

## Women's Clubs: Dispersing Shakespeare across America

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In the late nineteenth century, the Woman's Club movement dispersed Shakespeare's work across the country, specifically through women's reading groups. It was a symbiotic relationship—through studying Shakespeare, women who had no access to higher education developed skills in critical thinking, research, writing, elocution, and organization; in turn, the women took Shakespeare to thousands of towns across three thousand miles of states and territories, from the east to the west coast. In the process, Shakespeare transitioned from being a staple in popular lowbrow entertainment performed in saloons and barns to being an elite element in the highbrow culture in salons and grand theatres. This paper examines that process, beginning with a brief overview of Shakespeare in early America and following with an exploration of Shakespeare's impact on the education of women and the further impact of these women on America's obsession with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare first appears in colonial America written into the commonplace books of such Puritans as John Cotton's son Seaborn; there is documentary evidence that Cotton Mather

himself owned a First Folio.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare on the page was apparently considered not quite as wicked as Shakespeare on the stage, as evidenced by the numbers of Rowe's 1709 edition of Shakespeare found in the colonies, references cited in periodicals, and books sold in the records of booksellers.<sup>2</sup>

The first recorded stage performances (35 productions of *Romeo and Juliet*) took place in 1730; by 1770 there were 181 documented performances of Shakespearean plays. From that period forward it is difficult to find a time when a professional, amateur, or solo performance was not being performed somewhere on the seaboard.<sup>3</sup> Shakespearean actors traveled west across the country and were found performing in saloons, taverns, churches, lean-to theatres, hotel lobbies, and around campfires. As theatre spread across the country, demand for the printed texts increased,<sup>4</sup> until by 1831 a young French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, can say, 'There is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare. I remember that I read the feudal drama of *Henry V* for the first time in a log cabin.'<sup>5</sup>

In New York City in 1849, one could see three *Macbeths* on three different stages in the same week; during the 1857–58 season, ten *Hamlets*; in 1875, rival *Hamlets* performed on the same night in the same city. But in the last quarter of that century there was a palpable change in the air as Shakespeare moved from the lowbrow popular sphere and was appropriated as highbrow 'Culture': farces were eliminated from the ends of shows, jugglers and dancers were eliminated from interval entertainments, and admonitions to behave no longer appeared on posters.<sup>6</sup> Andrew Lipscomb sums up a nascent trend when he writes in 1882, 'Of late years men have come to understand that Shakespeare off the stage is far superior to Shakespeare on the

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Scheide, 'The Earliest First Folio in America?' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 27 (1976), 332–33 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2869504>> [accessed 29 January 2010].

<sup>2</sup> Frances Teague, *Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 15–16.

<sup>3</sup> Odai Johnson and William J. Burling, *The Colonial American Stage, 1665–1774: A Documentary Calendar* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001), pp. 66–67.

<sup>4</sup> *Shakespeare in American Life*, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (Washington DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2007; distributed by University of Washington Press), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama, and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, 'William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation', *The American Historical Review*, 89 (1984), 34–66 (pp. 46–48).

stage'. Lipscomb credits Goethe and Coleridge for rescuing Shakespeare from 'mere playwrights' and exalting him to a 'transcendent position'.<sup>7</sup>

Lawrence Levine sees a combination of elements contributing to less Shakespeare on stage: a decline in the adulation and power of oratory, increasing secularisation with its diminishing practice of reciting from the King James Bible both at home and in public, a devaluation of the melodramatic genre to which Shakespeare was so well suited, and millions of immigrants creating a 'deverbalisation of the forum'.<sup>8</sup> By 1850, English was a second language for 35 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, America began a national push for education and literacy—in 1870, 20 percent of the population was illiterate; by 1940, only 3 percent.<sup>10</sup>

In the push for education and literacy, however, women were left behind. Although Gary Taylor claims that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the students in the late nineteenth century in the new modern languages school at Cambridge were women,<sup>11</sup> he neglects to mention that although they were allowed into lectures *at the discretion of the lecturer* (from 1872), they were still treated with discrimination in the early twentieth century:

Another professor, entering a Cambridge lecture hall in 1902 and noticing his audience was all-female, announced that as there was unfortunately nobody there today (Wednesday, 26 August), his lecture would be canceled. Then he left'.<sup>12</sup>

In America, Harvard opened its sister college, Radcliffe, for women in 1879, although they were not allowed into the undergraduate library at Harvard until 1949: 'As late as the early

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<sup>7</sup> A. A. Lipscomb, 'Uses of Shakespeare Off the Stage', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 65 (1882), 431–438 (p. 432) <<http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=harp;idno=harp0065-3>> [accessed 2 February 2010].

