

# FIGHTING WORDS

## *Shakespeare and Minnesota's Experience of Civil War*

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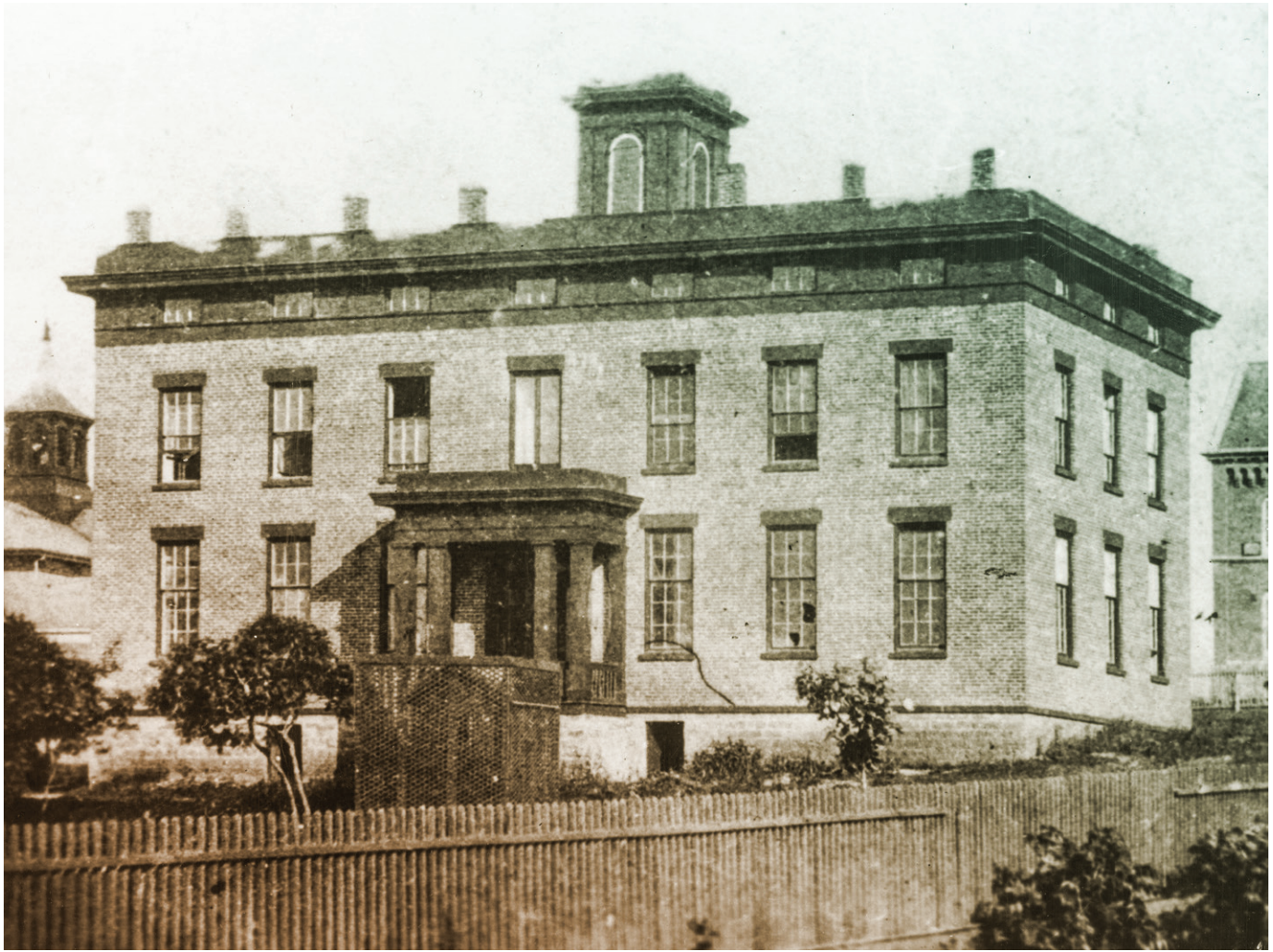
JAMES A. WRIGHT was a lucky man. Enlisted in the First Minnesota Regiment from 1861 to 1864, Wright saw combat at nearly every major engagement of the US Civil War—First and Second Bull Run, the Peninsula Campaign, Antietam, Fredericksburg, and, most famously, the Battle of Gettysburg—and survived them all. Brothers Thomas and William Christie, Minnesotan artillerymen, likewise withstood a steady dose of combat, from being wounded at Shiloh to briefly (in William's case) suffering capture and ransom at the hands of Confederate cavalry. Philip Hamlin, a Hamline University-educated corporal, survived the First Minnesota's heroic charge on the second day of Gettysburg, only to lose his life the following day in a counterattack against Pickett's Charge. Stories like these aren't difficult to find in the annals of Minnesota's Civil War history, and they've been chronicled extensively, both by those who lived through it and by subsequent historians.<sup>1</sup> But there is another version of this opening paragraph that we might feasibly write, one that focuses on another, lesser-known, aspect of Minnesota's Civil War history:

