
United States College Literary Society Shakespearean Afterlives in the Nineteenth Century: James Cadman and Kalamazoo College's Sherwood Rhetorical Society

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The paper analyzes a nineteenth-century American undergraduate student essay on *Macbeth* written in 1860 by sophomore James Cadman at Kalamazoo College (Michigan, USA). Supported by literary society debate topics in which Cadman participated – he was an active member in the Sherwood Rhetorical Society, one of two literary societies at Kalamazoo College – the essay suggests nuanced and complex points of view (on the parts of Cadman and also his peers) regarding politics, race, anti-Semitism, slavery and secession, gender roles, and education in the years directly preceding the American Civil War, all revealed through a Shakespearean lens. Cadman's essay provides a glimpse into the early American study of Shakespeare, at a time when English as a school subject and college curriculum was still in its nascent stages and just as Shakespeare's plays were becoming standard fare in the American secondary and higher education curriculum.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Kalamazoo College; Sherman; Cadman; education; literary society.

In 1860, at the age of seventeen, James Piper Cadman wrote a student essay on *Macbeth* during the spring term of his sophomore year at Kalamazoo College (formerly a branch campus of the University of Michigan). Handwritten in a hardbound notebook alongside journal entries and other essays, Cadman's *Macbeth* essay, though, was not written to be turned in, but for oral presentation; he reports in its conclusion having read it aloud both before his English class and in part as a chapel essay; this was a time in schools when oral declamation still outweighed written work. Cadman's is the only known extant Kalamazoo College student Shakespeare essay from this period, but together with student literary society debate records from his years as a member, it provides insight into his and his peers' literary education as well as their political and socioeconomic beliefs, in terms of Shakespeare, in what was then the Western United States in the tense years just prior to the American Civil War, and paints a picture of student life at a time when Shakespeare was just finding its way into the formal American college curriculum.

Kalamazoo College, founded in 1833 with Baptist roots, had just begun offering an English Literature class in the 1856-57 academic year, just three years prior to James Cadman's composition. English as a unified subject of study generally, and the formal curricular study of Shakespeare in particular, was still rare in 1860 throughout most of American higher education. The Sherwood Rhetorical Society, an extracurricular literary and debating society, of which Cadman was an active member, had just recently formed in 1851, with the encouragement of President

James Stone, and had been just chartered the same year as Cadman's essay, in 1860 (Francis, 2008: 47). The Sherwood was one of the three active literary societies at Kalamazoo College during the years Cadman attended: the others were the Philolexium Lyceum – a second literary society for young men established in 1855 – and the Eurodelphian, established in 1856 for young women; all three collected their own library of books; the Sherwood Rhetorical Society's library included 400 titles, which they shared with students of the other societies (47). The three college literary societies, alongside the newly added English Literature course, provided Kalamazoo College students rich opportunities for the study of literature and other topical subjects, opportunities not available even ten years before.

The young men of Sherwood Rhetorical Society, typical of literary societies in the United States in the nineteenth century, were actively interested in the shifting function schools and universities played in affecting society and culture, and how the established curriculum, as well as the informal extracurriculum they were creating, reinforced and undermined the societal status quo. Their debate topics often addressed issues demonstrating an intellectual involvement in their own learning. Sherwood members, for example, discussed educational topics such as whether common schools or universities were more valuable to society, whether the state should provide a free education for all children, whether prizes should be given in school, whether the Classical course or the scientific course at Kalamazoo College was preferable, whether or not students should keep up on current events even if at the expense of their studies, as well as others. As the Civil War approached, though, debates on educational issues waned while issues related to the war moved to the forefront: secession, slavery, and race. Even in the midst of the war, though, questions on educational issues occasionally peppered the Friday evening debates. Cadman and the students of Kalamazoo College were not passive learners; they took an active interest in their own education and had opinions on how best that education should be achieved.