<sup>8</sup> Levine, 'Shakespeare and the American People', *American Historical Review*, p. 57 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1855917>> [accessed 30 January 2010]. Andrew Murphy also sees a connection between a decrease in the recitations of the King James Bible and a decrease in the interest in Shakespeare in *Shakespeare for the People: Working-Class Readers, 1800–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 186.

<sup>9</sup> Kim C. Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; repr. 2007) pp. 102–03.

<sup>10</sup> Carl F. Kaestle, 'The History of Literacy in America: An Introduction,' paper presented at the White House Conference on Library Information Services (Reston, Virginia, April 1–4, 1979), ERIC Document Number: ED176241 <<http://www.eric.ed.gov>>.

<sup>11</sup> Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Cambridge University <[http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/cn\\_news\\_features/displayarticle.asp?id=444273](http://www.cambridge-news.co.uk/cn_news_features/displayarticle.asp?id=444273)> [accessed 25 January 2010]. Women were not allowed degrees until 1947.

[eighteen] seventies no college training was possible to a girl in New York city . . . except under precisely the same conditions as those which existed in Russia', permission from a kindly professor.<sup>13</sup> Educational possibilities across the rest of the country for girls past the age of twelve were nearly non-existent.

The Lyceum Movement began in 1826, designed to bring lecturers, scholarly instruction, and debates across the country as an early form of adult education at a time when 'the people of America were never more in earnest, more enthusiastic, sympathetic and intellectual in their demands'.<sup>14</sup> Not long after the Civil War (1861–65), however, this lecture circuit was forced into vaudeville entertainment; in its place rose the Chautauqua Movement (1874) with aspirations to eliminate the spare time conducive to immoral entertainments.<sup>15</sup> Starting as an experimental episode in more structured adult learning, it almost immediately broadened into the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle with a four-year correspondence course and a graduation ceremony, giving people who lived in rural areas—including women—an opportunity for extended education.

At the same time, federal regulations stipulated that land for public schools be set aside in every county, and a women's 'crusade for the cause of the better education of women' began.<sup>16</sup> This coincided with the years during and following the Civil War that incited women to new developments; women felt 'an increased sense of power and influence in their relations toward humanity in general'.<sup>17</sup>

This rise and emphasis on literacy and the prominence given higher education, both coincident with the frustrating lack of opportunities for women's education, created a vacuum that begged to be filled. In 1868, Jane Cunningham Croly (1829–1901) was a professional

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<sup>13</sup> Mrs. J. C. Croly (Jennie June Cunningham), *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America, Published under the Authority of the Council of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs of America* (New York: Henry G. Allen & Co., 1898), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> E. P. Powell, 'The Rise and Decline of the New England Lyceum', *The New England Magazine*, 17 (1895), 730–739 (p. 730).

<sup>15</sup> Chautauqua Institution <http://www.ciweb.org/historyarchives/>. The Chautauqua Institution is still strong today.

<sup>16</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 35. There is a historical pattern of women taking men's jobs during wartime and having a reluctance to return to their oppression after having had a taste of independence and power.

journalist in New York city. Because she was a woman, she was denied admission to attend a press dinner honouring Charles Dickens. In response, Croly formed Sorosis (a Greek word meaning ‘aggregate’), a club for women only. As she described it, Sorosis would be a ‘centre of unity’ that had neither a charitable nor socioeconomic purpose, but sought ‘collective elevation and advancement’. Croly recognised that ‘the middle-class woman was losing her place of authority in the home as industrialization and servants freed her from housework, and new avenues of responsibility outside the home opened slowly if at all’.<sup>18</sup> Having recently been inspired by Goethe’s discovery of structural unity and its attendant philosophical distinction of the rights of the individual, Croly felt it was the actuating principle heralding a new age: ‘This was absolutely new doctrine. It brought women and children within the pale of humanity’.<sup>19</sup>