First Sgt. James A. Wright was a Hamline-educated avowed Shakespearean, whose company kept with them a copy of the renowned author's *Complete Works*, from which they read while encamped. Following his Civil War service, Wright returned to Minnesota and helped found a literary group named the Shakespearean Syndicate in Red Wing. Thomas and William Christie, both artillerymen, made repeated reference to Shakespeare in their wartime correspondence, using his writings to help them describe their experiences. And the Hamline-educated soldiers in the First Minnesota Regiment used Shakespeare's work as a mode of commentary on the often-bitter realities of war.<sup>2</sup>

Shakespeare's work was a persistent part of the Civil War experience for Minnesota's soldiers. Certainly, Shakespeare's plays were not the only text Minnesotans carried with them into the war—newspapers, pulp novels, Romantic poetry, and, above all, the Bible were all key texts that appear frequently in the diaries, letters, and memoirs of soldiers. But references to Shakespeare stand out for their flexibility and ubiquity in soldiers' writings, called upon in nearly every sort of situation the war could present. When Daniel Bond of the First Minnesota vents his frustration at the politicians running the war, he adapts *Julius Caesar*, declaring "I had rather be a dog and bay the moon than be such an American."<sup>3</sup>

When an anonymous soldier, writing to the *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* in 1862, wants to mock the run-down condition of Southern civilian militias, he declares them "tragico-comical," in reference to *Hamlet*, and tells the paper that the Southerners' paltry store of weapons is "a collection that Falstaff would have rejoiced in." Another anonymous soldier also drew from *Hamlet* when writing to the *St. Paul Press* and the *Wabasha County Herald* shortly after the outbreak of the war. Struck by the sheer number of amassed Union forces in Alexandria, the soldier realizes that "the times are sadly out of joint" and "there is something rotten in Virginia."<sup>4</sup>

A Minnesotan celebrating earning a commission echoes a character in *Twelfth Night*, saying "some are born great, some achieve greatness," adding anticlimactically, "some don't." Celebrating the marriage of a colleague while awaiting deployment at Fort Snelling in 1862, a member of Minnesota's Eighth Regiment, channeling *Richard III*, hopes, "May the winter of his discontent' be 'made happy by a glorious spring.'" Remembering the violence of a recent battle, several Minnesota soldiers reach



Hamline University, Minnesota's first collegiate institution, then located in Red Wing, about 1865

for *Macbeth's* famous exclamation: "The cry is still 'they come.'" Whatever the occasion, from the tumult of battle to the quotidian rhythms of camp life, Shakespeare proved a ready lens through which to view it.<sup>5</sup>

What made Shakespeare and his work so durable a reference point for Minnesota's soldiers? The question has mostly gone unasked. There's been significant interest in how Shakespeare intersected with the US Civil War, but study has remained focused almost entirely on the war's best-known figures, from politicians to generals to prominent civilians. Abraham Lincoln's love of Shakespeare, including his habit of bringing Shakespearean actors to the White House, has been thoroughly examined. Ulysses S. Grant's portrayal of Desdemona in a production of *Othello* remains a fascinating window into America's relationship with Shakespeare. John Wilkes Booth's Shakespearean lineage has been explored and analyzed. The black sheep of America's most famous family of Shakespearean actors, Booth had, in the years leading up to his

assassination of President Lincoln, toured the Confederacy as the lead in a range of Shakespeare productions, where the warm reception he found endeared him further to the Confederate cause and helped embitter him against Lincoln. But Shakespeare's influence on the experiences of the enlisted soldiers who did the bulk of the war's fighting (and dying) has been overlooked.<sup>6</sup>

The Civil War writings of Minnesotan soldiers, however, are also filled with references to a wide swath of Shakespeare's works, from the canonical *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, *Richard III*, and *Henry IV*, to lesser-known works such as *As You Like It*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Venus and Adonis*. This article examines three textual "case studies" to track how Minnesota's soldiers read, reflected on, and adapted Shakespeare in a time of war: *Hamlet*, called on to describe the mysterious forces of Providence; Falstaff (a major character in several plays), referenced to acknowledge the "tragico-comical" nature of the war; and *Othello*, a work flexible enough

to address issues of military commitment and domestic relations alike. These represent only a small fraction of Shakespearean references and citations in the records of the war—nonetheless, they offer a window into the flexibility of Shakespearean reference throughout the war, and the ability for Shakespeare’s work to be called on to serve myriad occasions and sentiments.<sup>7</sup>

### Minnesotans’ Familiarity with Shakespeare

The frequency of Shakespearean citations in soldiers’ writings stems, in part, from the unique educational policies of Hamline University. In antebellum America, elite American universities, following the lead of their British counterparts, offered literary courses only in classical languages. As the literary historians Alden and Virginia Vaughan note, “Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Princeton, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Virginia” all initiated courses on Shakespeare only between the 1870s and 1890s. But Hamline University, Minnesota’s first collegiate institu-

tion, deviated from this model. Then located in Red Wing, Hamline offered students the opportunity to study English literature in greater depth than a typical mid-nineteenth-century American university.<sup>8</sup>

Under Hamline’s “classical” curriculum, students took the old standbys—Greek, Latin, mathematics, and science—but the school also required three years of English. Considering Shakespeare’s place at the forefront of the nineteenth-century canon, it’s virtually inconceivable that Hamline students wouldn’t have read his major works. By the 1880s, Hamline was listing its first-year English course as “English (Shakespeare),” making him the only named author in its catalog. While Shakespeare wasn’t good enough for the Harvard or Yale curricula quite yet, Hamline students would have left the Red Wing campus well acquainted with the Bard of Avon’s oeuvre.<sup>9</sup>

