

Excerpt from: He Was Called John Wilkes for a Reason

We Booths are not normal people with matter of fact, dry old ordinary names, the Old Man admitted, as he continued his conversation with his inquisitive son. We, by name, are a political statement that stretches from the present into the classical past. We are, by simple name, as historically significant as a full Shakespearean drama. We are, by name alone, mind you, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States, the essence of what it means to be American. Sit son, and hear our tale, for we represent by name the reason why this nation came to be.

The boy took a seat on a nearby log, next to the father he revered, but rarely saw. Junius Brutus Booth traveled much, starring in roles nation-wide, billed as the greatest tragedian of the time. Later ersatz psychologists and historians would postulate that John Wilkes killed President Abraham Lincoln to symbolically kill his hated, always-absent father--or was it jealousy of one of his older brothers, Edwin Thomas, known to the family as Ned, who would follow the Old Man to the stage, as Johnny himself would, and whom Johnny could never eclipse? But that was never the way Johnny would see it. Johnny saw it, as his father would have him see it. It was in the names.

Booth is not so ordinary in itself, Johnny. It comes from the Portuguese. It was originally Bota. Our ancestor was a wandering Jew, silversmith by trade, I believe, who fled his native Lusitania for having criticized monarchy--something we Booths have never learned *not* to do.

And he changed the name to Booth?

Right, my boy, he anglicized the name, as an educated man might say. Leastwise, by the time my father, Richard Booth, came along the family was not only possessed of an English name, we were Church of England (Episcopalians we are called in this country), to boot. Of course I never give a state-sanctioned religion no never-mind. I dabble in them all, Christian, Mohammedan, Buddhist, you name it. All have something good in them. One must not be restricted by convention, you know. I read the Muslim Koran to get in the proper mood for *Othello*. Where was I . . . ?

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