Within one year of its inception, Sorosis had eighty-three members, including six artists, twenty-two authors, six editors, one historian, eleven poets, nine teachers and lecturers, eight well-known philanthropists, two physicians, and four science writers. They developed standing committees in Literature, Science, Education, Art, Philanthropy, House and Home, Drama, and Current Events. By 1873, Sorosis also founded the Association for the Advancement of Women; 400 women attended their first congress.<sup>20</sup> In 1890 Croly formed the General Federation of Woman’s Clubs (GFWC), in 1894 effected a State Federation system to organize the individual groups across the country, and by 1896 the GFWC had nearly 200 clubs and 25,000 women as members.<sup>21</sup> By the time Croly published the 1200-page *History of the Woman’s Club Movement* in 1898, there were more than 1,300 clubs across America.

The collective consciousness of the Woman’s Club developed into a movement of enormous social activism by women. Some clubs followed the Chautauqua courses, doing the required readings in connection with the study outlined by that society. Most were concerned about educating themselves as well as improving the moral and social structure of the country. The various club minutes list topics such as, ‘Criminology’, ‘Have we an American Literature?’

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<sup>18</sup> General Federation of Woman’s Clubs [http://www.gfwc.org/gfwc/Jane\\_Cunningham\\_Croly.asp](http://www.gfwc.org/gfwc/Jane_Cunningham_Croly.asp).

<sup>19</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> GFWC web site <<http://www.GFWC.org>>.

‘International Copyright’ from both the authors’ and the publishers’ points of views, ‘The Starring System: Its Effect upon Dramatists’, ‘Japan: the Aborigines, Mythology, and Folklore’, ‘Invasions of the Tartars’, ‘Perfection and Duarchy of Feudalism and its Decline’, ‘Mechanical Conditions on which Thought Depends’, a year-long virtual ‘Tour of the Holy Land’, ‘The Constitution of the United States’, ‘Unions, Strikes, and Boycotts’, or ‘Hegelian Philosophy’.<sup>22</sup>

Not only did each group have its own motto, signature flower, and colours, they developed constitutions and bylaws, elected officers, chose Boards of Directors, determined a weekly or fortnightly schedule; in some groups, women could only be admitted as members through elections. In their very acts of parliamentary procedures and meticulous organisational records, they signaled a seriousness in unity previously unseen in their communities. Men were generally not admitted for the very sound reason that they intimidated and tended to belittle the women, as evidenced by this note from a club member: ‘We make no pretensions to profound learning nor frown because some enquiring member disturbs the dramatic effect by asking for information’.<sup>23</sup> In most clubs, reports were assigned to every member and the members were the speakers; the oral presentations of papers to their peers ‘taught us not to fear the sound of our own voices’,<sup>24</sup> gave them confidence in their own ideas, and empowered women to embark upon even more rigorous programs of education. With hundreds of women in some groups, they outgrew the hotel parlors they typically used and consequently bought existing buildings to be used as clubhouses or built their own. The woman’s club movement swept over the country, part of the widespread educational movement of which ‘Chautauqua, summer schools, night schools, university extension, etc, are all manifestations. . . . The club is the postgraduate for the individual woman.’<sup>25</sup>

It was not easy. In 1868 a well-known male journalist and editor wrote that ‘if a woman’s

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<sup>22</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 383 (re Chautauqua) and *passim*.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Thompson, ‘A Club of our Own: Women’s Play Readings in the Nineteenth Century’, *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 2 (2006), 1–5 (p. 3) <<http://www.borrowers.uga.edu>> [accessed 22 January 2010]. Men had their own all-male clubs, such as the Royal Shakspearean [*sic*] Club of Stratford-upon-Avon that was established in 1824 but did not admit ‘lady visitors’ until 1894. *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Croly, *History*, pp. x–xi.