When Minnesota formed its first regiment—the First Minnesota, mustered into service in April 1861—these

*Men of the First Minnesota after the Battle of Fair Oaks, Virginia, 1862*



Hamline-educated soldiers made up a significant part, frequently earning higher military rank, likely due to their college-educated background and slightly advanced age in comparison to the other volunteers. And with the Hamline soldiers came Shakespeare. The aforementioned First Sgt. Wright notes that the First Minnesota's "Company F had a copy of Shakespeare that contributed much to a pleasant passing of a stormy day when we were confined to quarters."<sup>10</sup>

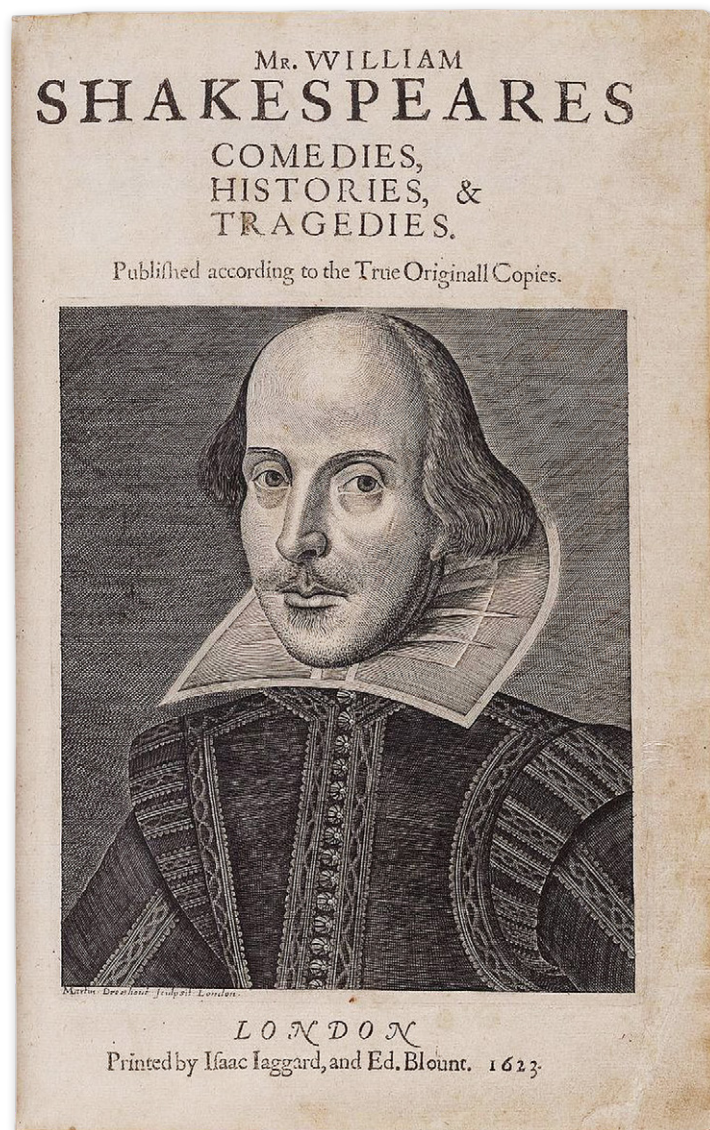
John Arkins, another Red Wing recruit from the Fifth Minnesota, did much the same. Although too young to have yet enrolled at Hamline, Arkins worked for one of the prominent town newspapers, the *Red Wing Republican*, which would have likely brought him into close contact with Hamline and its milieu. As historian Kenneth Carley documents, "Whenever he could, Arkins read from a volume of William Shakespeare's plays that he carried with him in the field."<sup>11</sup>

But while Hamline and Red Wing were a key source in providing Shakespeare-educated recruits, soldiers without this background also evince some familiarity with Shakespeare's works. Though soldiers without significant secondary education were less likely to read Shakespeare's plays in full, this does not mean they did not encounter his work in excerpts. In primary education, Shakespeare's language trickled down to students through popular readers, such as the ubiquitous McGuffey Readers, which featured short snippets from Shakespearean plays designed to teach elocution and rhetoric.<sup>12</sup>

Minnesotan soldiers may also have seen Shakespeare onstage, his plays being performed in the Twin Cities in the 1850s and '60s. Daniel Bond, for example, who had come to Minnesota from Indiana before the start of the war, knew his Shakespeare well and quoted from it frequently. The Christie brothers had emigrated to Minnesota from Scotland and had grown up as farmworkers, but nonetheless they acquired enough knowledge of Shakespeare to refer to his work frequently.<sup>13</sup>

Love of Shakespeare extended even outside the Anglophone soldiers. In 1862 the *Minnesota Staats-Zeitung* enthusiastically reported that "Herr Julius Schmidt" of the First Minnesota had been promoted, noting that he was "besser unter der Namen 'Shakespeare' bekannt" ("better known by the name 'Shakespeare'") due to his reputation as a theater aficionado.<sup>14</sup>

The soldiers who brought Shakespeare with them spread the Bard throughout their companies either by reading his works aloud, as Wright describes, or by passing around volumes of Shakespeare's plays. Despite a stubborn stereotype that has held on for generations, the vast majority of Civil War soldiers could, and did, read widely—



