograph, mid-19th century. Folger Shakespeare Library.



Dan Dry

Nora Titone

**Nora Titone** studied American History and Literature as an undergraduate at Harvard University, and earned an M.A. in History at the University of California, Berkeley. She has worked as a historical researcher for a range of academics, writers and artists involved in projects about nineteenth-century America. This is her first book.

[Learn more about Nora Titone's research at the Folger and explore the library's Booth collection at \[www.folger.edu/booth\]\(http://www.folger.edu/booth\).](#)