club held together for one year, a good many people would find it necessary to revise their opinion of women'.<sup>26</sup> Women's clubs were caricatured in cartoons and satirized by male authors. A newspaper article in 1899 mentions that the U.S. Department of Labor published a bulletin that contained an account of the women's clubs and associations in America—more than 1,300 of them across the country. That was the essence of the first paragraph, while the rest of the lengthy two-column article ridiculed the names of the groups: 'Here is a St. Helen's Club, as if St. Helen ever wielded one'.<sup>27</sup> Husbands fumed and pundits quipped, some members dropped out to keep peace in the home and neighbourhood, but most women carried on, 'afire with the revolutionary desire for education and self-development'.<sup>28</sup>

Most of these women would not have called themselves feminists; some were anti-suffragist, many were pro-temperance. But the struggle of having a bright mind yet forced to live outside (as Croly wrote) 'the pale of humanity' is evidenced in their mottoes: 'Tell them the world was made for women also', 'Light, more light', 'She flies with her own wings', 'Step by step we gain the heights', 'The temple of knowledge is within our very midst', 'Progression brings happiness', 'The destiny of nations is in the hands of women', or the poignant 'Be a candle in the window if you cannot be a star in the sky'. A group in Arkansas called Quid Nunc (with its own layers of meaning) was very explicit in its motto: 'Two heroic necessities make up a large part of our lives—to be made to do what we dislike, to be withheld from doing what we desire'. Women were simply ready for larger lives.

The Woman's Club of Brooklyn was founded in 1869, and though, as Alice Cary noted, it met with the usual 'sneering comment' from 'vulgar would-be wits' and was 'caricatured, criticised, and misrepresented,' the support and interest from women was unlooked for and unprecedented:

If we could have foreseen the sneers and sarcasms with which we have  
been met, they of themselves would have constituted all-sufficient

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<sup>26</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, 'Names of Women's Clubs', *Reading Eagle* newspaper, Reading, Pennsylvania, 3 December 1899, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 38–39.

reasons for the establishment of this woman's club; as it is, they have established a strong impulse towards its continuance and perpetuity. But, ladies, these sneers and sarcasms are, after all, but so many acknowledgements of our power'.<sup>29</sup>

In Croly's *History of the Woman's Club Movement in America*, she notes that the Shakespeare Clubs were particularly long lived:

The study is rarely given up, and new clubs are constantly formed to undertake it. Shakespeare Clubs all devote some time to book reviews, current events, and some new voice of to-day, for the study of Shakespeare stimulates the mind, broadens and uplifts it, and gives an interest in all vital questions, but to the greatest study of all, all return with renewed zeal'.<sup>30</sup>

The women readers and writers were encouraged by Shakespeare's lack of formal education, finding themselves in similar predicaments. Judging from the titles of essays they presented, women were encouraged by the number of heroines who are literate, challenge authority, take on men's roles in their own feminine manner, yet maintain their honour and virtue. Women used their readings to raise contemporary concerns such as 'marital relations, repression in the family, the education of women, women's access to the university and the professions, the ideal of Womanhood, ethnic difference, and the experience of civil war'.<sup>31</sup> It is striking to witness their effusion over Shakespeare's sympathetic nature to women, as evidenced by their empathy with British actress Helena Faucit's (1817–98) complaint about the Elizabethan boy actors: 'Woman's words coming from a man's lips, a man's heart—it is monstrous to think of! One quite pities Shakespeare, who had to put up with seeing his brightest creations thus marred, misrepresented, spoiled'.<sup>32</sup> But not all the Shakespearean lectures and essays were about women. Topics are itemised as, 'Is Hamlet Insane?' 'Shakespeare's Use of Eleven', 'Was Oberon a Meddler?'

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<sup>29</sup> Address of Alice Cary, poet, at the second meeting of the club. Croly, *History*, p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 914.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, *A Club of our Own*, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Helena Faucit, Lady Martin, *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (Edinburgh, London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885; repr. Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 5.