Analysis of Cadman's criticism of *Macbeth* further reveals the opinions and beliefs of Kalamazoo College students in the years leading up to the American Civil War. First, students had been trained to revere Shakespeare. Cadman's opening paragraph, for example, adulates Shakespeare's ability to draw upon a range of different characters in his plays, from the "prattling child" to the "wisest philosopher" (1860). His praise echoes the bardolatry found in the text studied at the college at that time. College catalogs reveal that students of Kalamazoo College's English Literature classes until the mid-1860s read from Scottish academic William Spaulding's *The History of English Literature*, which influenced Cadman's thinking and writing, and elements of Cadman's writing echo Spaulding's Romantic style and ideals. For example, Spaulding considers the age of Spenser, Shakespeare, Bacon, and Milton to be the summit in the history of English literature, describing it at length as "the most brilliant [period] in the literary history of England" in which "thought, and imagination, and eloquence, combine to illuminate it with their most dazzling light" (1853: 195). This lofty praise continues through several chapters, generously mingled alongside more concrete analysis of the historical period. Spaulding's text identifies Shakespeare specifically as "the greatest of the great men who have created the imaginative literature of the English language" (251). According to Spaulding, "the name of Shakespeare is the greatest in our literature: it is the greatest in all literature ... no man ever came near him in the creative powers of the mind" (260).

Spaulding's praise informs Cadman's writing. For example, Spaulding describes Shakespeare as a painter of: "The grand pictures of life ... pictures which group all their characters, whether elevated or mean, in situations exciting universal sympathies ... pictures which ... we cannot behold without being forced to meditate on some of the most important problems of human life and action" (259).

Cadman likewise offers a strikingly-similar reverent description of Shakespeare's character development in his student essay: "Shakespeare seems to have gathered the whole world in one mighty sweep and placed it before us ... we may consider him raised above the common level and from his eminence viewing the characters of those below him ... none can ever see more, since

within the range of this poet's eye all men seem to have appeared" (1860).

For Cadman, like Spaulding, Shakespeare stood above all other men as a deity and peered down into their very souls as he created his characters. Cadman writes: "Thus we behold Shakespeare in his true position as regards his fellow men" (1860). Shakespeare creates not just characters in his plays, but recreates the very nature of humanity. At Kalamazoo College, as early as 1860, Shakespeare had already taken his place atop the literary canon, as he would shortly thereafter throughout American higher education.

Spaulding was not the only secondary source with which Cadman was familiar, though. Nineteenth-century American college students were typically expected to read from only one text in each of their college courses. Cadman, however, in addition to having read Spaulding, was also influenced by the thinking of August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the nineteenth-century German poet and scholar who had translated several of Shakespeare's works into German at the turn of the eighteenth century. His *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, in which Schlegel speaks extensively on Shakespeare, was first published in 1808, and is the only secondary source that Cadman cites in his composition. Cadman most likely borrowed the Schlegel text from one of the society libraries, and it would have been a text his peers had been familiar with as well. In his opening lecture on *Macbeth*, Schlegel, much like Spaulding, flatters Shakespeare, asking, "who could exhaust the praises of this sublime work?" (1846: 407). Schlegel was popular with nineteenth-century college literary societies, and his works were frequently included in other society library collections, including Harvard's Institute of 1770¹ and Hasty Pudding Club², Yale's Calliopean Society³, Dartmouth's United Fraternity⁴, Wake Forest's Philomathesian Society⁵, and others.

That the young men of Kalamazoo College were trained to honor and revere Shakespeare as the pinnacle of the English literary canon can be seen not only in what they read, but also in what Cadman wrote. It can also be seen, though, that this view was one in which gender disparities of the day still held sway. Schlegel, in his criticism, lays a foundation for a misogynistic reading of the play upon which Cadman would build. In his writing, Schlegel suggests the three witches of *Macbeth* to be "merely instruments ... governed by an invisible spirit" (408). Cadman elaborates, adding that the witches are the "Devil ... in woman form" (1860). The stronger example, though, is Schlegel's analysis of Lady Macbeth. Schlegel blames Lady Macbeth most of all for her husband's downfall, which Cadman quotes, "of all the human participators in the king's murder", Lady Macbeth "is the most guilty" (409). Schlegel finds Macbeth to be guilty only of the deed, a lesser crime than that of Lady Macbeth and the witches, who goad Macbeth and push him to murder. Schlegel writes, "little more than the mere execution falls to the share of Macbeth; he is driven to it ... in a tumult of fascination ... [but] repentance immediately follows" (409). Like Eve from the Garden of Eden, it is the temptress who is most to blame for man's fall.

Cadman traces this logic in his own argument and concludes that, if not for Lady Macbeth's

¹ Harvard archives hold a series of society library catalogs from the Institute of 1770. The 1854-55 volume lists "Schlegel's Dramatic Literature" but the previous 1841 catalog does not, indicating the society acquired the Schlegel text between 1841 and 1854. (Records of the Institute of 1770. Library Catalogs, 1823-1855, Library Catalogs 1841 & 1854-55. HUD 3461.750. Harvard University Archives.)