Title page of the First Folio, by William Shakespeare, with copper engraving of the author by Martin Droeshout, 1623

Union Army literacy rates approached 90 percent. It's worth noting, further, that hauling a volume of Shakespeare's plays was no minor decision for a typical soldier, who carried a pack that ranged from 40 to 50 pounds and that lacked enough space for the daily necessities of food, clothing, ammunition, shelter, and medical supplies; soldiers regularly complained about the weight. To sacrifice both space and weight to carry around Shakespeare's plays was thus to make a considerable commitment to having his works at hand.<sup>15</sup> If hauling around a copy of Shakespeare was no easy task, what made many of Minnesota's Civil War soldiers bother to do so? That other ubiquitous text cited throughout the soldiers' writings, the Bible, can be understood as a source of spiritual comfort in a time of great trial. But while Shakespeare was tremendously

popular in nineteenth-century America, he wasn't a religious writer; his work must have offered something else to Minnesota's fighting men. That something, I believe, was Shakespeare's unique combination of ubiquity and malleability. Shakespeare offered a body of work that simultaneously was well known (albeit to differing degrees, based on one's education) and that could also be adapted to capture a myriad of perspectives on war and the human experience of it, ranging from the jingoistic and the bellicose to the shell-shocked and war-weary. For Civil War soldiers, as with soldiers across generations, literature offered a tool for naming, sharing, and understanding experiences that could help make sense of the trials of war.

### The Universality of Shakespeare and Hamlet

Wright provides a telling example of Shakespeare's ever-present relevance, using perhaps the most popular, or at least most frequently cited, Shakespearean play among Minnesotans in the Civil War: *Hamlet*. After describing a particularly devastating example of war's self-destructive nature, in which the First Minnesota witnessed a regiment from Massachusetts come under friendly fire, and the deaths of several soldiers as a result, Wright relates one regiment member's reaction to the event:

One of the Hamline Boys, who usually took a hopeful view of things and sometimes tried to repeat appropriate passages from Shakespeare or some other poet, made an attempt at a quotation. He believed in an overruling Providence and frequently quoted "There is a *Divinity shapes our ends, rough hew them as we may.*" As he made the quotation that night, in the middle of a period of silent marching, it indicated that his customary faith had been materially weakened, for it was to this effect: "There is a Divinity that shapes our ends, *rough hew them as we may.*"

The "Hamline Boy," in this telling, uses *Hamlet* rather than an explicitly religious text to express that "his customary faith had been materially weakened." He does so, as Wright expresses through the use of italicization, not simply by reciting a line from the play but by reframing it, shifting the verbal emphasis from Hamlet's reassurance of an over-seeing "divinity" and placing it instead on the tendency of humanity to "rough hew" their ends—to hack or chop away at them, as with an ax. Wright's anecdote reveals, in this moment, not just the ubiquity of Shakespeare among the First Minnesota but the ability of soldiers to use his works as tools for interpretation or commentary on their experiences. We're told this isn't the first time



Portrait of William Gilchrist Christie,  
First Minnesota artilleryman, about 1864

this soldier has tried to "repeat appropriate passages from Shakespeare," which suggests that Shakespeare served as a vehicle for reflecting on the conflict. The Massachusetts tragedy and the commentary of the "Hamline Boy" was memorable enough for Wright that, decades later, he titled a chapter of his memoir "There is a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we may."<sup>16</sup>

Wright never specifies who this Hamline boy is, but Wright seems to have spread his appreciation for this passage throughout the regiment, for it appears twice in the diary of Daniel Bond. In addition to numerous citations of Shakespeare, Bond's manuscript diary reveals much about the literary culture of the First Minnesota, and he provides a window into the ways that university-educated soldiers could transfer their knowledge of Shakespeare to their colleagues. Despite being a talented writer and a diligent, self-taught student, Bond was self-conscious about his lack of formal education in comparison to the Hamline soldiers. In his diary, Bond records that after a conversation with "young Standish"—almost certainly Merritt Standish, a corporal in Bond's company whom Wright describes as a "Hamline Boy"—Bond confesses that "I am more pleased with him than ever. He is remarkably fond of classical literature, but his education is so much superior to mine that I fear I do not interest him much."<sup>17</sup>

But rather than shun Bond for his lack of formal education, the Hamline boys in the regiment offered him learning materials. They supported his study of "classical literature" not only by helping him study Latin but also, in

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the spirit of a Hamline education, by helping him read Shakespeare. Artemus Decker presented Bond with "an abridgement of Blair's *Lectures*" as a "New Year's Gift" in 1862, which Bond spent several months studying. Hugh Blair's 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* were a key force in bringing Shakespeare's work to the American public. One scholar even credits Blair with carrying Shakespeare's work "unchallenged into the educational scheme of America."<sup>18</sup>

Blair deems Shakespeare's work brilliant because it possesses "lively and diversified painting of character"—in other words, because Shakespeare captures a wide range of human experience. In Blair, readers like Daniel Bond found an endorsement of the idea that Shakespeare's work might be put to use in any situation, and the fact that soldiers in the First Minnesota were sharing Blair's text with one another gives us a glimpse into what shaped their attitudes toward Shakespeare's usefulness in describing their own experiences.<sup>19</sup>