‘Shakespeare’s Manifestation of Abnormal Characters’, ‘Shakespeare’s Historical Plays’, ‘Elemental Beings as Agents of Enchantment’, or ‘The History of Rome as it pertains to Coriolanus’.<sup>33</sup>

Within fifty years of white women entering the state of Idaho, a woman’s club was formed, appropriately called the Pleiades, that focused on Shakespeare and had a scholarly bent toward other literary endeavours. North Dakota, a state of 300,000 people spread across a huge territory (slightly smaller than the size of England) dotted with small towns, listed thirty clubs before 1899.<sup>34</sup> In the town of Concord, New Hampshire, in 1853 (population 9,800<sup>35</sup>) there existed *ten* Shakespeare clubs. By 1959, the Stratford Club in Concord was still meeting regularly and its diamond jubilee celebration was announced in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, where it was also noted that a ‘substantial contribution was made to the American Shakespeare Festival Theater and Academy’.<sup>36</sup> Across the country one could find the Mary Arden Shakespeare Club of New York city, the Sisters’ Shakespeare Society of New Jersey, the Ann Hathaway Club of Colorado Springs, the Avon Shakespeare Society in San Francisco, and the Dallas Shakespeare Club (still meeting today), which allotted six months to the study of each play. After twenty years of reading Shakespeare together, in 1897 the women of The Shakespeare Club in Concord claimed that they had ‘met to perfection the requirements laid down by Portia’:

. . . for in companions

That do converse and waste the time together,

Whose souls do bear an equal yoke of love,

There must be needs a like proportion

Of lineaments, of manners, and of spirit.<sup>37</sup>

*Merchant of Venice*, 3.4.11–15

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<sup>33</sup> Croly, *History*, *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the population of New York State at this time was 7,268,894. Demographia <<http://www.demographia.com/db-state1900.htm>> [accessed 1 February 2010]

<sup>35</sup> Rev. N. Bouton, ‘Table of Mortality in Concord, from 1825 to 1853, Records Kept by Rev. N. Bouton’, (Concord: Benning W. Sanborn, 1856), p. 766.

<<http://www.ConcordNH.gov:80/books/bouton/ConcordHistoryDescandPersS8.pdf>> [accessed 24 January 2010]

<sup>36</sup> ‘Notes and Comments’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 10 (1959), 456.

<sup>37</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 795.

Most of the woman's clubs focused on or studied a variety of topics, but Shakespeare was usually included as a regular feature in almost every group, if only for a year or two as they cycled through topics. The Philomathic Club in Arkansas, for instance, spent four months on Homer and Plato, two months on field work in botany, a year of Shakespeare, then Italian plays and magazine study. When studying Shakespeare, they developed their own system: 'There is a leader appointed for each play, and she gives every member one or as many questions as she wishes, to be answered at the meeting. For assistance in the study of the play there is a form of analysis on the flyleaf of the programme that can be applied to each play.'<sup>38</sup>

Women were serious in their pursuit of knowledge. A fascinating comparison to women reading Shakespeare in the modern clubs is in the description by Frances Teague of the manner in which Elizabethan women read books: 'The implication is rather that reading is always a serious and time-consuming activity; . . . the assumed *telos* of reading is improvement, not entertainment'. For an Elizabethan woman, reading was 'rarely enjoyed in isolation' but was a public and social activity designed to find the underlying structure of the prose, the moral benefit, the stylistic practice.<sup>39</sup> Thus these trendsetting women in the forceful Woman's Club movement of the late nineteenth century were unknowingly sympathetic with their Elizabethan forebears. Esther Dunn, however, expresses a sadness about this studious method of approaching the playwright's work: 'Yet some fragrance, some balanced rhythm about the older amateur method fled and has never been recovered in the history of America's national pursuit of Shakespeare'.<sup>40</sup>

Although studies from Shakespeare formed the basis of its literary work, the Shakespeare Club of Idaho Springs, Colorado held that its purpose was not strictly Shakespearean. They drew subjects for papers and discussions from Macaulay, Hawthorne, Tennyson, and others, quite as much as from Shakespeare, and set aside four meetings of the year for discussions of current events. The Home Reading Club of Leadville, Colorado, began in 1889 to read classical works and provide serious study and critical discussion of the best English and American literature,

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<sup>38</sup> Croly, *History*, pp. 212–13.

<sup>39</sup> Frances Teague, 'Judith Shakespeare Reading', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 47 (1996), 361–73 (pp. 365–67) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870959> [accessed 6 January 2010].