² Harvard archives also hold several society library catalogs from the Hasty Pudding Club. One of these – likely from 1851 – includes a listing for "Schlegel – Dramatic Art and Literature". The date is not listed in the text itself, but is instead listed in the archive's finding guide as 1851. (Records of the Hasty Pudding Club. HPC Library Catalogue. HUD 3447.750.11. Harvard University Archives.)

³ Google Books has archived a digital copy of *The Catalogue of the Library of the Calliopean Society, Yale College, 1846*. The volume lists a copy of Schlegel's *Dramatic Art and Literature*. Another version, from 1873, also in Google Books, includes the Schlegel text too.

⁴ Google Books has archived a digital copy of *A Catalogue of Books in the Library of the United Fraternity, September 1859*. The volume lists a copy of Schlegel's *Dramatic Art and Literature*.

⁵ Thomas Harding reports that the Philomathesian Society had \$150 to spend on books in the spring of 1846 and asked President William Hooper to make the selection for them. Amongst his selections was included Schlegel's *Lectures on Drama and Literature* (1971: 207).

urgings, Macbeth would have remained loyal to King Duncan. The primary difference between Macbeth and Banquo, according to Cadman, lies in the “external” forces in their lives. Cadman writes, “had there been a Lady Banquo of a nature similar to Lady Macbeth, we should have had in Banquo another Macbeth” (1860). He underlines this passage, meaning that when speaking before class and chapel, he had likely emphasized it orally, arguing emphatically for Lady Macbeth’s guilt. It seems that, for Cadman, Macbeth’s tragic fault is not ambition, but instead having an ambitious wife. Even when Schlegel sympathizes with Lady Macbeth, attributing her suicide at the end of the play to a “remorse of conscience” (425), Cadman concludes that “after careful consideration of the matter” he “can find no reason for attributing ... such a cause” (1860). Not even Lady Macbeth’s death can elicit sympathy in Cadman for the fallen heroine.

Cadman’s misogynistic undertone is developed further when he generalizes Lady Macbeth’s wrongdoings as an allegory for the imagined historical wrongdoings of women throughout history. Believing that through his genius Shakespeare had created a compendium of universal human character types in his plays, Cadman paints Lady Macbeth symbolically as the female monster driving the ambitions of every tyrant that has ever ruled. While he concedes that there is no such evidence in the historical record – that history rarely has “drawn aside the curtain and allowed us to view castle halls and see there the *real* corridors of human affairs” (1860) – he concludes regardless that, for every real-life Macbeth that has existed in history, there has been behind the scenes a real-life Lady Macbeth driving him toward his ambitions, and responsible for his misdeeds. He writes, “we may be sure of one thing: that as often as we have seen a Macbeth just so often have we seen a Lady Macbeth” (1860). In saying so, Cadman overgeneralizes, further developing *Macbeth* as a Garden of Eden allegory in which *womankind* is blamed for the crimes of *mankind*.

Cadman was not alone amongst the men of the Sherwood Rhetorical Society in such views. The Sherwood men collectively doubted the intellectual equality of men and women. In a December 10, 1858, debate of the Sherwood Rhetorical Society, its members decided that “the mental faculties of the sexes” were not “equivalent” (handwritten meeting minutes, 1858-64, Sherwood Rhetorical Society). At that time, Cadman served as the society’s secretary; the debate results are written in his handwriting. Over a hundred years later, in 1967, the Sherwood Rhetorical Society began admitting female members to its ranks, but such thoughts of equal opportunity were far from the minds of the Sherwood men of Cadman’s era (Francis, 2008: 269). Cadman’s willingness to entirely divert the blame for Duncan’s murder to Lady Macbeth and his broad overgeneralization of Lady Macbeth as a symbolic scapegoat for history’s tyrannical men represent the general misogynistic leanings of Sherwood members in the 1850s and the 1860s.