Bond may actually have already learned about Shakespeare's universality, since his diary shows him adapting Shakespeare even before receiving Artemus Decker's "New Year's Gift." Following the First Minnesota's engagement at the Battle of Seven Pines (May 31–June 1, 1862), Bond returned to the regiment's camp, where he found that the "grapevine bridge" the regiment had hastily constructed, a bridge that had carried crucial Union reinforcements across the Chickahominy River after unusually high waters washed away the army's other bridges, had itself collapsed. Struck by how close the regiment had come to disaster, Bond muses:

And now for the first time I began to reason on the thousand instances in my life where we see everything depending on very slight circumstances, I did not then call it Providence, but Fate. And I would after quote, "There is a tide, in the affairs of men, Which [*sic*] taken at its flood; leads on to fortune." But I never quoted another which I now deem more appropriate and therefore use it. "There is a Providence which shapes our ends; rough hew them as we will."

Surveying the remnants of camp, Bond marks a personal shift from a belief in "fate" to a belief in "providence," a shift he marks not only by selecting a new play to quote from but also by altering Shakespearean quotation, shifting Hamlet's "divinity that shapes our ends" to a "Providence." Bond's previous "thousand instances" could be rationalized through the pagan world of *Julius Caesar*—his quotation of the "tide, in the affairs of men" comes from Brutus, whose lines are Bond's favorite source of citation material throughout 1861 and 1862. But, perhaps prompted by its popularity with the Hamline soldiers of the First Minnesota, Bond now views these "thousand instances" through the Christian world of *Hamlet*—searching through his mental archive of Shakespearean quotation, Bond finds one that "I now deem more appropriate."<sup>20</sup>

Bond shapes his wartime diary through the act of carefully selecting the proper Shakespearean passage to describe his experience. Shakespeare's work serves as a common language, but one that can be drawn to different ends; the same Shakespearean line can be deployed to express either despair or hopefulness. In both Bond's diary and Wright's relation of the Hamline boy who quotes *Hamlet*, Civil War soldiers reframe Shakespeare's lines to suit their situation. The Hamline boy, performing his pessimistic interpretation, deemphasizes any control by a "divinity" in favor of a focus on the "rough" experience of the First Minnesota. Bond, on the other hand, uses the same line to reinforce his newfound belief in the sort of "overruling Providence" that Wright references, going so far as to actually change Hamlet's "divinity" to "Providence" itself.

As if to drive this point home, Bond cites the line again, in a much more pessimistic manner, when reflecting on a letter he wrote to Artemus Decker in late May or early June 1864. As he recalls it in his diary, Bond's letter discussed his plans for his remaining military service and life after the war. (Decker had attempted to recruit Bond for "adventures in the North West," while Bond was interested in potentially taking a "commision [*sic*] in a colored regiment" or "going to school next winter.") On June 7, 1864, Bond notes in his diary that he "wrote to Decker

stating my objections to his plan and making many proposals myself none of which I presume will be accepted, and I am very sure that they will never be carried out; for 'there is a Providence which shapes our ends; rough hew them as we will.'" Bond's providential *Hamlet*, once a reflection on how close his regiment came to disaster, is now turned against him, working to defeat his attempts to shape his career in the war—perhaps Bond recalled this pessimistic citation when, 15 days later, he was captured in Petersburg, Virginia, and imprisoned in Andersonville, the Confederacy's most notorious prison camp.<sup>21</sup>

### Falstaff and the Henry IV Plays

*Hamlet* comes from the realm of high tragedy, but the grimness of war did not prevent comedic elements in other Shakespearean plays from proving relevant to Minnesota's Civil War soldiers. One figure was particularly popular: John Falstaff. One of Shakespeare's greatest comic creations, Falstaff is a key figure in two of Shakespeare's most important war plays, *Henry IV, Part 1*, and *Henry IV, Part 2*. In these plays, Falstaff provides levity through his fondness for wine and revelry, but he also is given some of Shakespeare's bluntest language regarding the realities of war, such as his declaration in *Henry IV, Part 1*, that the frontline soldiers he's recruited for the king's army are "good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better," surely a depressing assessment of the role of infantry for any Civil War soldier to read.<sup>22</sup>

The bumbling antics of Falstaff, and his notorious military cowardice (despite manufacturing tales of his supposed heroism), sometimes made him a weapon with which Minnesotans attacked Confederate soldiers and political figures. The *Rochester Republican* memorably criticized Jefferson Davis by comparing his military service to Falstaff's; both of them, in the paper's telling, had "hacked and dented" their swords to try to pass themselves off as combat veterans. William Christie used a similar gambit when writing to his brother Alexander in 1862, describing standing guard over "4 members of sesseia":

They are well fed and have as good a place to stay as our own troops. But they are a dirty set of good for nothing set of fellows. Lousey lank, light men: Falstaff might have made the same remark about them he made of Justice Shallow: they look like a forked radish an so it is there were two of them got released yesterday.<sup>23</sup>

William refers here to another scene of Falstaff recruiting soldiers, this time from *Henry IV, Part 2*. The humor

comes from the comparison of the "dirty set" of soldiers to a mandrake root (a "forked radish" in Shakespeare's language), which emerges covered in dirt when harvested; the sentiment recalls the description by the anonymous writer of the Second Minnesota who used Falstaff to mock the condition of Southern militias.