<sup>40</sup> Esther Cloudman Dunn, *Shakespeare in America* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 130.

including Shakespeare. A club in Arkansas reported that the courses of its study included ‘English literature, American history, Shakespeare, German literature in connection with the physical geography of ancient Germany and as applied to its mythology, superstitions, politics, and its modern intellectual development in prose and poetry’.<sup>41</sup>

In addition to study and self-improvement, an altruistic thread appears—records of almost all the woman’s clubs include philanthropic causes. The Woman’s Shakespearean Club of Barnesville, Georgia, established a reference library useful to students, created a night school for factory hands at which club members served as teachers, and a Factory Girls’ Club with permanent club rooms where a committee from the ‘Shakespearean’ provided instruction and entertainment. Other clubs built high schools, supported hospitals, arranged for street cleaning (a prevalent concern among clubs across the nation), and organized Travel Libraries for isolated areas.

Nor were the very young women ignored. Clubs with names such as ‘Shakespeare’s Amateurs’ or ‘As You Like It’ were developed for girls about twelve years of age (the age when school was finished for them). They began with reading the tales of Mary Lamb (at the time, ironically, assumed to be the work of Charles Lamb). The girls were required to write papers on Shakespeare’s life, analyses of the plays, ‘their individual merits, critical studies of the characters, sketches of the places in which the scenes are laid, and of the times which they delineate’.<sup>42</sup> Mary Cowden Clarke, a noted English independent scholar, wrote in support of introducing Shakespeare to young girls in the form of reading:

Happy is she who at eight or nine years old has a copy of Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* given to her, opening a vista of even then understandable interest and enjoyment! Happy she who at twelve or thirteen has Shakespeare’s works read to her by her mother, with loving selection of fittest plays and passages! Happy they who in mature years have the good taste and good sense to read aright the pages of

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<sup>41</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 223.

<sup>42</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 913.

Shakespeare, and gather thence wholesomest lessons and choicest delights!<sup>43</sup>

It wasn't all studious intellectualism. Mrs. M. Wilmarth, 'an enthusiastic scholar of the immortal bard', led her New England group in regularly scheduled extra sessions: on the 'Twelfth-day' to read *Twelfth Night*, accompanied by a 'Twelfth-cake'; on St. David's Day to read *Henry V*, previous to attending a public reading of the play by Dr. Furness; April 23 to celebrate the birth and commemorate the death of Shakespeare with appropriate readings; on May Day to read *As You Like It*, followed with box lunches which they refilled with wild violets picked in the Forest of Arden—'alias the garden of their leader'.<sup>44</sup>

The Houston Ladies Reading Club embarked on a period of Shakespeare study with a bit of trepidation:

This afternoon, March 6th, 1888, we knelt humbly, hesitatingly, with most womanly reluctance, before the shrine of the inimitable, the incomparable, the greatest, the mightiest of all, William Shakespeare, poet by the grace of God. As in the ancient days, Solomon's mines must have startled the minds and dazzled the eyes of those who crept near enough to gaze upon the wondrous plenitude of its fabled riches, so on this, our initial Shakespeare meeting, when quotations were called for, the depth of the mine opened was so great, the jewels so inexhaustible, so rare . . . that our ladies bring their tribute just a trifle timidly.<sup>45</sup>

Although reluctant and reverent, in the process of incorporating the reading and studying of this great godhead each woman appropriated the cultural cachet of Shakespeare for herself as an individual and together as a collective, inducting themselves into the very sphere of his elite status. Although there were more clubs that did *not* focus on Shakespeare than those that did, the dissemination of the works across America might actually have had more impact from the non-

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<sup>43</sup> Ann Thompson and Sasha Roberts, eds., *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660–1900: An anthology of criticism* (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>44</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 45.

Shakespeare-specific groups as they introduced the works to women who otherwise would not have chosen to study them. Thus the cultural confiscation crept its way across the country.