Cadman’s views regarding race, on the other hand, were relatively progressive. He was the product of nineteenth-century thinking and values, as well as a product of the region of the United States in which he lived. Thomas Harding divides nineteenth-century literary societies into three broad geographic regions: Northern, Southern, and Western. The expansive western frontier included Oregon and California, but also states typically considered Midwestern today: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. The student societies of Western colleges tended to hold generally anti-secessionist and anti-slavery views in the years just preceding the Civil War, though because of their geographical distance from the conflict, theirs was generally a more dispassionate discussion than those that ensued in Northern and Southern literary societies (1971: 234). The faculty and students of Kalamazoo College likewise held anti-secession and anti-slavery views, perhaps to a higher degree even than some of their Western peers, and were sympathetic to the plight of African Americans in the South (Francis, 2008: 37). The longstanding college president, Dr. James Stone, and his influential wife, Lucinda Stone, were both vocal abolitionists; the couple’s twenty-year tenure from 1843 until 1863 serves as a cornerstone to the history of Kalamazoo College, and their influence upon the college in this period cannot be understated (37). In 1860-61, in fact, the year after Cadman finished his *Macbeth* essay, Kalamazoo College enrolled its first African American student, Rufus Perry, who had previously been a slave (46). Such influences shaped Cadman’s views and writing. As a result, Cadman was disposed to sympathize with black

Shakespearean characters; in a few brief lines on *Othello* near the end of his essay, he “lament[s] that such a noble soul as the Moor should have fallen beneath deceitfulness of Iago” (1860).

Several of the Sherwood Rhetorical Society’s weekly debate topics also explicitly challenged issues related to slavery, secession, and the plight of African Americans in the South. For example, on May 7, 1859, the society debated whether intemperance or slavery was a greater evil, and determined the greater evil to be slavery. A little more than a year later, on November 9, 1860, the society debated whether “slavery in the US ought to be abolished immediately” (handwritten meeting minutes, 1858-64, Sherwood Rhetorical Society), but this time decided against immediate abolition. While some students may have graduated or left the college, it is unlikely that student opinion changed so drastically in such a short time. It is more likely that instead the nature of the altered phrasing led to a complex discussion of the national political climate, and that the key word “immediately” drove the second debate. While most students believed that slavery should be abolished, they may not have believed that doing so “immediately” would be the best course of action. Relatively far removed from the conflict, theirs would have been a rich debate in which their sympathy for the slaves was weighed against the potential consequences of such sudden social change. In another apparent contradiction, the society determined, on May 11, 1861, that it would be “policy to compel the seceding states to remain apart from the union” (handwritten meeting minutes, 1858-64, Sherwood Rhetorical Society). Two weeks later, in a second debate, the phrasing was changed and the society came to the opposite conclusion, agreeing that it would be “policy to compel the seceding states to remain in the union” (handwritten meeting minutes, 1858-64, Sherwood Rhetorical Society). That nearly identical debate topics would be addressed only two weeks apart suggests that the original debate had not been sufficiently concluded and that it was felt that further debate was needed. Secession was an important enough issue that the students brought the question back so that they could continue and overturn their previous finding.

Cadman’s own opinions on secession, though, were clear. In a September 28, 1861, journal entry, opposed to Southern secession, he wrote, “when laymen will ... allow a secession flag to be placed at his window, he must either mend his ways, leave the country, or *be hung*”. Some of Cadman’s views on *Macbeth* may best be explained in terms of the complex sociopolitical context from which students of Kalamazoo College witnessed the secession. Cadman condemns Macbeth for the murder of Duncan – his “best earthly friend, to whom he [Macbeth] owes all that he has ever had, that he now possesses, and all that he may reasonably expect to obtain” (1860) – but also sympathizes with him. He shifts much of the blame from Macbeth to Lady Macbeth, and also recalls Macbeth’s honorable military service. Cadman notes that the “first impression of Macbeth’s character is his favor” (1860). He was once a man “of true nobleness of character” (1860). Because “our sympathies are so strongly enlisted for him” at the beginning of the play, at the end of the play “past regard cannot be entirely forgotten” (1860). Such regard, though, is not enough to pardon Macbeth, and Cadman ends his essay: “we may regret to behold powers once noble become so debased, but still cannot refrain from exultation when we see the tyrant brought low” (1860).