But in employing Falstaff, Christie also adds a further layer to his criticism of the soldiers as "lousey lank, light men." In calling up the image of Falstaff inspecting troops, Christie recalls scenes in which Shakespeare presents working-class soldiers drafted into a war in which they will be tasked with killing their countrymen—the wars for which Falstaff is recruiting soldiers in both parts of *Henry IV*, after all, are civil wars between King Henry and groups of rebels. In the scene from which Christie quotes, Falstaff allows wealthier men to bribe their way out of conscription—a reminder, in this context, of the social classes who did much of the fighting. A "dirty set of good for nothing" soldiers looks different when filtered through the lens of Shakespeare—a reminder of poverty and disempowerment as much as a critique of personal character.

This theme of using Falstaff and the two *Henry IV* plays to comment on the social implications of the war carried throughout the Christie family. Thomas Christie, William's younger brother, writes to his father, James, on July 4, 1862, about the possibility that rising wool prices will lead to more profit for the family farm: "There must be a great demand for wool to run it up to such a good price. I expect that the vast manufactures of woolen goods for the army has something to do with it. 'It is an ill wind that blows nobody good' you know."<sup>24</sup>

Thomas's declaration of an "ill wind that blows nobody good" quotes directly from one of the closing scenes from the same play his brother William cites: *Henry IV, Part 2*, in which Falstaff learns that upon King Henry IV's death, his friend Prince Hal has ascended to the throne. This leads Falstaff to expect great rewards, only to have his hopes dashed when the new king publicly spurns him. Invoking the phrase here, Thomas raises the image of Falstaff's eager expectation of benefiting from calamity, implicitly cautioning himself against any idealization of the war. That Falstaff could be used by Minnesotans for everything from launching attacks on Jefferson Davis and Southern soldiers and civilians to reflecting on the prospects of financially benefiting from war indicates yet again the flexibility to which Minnesotans could put Shakespeare's work as a tool for commenting on the war.<sup>25</sup>

Falstaff wasn't only turned against the enemy, like William Christie and the anonymous writer in the *Rochester Republican* did. Minnesotans also used the character to

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The image of Falstaff's recruits as disheveled "vagabonds" is called up here not to mock the state of a captured enemy but to describe Minnesota's own fighting men at what Lochren sees as their lowest point.

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talk about their own soldiers. William Lochren does just this in his narrative of the First Minnesota, compiled in 1890 in the monumental *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*. Early in his regimental history, Lochren relates the experience of the First Battle of Bull Run, and the regiment's demoralization afterward:

Here, also, for the only time in the service of the regiment, was manifested some slight feeling of discontent and lack of morale. Aside from the depression naturally following the reverse at Bull Run, there were many other causes for dissatisfaction. The rations were poor. . . . Neither pay nor clothing had yet been received from the Government, and most of the men still wore the flannel shirts and black pantaloons picked up hastily by the state at the time of enlistment from clothing stores in St. Paul and elsewhere, the original poor material of which had come to rags and tatters, reminding one of the uniform of Falstaff's vagabonds.

The image of Falstaff's recruits as disheveled "vagabonds" is called up here not to mock the state of a captured enemy but to describe Minnesota's own fighting men at what Lochren sees as their lowest point.<sup>26</sup>

This passage in Lochren's history comes immediately after he has deplored the tactical decisions made at Bull Run. Regiments were sent into battle against heavily fortified lines without sufficient support, and commanding officers failed in "even properly regarding what was in plain view," leading the First Minnesota to be "beaten in detail." While Lochren's tone is far more formal than Falstaff's, his description of the battle is not far from the latter's "food for powder" speech, describing "vagabond" recruits sent on hopeless charges against stronger forces. To call the soldiers of the First Minnesota "Falstaff's vagabonds" signals that despite their bravery and discipline—Lochren is careful to remind his reader that notwithstanding their fate at First Bull Run, "the men of the First Regiment fought like veterans"—they remain at the mercy of circumstances dictated largely by the

skill (or lack thereof) of their commanders. If Christie's reference to Falstaff had added a glimmer of sympathy to his derisive depiction of Southern prisoners, Lochren's allusion to the same passage darkens the image of soldiers in tattered clothes by making it a reminder of their tremendous vulnerability.<sup>27</sup>

### Othello

As fraught with meaning as soldiers' references to Falstaff could be, perhaps no moment better captures the flexibility of Shakespearean reference than a reference to *Othello* in a letter from James Madison Bowler to his wife, Elizabeth Caleff Bowler (the couple went by "Madison" and "Lizzie" respectively). Madison and Lizzie were acquaintances of Ignatius Donnelly, lieutenant governor of Minnesota (1860–1863) and a fellow resident of Nininger, Minnesota. Donnelly was an obsessive Shakespearean who eventually gained international fame (or infamy) for a series of books that posited Francis Bacon's authorship of Shakespeare's plays; Madison and Lizzie may well have received hearty doses of Shakespeare from this acquaintance. Madison, who spent most of the war in the Third Minnesota before taking up a post as an officer in the 113th US Colored Infantry, demonstrates a fondness for Shakespeare throughout the war, citing *Macbeth* and *As You Like It* to describe his service with the Third Minnesota.<sup>28</sup>

By 1865, Lizzie had grown frustrated with Madison's continued military service, and he opens his May 16 letter defensively: "You are in error as to my having made up my mind to always stay in the army. I have no such mind. I have been in the army quite a while, I admit; but not longer than duty required." Madison attempts to reassure his wife by explaining that he plans to continue his military service only "until I can have saved something" to bring home, but his writing is suddenly interrupted:

Lt. Col. Steele has just come in [and] picked up my little volume of "British poets," out of which he reads, "Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone," and remarks



that we can sing that when we are mustered out. But if this Othello should be mustered out and deprived of his occupation, he will seek his Desdemona; and together we will cultivate our farm and live in peace and happiness. But I must be more serious. I do miss you very greatly, Lizzie.