‘High Culture’ in late nineteenth century America reached a fevered height. The wealthy classes, including the wealthier woman’s clubs, poured millions of dollars into the erection of massive concert halls, auditoriums, theatres, museums, and in the process (begun earlier in the century) eventually dispossessed Shakespeare (as well as opera and symphonic music) from the populist masses. This was a transition unconsciously but perfectly designed for women, ‘whose appreciation, preservation, and transmission [of culture] already seemed the special province of the fair sex’.<sup>46</sup> The woman’s clubs are guilty of perpetuating Shakespeare into the realm of the highbrow. Although the fact is not acknowledged in the books and articles about the woman’s club movement, most organised memberships such as literary or educational clubs always have been (and still are) the province of the more well-to-do or at least upper middle-class women who (although busy housekeepers and mothers) had husbands with money, plus servants, leisure time, and some incentives and encouragement for education. Clubs required dues; individual meetings cost money to attend; programmes had to be printed; ; papers took time to research and write; fines were levied for papers assigned but not presented; books were expensive.<sup>47</sup> In 1893 at a meeting of the Shakespeare Club of Brunswick, Maine, the women heard of a small church in need of \$100 to offset a debt; in ten minutes it was paid for. Although it was noted that ‘this is the way club-women in Maine, not rich club-women either, do things,’ it is also important to note that this same club owned its own clapboard summer house in the mountains. As Shakespeare moved into these circles, he moved out of the log cabins and saloons.

The woman’s clubs not only circulated the works throughout upper middle-class America, but they had an important secondary effect with its own long-term impact. From the early part of the nineteenth century Shakespearean passages had been included in lessons of oratory, as American politicians and the public grew passionate about elocution. For example, in 1820

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<sup>46</sup> Long, *Book Clubs*, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Annual dues in 1887 for The Roundtable Club in Deadwood, South Dakota were US\$2 (£1.60). Croly, *History*, p. 327. The president of this club is Mrs. Judge Moody; this is the same Judge Moody shown in the HBO series, *Deadwood*, which is mentioned merely to provide a context for Shakespeare in the American West.

William Scott's book, *Lessons in Elocution, or, a Selection of Pieces, in Prose and Verse, for the Improvement of Youth in Reading and Speaking*, included nineteen speeches from Shakespeare.<sup>48</sup> Girls, however, were not taught elocution in schools, it being deemed an unnecessary skill for women. But the requirements of the Shakespeare reading groups, where every member was obliged not only to write compositions but read them aloud, enabled women to develop their oratory skills in safe and comfortable environments, eventually giving them the confidence to compete with men in public places in both print and speech. By the end of the century, not only was there now a larger market of readers for women's Shakespearean criticism, but in a field dominated by men, 'women had made a significant contribution to Shakespearean criticism that was acknowledged, by men, to be important'.<sup>49</sup> And this despite years of being ridiculed, discouraged, and discriminated against. In 1886 the journal *Shakespeariana*, published in Philadelphia, claimed to be 'the only Shakespearean magazine in the world';<sup>50</sup> significantly, its first editor was a woman, Charlotte Endymion Porter.

It can be claimed that Ms. Porter's position as editor could only have been effected with the previous underlying support of two decades of Shakespeare through the Woman's Clubs; certainly it can be claimed that the Woman's Clubs dispersed an appreciation and greater knowledge of the works of Shakespeare across the vast and open expanses of the United States. It appears that they also helped move Shakespeare into the world of highbrow culture, but that is a small price to pay for laying the groundwork of greater respect for both Shakespeare and for women.

The General Federation of Woman's Clubs is still active today, 120 years later—there are more than 4,000 clubs and 100,000 members, many of them continuations of the original groups. They have been responsible for the building of seventy-five percent of the libraries in America, and they continue to support libraries—between 1997 and 2002 the GFWC donated \$13.5 million to public and school libraries across the nation.<sup>51</sup>

In her closing report as secretary of Sorosis in 1887, Celia Burleigh summarised her feelings

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<sup>48</sup> William Scott, *Lessons in Elocution* (Montpelier: E. P. Walton, 1820).

<sup>49</sup> Thompson and Roberts, *Women Reading Shakespeare*, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted from 'anon., "The Drama":36' in Thompson and Roberts, *Women Reading Shakespeare*, p. 160.

<sup>51</sup> GFWC [http://www.gfwc.org/gfwc/History\\_and\\_Mission.asp?SnID=1307349323](http://www.gfwc.org/gfwc/History_and_Mission.asp?SnID=1307349323).

as a woman participating in this phenomenal era of American woman's clubs by expressing immense gratitude 'to this school where I have been educated to better hopes, to nobler aspirations, and a larger life'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Croly, *History*, p. 27.

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