Cadman’s sympathies with but final condemnation of Macbeth serve as allegory for the Western view of Southern secession. The West had historically, as recently as twenty years before, been sympathetic to the South, though, they generally sided with the cause of the North by the 1860s. The themes of *Macbeth*, in this case, parallel the larger conflict between North and South, in which the riotous South is represented in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and the noble North in Duncan. When Macbeth murders Duncan, it matches Southern secession; both are overly ambitious attempts, from the perspective of the West, to overcome rightful government. Cadman’s willingness to hang secessionists, together with the results of Sherwood Rhetorical Society debates, illuminates the context from which he read and understood Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Cadman can condemn Southern secession at the same time he maintains some sympathy with it. He did not condemn the man who hung the Confederate flag without first offering him pardon, should he mend his ways. Cadman can sympathize with Macbeth to a limited degree because he can sym-

pathize with the Confederacy to a limited degree. Had Cadman been part of a Northern college literary society with stronger Union ties, he may not have held even these sympathies for the rebel Macbeth. Had Cadman grown up in a Southern state, and been a member of a Southern college literary society, his context for reading and understanding *Macbeth* would also have been altogether different, and his essay likewise would have revealed an entirely different worldview.

In addition to having studied *Macbeth* and his reference to *Othello*, Cadman was also familiar with at least two other Shakespearean plays, which he mentions briefly in the closing paragraph of the essay: *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. He is satisfied with the ending of *The Merchant of Venice* – “having little or no sympathy for Shylock” he rejoices “to see his property confiscated” (1860), which could point to potential anti-Semitic undertones in the piece – but is dissatisfied with the conclusion of *Hamlet*. In the case of *Hamlet*, he is “at loss to find a suitable cause for the introduction of the ghost of Hamlet’s father” (1860). The ghost of Hamlet’s father may have been revenged, but at too great a cost: “The apparition was avenged, but what a sacrifice! He that was required to obtain this satisfaction loses his life in taking it” (1860). Cadman mentions *Hamlet* only briefly in these three lines of the concluding paragraph, but his mention of Hamlet’s father’s ghost provides an interesting comparison to a lengthy earlier analysis he made of Banquo’s ghost. While he can’t “find a suitable cause” for Shakespeare’s creation of the ghost of Hamlet’s father, Cadman argues earlier in the essay of Banquo’s ghost as “another proof ... which shows how wonderfully correct was Shakespeare’s knowledge of human nature” (1860). Cadman argues Banquo’s ghost to be “one of the finest or rather the most *natural*, characters of the play” (1860). According to Cadman, the ghost of Banquo is an internal manifestation of Macbeth’s guilty conscience; Macbeth alone sees the ghost because it has been created from his own guilt; his mind has made it real. Cadman believes that it is entirely natural for the minds of men to make their fears real, in “the remarkable power which the mind has over our senses and indeed over our whole being” (1860).

Just as Cadman argues that Shakespeare is able to stand above the world and look down into the masses to find his characters, it is as though Cadman sees himself – perhaps because of his class, his gender, his ethnicity and religion, perhaps because of his access to literature and education, perhaps because of his access to Shakespeare even – to stand from a similar height above the rest of humanity and look down himself and analyze the people he sees. Nowhere in Cadman’s work is Shakespeare used as a reflection of self, but instead as a looking glass to judge others. It is important, though, not to judge Cadman too harshly. He was scholarly and critical as a student, and remained so throughout his life; his essay as a young man was written over a century and a half ago, and while his writing reveals much about life in the developing Western United States in the early 1860s, his views cannot be fairly evaluated without consideration of the context in which he lived and wrote.

Cadman’s 1860 sophomore essay on *Macbeth* offers a glimpse into how the study of Shakespeare functioned in nineteenth-century American colleges. It reveals much about his education and opinions of Shakespeare: he had read, or at least become familiar with, at least four Shakespearean plays; had been exposed to secondary sources; had adopted, like these sources, a writing and speaking style that adulated Shakespeare’s genius; that the study of Shakespeare at Kalamazoo College was not solely oratorical, but that plays were read and studied as full literary pieces; and Cadman held misogynistic and anti-Semitic prejudices tempered with complex pro-Union opinions on slavery, secession, and race. Cadman’s essay was written at a pivotal moment in the history of Kalamazoo College (and also in American higher education more broadly). Its literary societies had just taken shape in the past decade, and English literature even more recently had officially become a subject of study worthy of its own course. This was also a period of deep conflict in the United States as dark clouds of civil war loomed. Through literature and Shakespeare, though, Cadman and the students of Kalamazoo College were able to find both an escape from the oncoming turmoil, and an outlet through which they could better understand and also interpret their own world, an academic path for the extracurricular to develop into the curricular. Because

of Cadman's essay, there is a clearer picture of that world and how he and his peers thought, studied, and experienced life and Shakespeare.

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