That Madison feels the need only to quote a single line from Othello's speech indicates that Lizzie knew her Shakespeare well—her husband clearly expects her to follow the connection between the *Othello* reference and the end of his own military service from that line alone. And the fact that “Lt. Col. Steele” comes by to read aloud a Shakespearean passage seemingly without provocation hints at how interwoven Shakespeare could be in the day-to-day life of Minnesota's soldiers. In Madison's letter, the reference to *Othello* manages to embody domestic life and military life at the same time, both signaling his commitment to “live in peace and happiness” with his wife and illustrating the shared language Shakespeare had become for soldiers.<sup>29</sup>

Nonetheless, much about this moment is puzzling. *Othello* is a tragedy in which an otherwise noble husband is gradually manipulated into believing his steadfast wife to have been unfaithful, leading him to murder her. Why, then, does the apologetic Madison choose to refer to himself as “this Othello” and his wife as “his Desdemona”? After all, Othello's farewell to his military life comes not after he receives any kind of formal discharge but after he is fully convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful:

I had been happy, if the general camp,  
Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. O, now, for ever  
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!  
Farewell the plumed troop, and the big wars,  
That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!  
[...]  
Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone!

It is possible that Madison references *Othello* not in the spirit of high tragedy but burlesque—the play was performed in minstrel adaptations throughout the nineteenth century; this would explain why Madison tells himself he “must be more serious” despite having cited a tragic speech. It may also be that Madison finds a new affinity with Othello after taking a commission in what he calls the “the finest colored Regiment in the Department.” Or perhaps Madison feels a worrying connection to Othello, a character who is successful in military life but unable to preserve domestic “peace and happiness.”<sup>30</sup>

In any case, it is striking that Madison places himself in the shoes of a character who sees the end of his military life as a farewell to “tranquil mind” and “content,” using Shakespeare to hint at his desires to remain in military service even as he ostensibly declares his desires to see his wife and child. That Madison can adapt *Othello* to this purpose, painting himself as Othello the forlorn ex-soldier instead of Othello the tragically deceived murderer, is a remarkable sign of how Shakespeare could serve multiple purposes for Minnesotans in the Civil War.

In an 1862 column entitled “Shakespeare and the Military Situation,” the *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* asked its readers: “Is there any conceivable situation of human affairs, whether belonging to public or private life, which Shakespeare has not described?” Minnesota's soldiers evidently felt the answer was no, since they drew on Shakespeare's work to address myriad aspects of their wartime experience, from the mundane to the deeply traumatic. As this article has tracked, Shakespeare remained a consistent presence for soldiers throughout the war. At the same time, Shakespearean references never overshadowed Minnesotans' depictions of their experience; rather, they were a nimble source, adapted to illustrate soldiers' personal narratives, not to take the place of them. From Hamline boys to the children of immigrant farmers, Minnesota's Civil War soldiers saw fit to add what Thomas Christie called “this great struggle” to the human affairs that Shakespeare could help describe.<sup>31</sup> □

## Notes

1. The scholarship is vast, but see especially *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2005); Richard Moe, *The Last Full Measure: The Life and Death of the First Minnesota Volunteers* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993); Kenneth Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War: An Illustrated History* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2000); Brian Leehan, *Pale Horse at Plum Run: The First Minnesota at Gettysburg* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2002); John B. Lundstrom, *One Drop in a*

*Sea of Blue: The Liberators of the Ninth Minnesota* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2012); Joseph C. Fitzharris, *The Hardest Lot of Men: The Third Minnesota Infantry in the Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

2. James A. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed: A Civil War Memoir of the First Minnesota Volunteers*, ed. Steven J. Keillor (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2001), 421.

3. Daniel Bond, unpublished memoir and

war diary, Newberry Library Special Collections, 24. Bond quotes Brutus's declaration “I had rather be a dog and bay the moon / than be such a Roman” (*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.28; references are to act, scene, and line).

4. “Army Correspondence,” *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, July 4, 1862; “Army Correspondence,” *Wabasha Semi-Weekly County Herald*, July 13, 1861. All newspapers accessed through Minnesota Digital Newspaper Hub, MNHS. The

soldier at Alexandria cites two separate lines from *Hamlet*: Hamlet's declaration that "the time is out of joint" (1.5.190) and Marcellus's statement that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.95).

5. "Army Correspondence," *Stillwater Messenger*, Dec. 17, 1861; "Army Correspondence," *Freeborn County Standard*, Jan. 9, 1862; Thomas Christie to Alexander Christie, Mar. 19, 1864, in Hampton Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine: The Civil War Letters of Thomas and William Christie* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2011), 210; "Army Correspondence," *Stillwater Messenger*, Feb. 11, 1862. The Eighth Regiment soldier, writing under the pen name "Volunteer," alters the seasons to fit his context—in Shakespeare's *Richard III* the title character declares, "Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York."

6. Michael Anderegg, *Lincoln and Shakespeare* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015); James Shapiro, introduction to *Shakespeare in America: An Anthology from the Revolution to Now* (New York: Library of America, 2014); Terry Alford, *Fortune's Fool: The Life of John Wilkes Booth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 247.

7. In addition to examples cited elsewhere throughout this article, see Bond, unpublished memoir and war diary, 52 (*Troilus and Cressida*), 112 (*Venus and Adonis*); "Army Correspondence," *Shakopee Argus*, Mar. 27, 1862 (*Hamlet*); "Army Correspondence," *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, June 14, 1864 (*1 Henry IV*).

8. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.

9. Hellen D. Asher, "A Frontier College of the Middle West: Hamline University, 1854–69," *Minnesota History* 9 (Winter 1928): 369; Hamline University Course of Study, 1888, Hamline University Digital Archives.

10. Moe, *The Last Full Measure*, 11. See also Theodore C. Blegen and Russell W. Fridley, *Minnesota: A History of the State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 240–44; Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 93.

11. Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War*, 99.

12. Philip H. Christensen, "McGuffey's Oxford (Ohio) Shakespeare," *Journal of American Studies* 43, no. 1 (Apr. 2009): 101–15. Christensen notes that the McGuffey's spread of Shakespearean language occurred "especially throughout the Mid-western frontier."

13. Blegen and Fridley, *Minnesota*, 203–4; Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine*, 3.

14. "Herr Julius Schmidt," *Minnesota Staats-Zeitung*, June 5, 1862; translation from the German my own.

15. Carley, *Minnesota in the Civil War*, xxi; Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine*, 28, 148. Thomas and William Christie both often mention the fatigue-inducing knapsacks in their letters.

16. Wright, *No More Gallant a Deed*, 172, 192.

17. Bond, unpublished memoir and war diary, 15.

18. Esther Cloudman Dunn, *Shakespeare in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 225. As English professor Stephen Carr has cataloged, more than 100 different abridgements of Blair were published in the United States between 1783 and 1911, making it impossible to know which particular abridgement Bond received as a gift. The two most frequently printed, known as Collins's and Dean's abridgements, include several chapters on Shakespeare, and I have not been able to find an abridged version of Blair that removes his analysis of Shakespeare entirely. As Esther Cloudman Dunn points out, Blair's analysis of Shakespeare was the most popular part of his work in the United States, and therefore editors abridging the text would have been unlikely to remove the Shakespeare text. For more, see Stephen L. Carr, "The Circulation of Blair's Lectures," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 75–104. For more on Blair's influence on Shakespeare in early America, see Vaughan and Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America*, 87.

19. Hugh Blair, *Dr. Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric: Abridged with Questions* (New York: Collins, 1831), 258.

20. Bond, unpublished memoir and war diary, 35. For other citations of *Julius Caesar* in Bond's diary, see pages 2, 24, and 173.

21. Bond, unpublished memoir and war diary, 210–12.

22. William Shakespeare, *King Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. David Scott Kastan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002), 4.2.54–56. Falstaff is also referred to, although not seen, in *Henry V*, and he appears as a main character in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

23. *Rochester Republican*, May 15, 1861; William Christie to Alexander Christie, Jan. 22, 1862, in Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine*, 35.

24. Thomas Christie to James Christie, July 4, 1862, in Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine*, 61.

25. Thomas Christie fought the impulse to idealize throughout the war, carrying on a prolonged discussion in letters to his sister Sarah about what he perceived as the "decided antagonism between the feelings that prompt us to direct our shot and shell where they tear off the most heads and limbs, and those teachings that tell us all men are brothers, and should be treated with Christian charity and Kindness." For more, see Smith, ed., introduction to *Brother of Mine*, 13–15.

Regarding the use of Shakespeare to demonize or mock Confederate politicians or Southerners more generally, one further line of attack employing Shakespeare as a rhetorical tool criticized Southerners and their sympathizers for Shakespearean illiteracy. An example can be found in the *Wabasha Semi Weekly County Herald* of June 22, 1861, which features one "Artemas Ward" from the "Sonny South" stumbling through a Shakespearean misquotation.

26. *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 13; italics and capitalization in original.

27. *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars*, 12.

28. Andrea R. Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It*

*Your Duty: A Minnesota Couple's Civil War Letters* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2008), 75, 108. The couple were close enough to the Donnellys that Madison wrote to Lizzie in early 1862 saying, "Mr. Donnelly sends me papers now and then. Remember me to him and to Mrs. Donnelly when you see them": Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It Your Duty*, 51. On Ignatius Donnelly and Shakespeare, see Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly: The Portrait of a Politician* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 227–32.

29. Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It Your Duty*, 293, 294.

30. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Revised Edition with a New Introduction by Ayanna Thompson, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2002), 3.3.348–60; Madison letter to Lizzie, Apr. 5, 1865, in Foroughi, ed., *Go If You Think It Your Duty*, 287. On *Othello*'s popularity as a minstrel text in both antebellum and post-war America, see Vaughan and Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America*, 98–100.

31. *St. Paul Weekly Pioneer and Democrat*, Aug. 15, 1862; Thomas Christie to James Christie, Oct. 21, 1861, in Smith, ed., *Brother of Mine*, 25–26.

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