

A Club of Our Own: Women's Play Readings in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

In the nineteenth century, women began to form and participate in Shakespeare reading clubs, both in Britain and the United States. Written records of such clubs and societies, although they varied in format, social makeup, and purpose, demonstrate that Shakespeare readings offered women opportunities for both personal education and political action.

My interest in the topic of play reading builds on work I did when I co-edited the anthology *Women Reading Shakespeare, 1660-1900* with Sasha Roberts (Thompson and Roberts 1997). We were primarily interested in the written records of women's responses to and impressions and opinions of Shakespeare's works — what *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* referred to as early as 1834 as a distinctively "female criticism" of Shakespeare (Wilson 1834). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many women in Britain and in the United States (we limited our investigation to these two countries) became involved in the dissemination of Shakespeare, whether as teachers or story-tellers for children or as editors of plays. They edited and contributed to journals, published large numbers of essays and books on Shakespeare, and began to participate in professional debates. Many women quite explicitly used their reading of Shakespeare to raise a number of contemporary concerns: marital relations, repression in the family, the education of women, women's access to the universities and the professions, the ideal of Womanhood, ethnic difference, and the experience of civil war (to name but a few). Collectively, their work constitutes a kind of pre-history of modern feminist criticism, with which it shares a tendency to champion female characters, but also to use a reading of Shakespeare to challenge conventional gender stereotypes and contemporary attitudes toward women.

We found that play reading featured in a number of different ways for the women we studied. Some of them took it upon themselves to prepare texts of the plays that could be read without embarrassment by family groups: Henrietta Bowdler, for example, the editor of the first *Family Shakespeare* in 1807, wrote that her edition was "intended to be read in private societies, and to

be placed in the hands of young persons of both sexes." She explained that she had "endeavoured to remove everything that could give just offence to the religious and virtuous mind. . . . Many vulgar, and all indecent expressions are omitted; an uninteresting or absurd scene is sometimes curtailed" (Bowdler 1807, Preface). On the other side of the Atlantic, Caroline Maxwell published in 1828 *The Juvenile Edition of Shakspeare: Adapted to the Capacities of Youth*, an edition intended "for study or recitation," which came with similar reassurances for anxious parents and teachers: "Any incident, passage, or even word which might be thought exceptionable by the strictest delicacy, is entirely omitted, and on no occasion has the fair purity of the youthful mind been for one moment forgot" (Maxwell 1828, Preface, iv).

Meanwhile, female performers were offering professional readings of the plays. It became something of a convention for actresses, after they had retired from the stage, to give readings, both in public lecture halls and in private houses. Sarah Siddons, for example, retired from the stage in 1812, but gave many readings during the following decade, including private audiences for members of the royal family. William Hazlitt, who was too young to have seen Siddons's best stage performances, was particularly impressed with her public readings of the tragedies: In his obituary for her in the *New Monthly Magazine* (1831), he wrote, "No scenic representation I ever witnessed produced the hundredth part of the effect of her reading Hamlet" (Hazlitt 1831, 31) — this from a man who had been quite ecstatic about the performance of Edmund Kean in the role. (Siddons had, incidentally, acted the part of Hamlet in her youth on the professional stage in the English provinces.) Siddons's niece, Fanny Kemble, similarly retired from the stage in 1848, but continued to give readings for the next twenty years.

By the end of the nineteenth century, women who were professionally involved in secondary education were advocating the introduction of reading plays aloud, and even of acting them out in the classroom, as an addition to traditional methods of studying Shakespeare through a comprehension of his life and times, his language, and his characters. Agnes M. Lathe, for example, whose affiliation is given as "High School, Washington, D.C.," contributed a piece on "The Study of Shakespeare" to a collection of prize essays on *English in Secondary Schools* published in 1890, which ends with a kind of peroration on this practice:

Most High Schools have general Rhetorical exercises more or less frequently. Why not devote a few minutes to acting a portion of a play? Scholars [schoolchildren] are not critical, and do not demand stage furniture and elaborate dressing. They are easily pleased, and are stimulated in their reading to an astonishing degree by even the poorest representation. The sections of Shakespeare which have been found most appropriate for this purpose are, the quarrel scene in *Julius Caesar*, the Trial in *The Merchant of Venice*, the rioting at Cheapside

with Falstaff in *Henry IV*, Dogberry and his watch in *Much Ado about Nothing*, and the Trial and Statue scenes in *The Winter's Tale*. (Lathe 1890, 60)

She goes on to give examples of individual speeches that should be read aloud or acted, including "Mark Antony's eulogy of Caesar, Katherine's appeal to Henry VIII, and Othello's address to the Senate," and finishes:

It is easy to fill up the entire hour, by a recitation or two, and a portion of some play interspersed with Shakespearean music. The chorus can sing the hunting song in *As You Like It*, while there are always girls who can give the serenade to Sylvia — and Ophelia's and Desdemona's songs. (60)

To be fair to Lathe on this last, apparently casual, assumption, she has spent some time earlier in her essay discussing the difficulty for the teacher of handling classes in which some scholars have "been brought up with the books and have that degree of intimacy with them which comes from constant association," while others "have read nothing" and are encountering Shakespeare for the first time "in the middle of their senior year" (60).

More radical women were using readings to introduce black people to Shakespeare and, indeed, to literacy in adult education classes after emancipation. In 1882, Kate Richmond-West published in Chicago an account of a study course she had delivered to various groups and commented that "the strongest impulse to this course came from a group of illiterate people, a class of fifty colored men and women." She remarked, perhaps somewhat patronizingly, on "their earnest attention and marvellous appreciation of each story as it was unfolded to them . . . lifting them above the cares of the day into a new world, where they are strengthened and refreshed." But she was quite determined that Shakespeare should be made available to all humanity, "not narrowed to a class, but the common heritage of all" (Richmond-West 1890, 3). (Richmond-West's courses were open to participation by mixed groups, but in some cities — for example, Topeka, Kansas — black women and white women were running separate Shakespeare study classes at this time.)

Beyond the bounds of formal and informal education, large numbers of adult women were engaging in play reading as a voluntary, recreational activity, undertaken in the amateur reading groups and clubs that proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such clubs included the Stratford Club of Concord, New Hampshire; the Mary Arden Shakespeare Club of New York City; the Sisters' Shakespeare Society of New Jersey; the St. Andrew's Club for Women; the Clifton Shakspeare Society of Bristol and, eventually, the Royal Shakspearean Club of Stratford-upon-Avon in Britain. The programs of these clubs varied, but they usually included readings of Shakespeare's

plays by club members, lectures by visiting speakers, general discussion, and individual research. Many of the clubs were also specifically concerned with larger social issues, such as the education of women, the emancipation movement, and the women's suffrage movement.

We found that many women in Britain and the United States formed their own women-only Shakespeare societies in this period, sometimes because they were specifically excluded from the men's societies and sometimes because they preferred the more informal and supportive atmosphere of a women-only group: "We make no pretensions to profound learning," remarked Frances Abbott of the Stratford Club of Concord, New Hampshire in 1887, "nor frown because some enquiring member disturbs the dramatic effect by asking for information" — the implication being that this kind of interruption was indeed frowned upon in the more formal atmosphere of other groups (Abbott 1887, 329). The club to which Frances Abbott belonged consisted of "as many people as one parlor will comfortably accommodate when all want good light on their books" (327). These women met to study Shakespeare's plays by reading them aloud, pausing at the end of each scene for questions and comments. Each member in turn held what Abbott describes as the "arduous and responsible office of Critic," "who cast the play" for reading aloud and prepared "a short critical and historical sketch" of it (329).

Such clubs, which combined play reading with critical discussion, clearly allowed women to develop their self-confidence and to feel that they could even take on the male professionals: after studying Hamlet with Anna B. McMahan, including "the mysteries of [Hamlet's] complex nature" and "the nature of his regard for Ophelia and the *sweetness and lightness* of that fair maid," Adelaide Wood, President of the Friends in Council Shakespeare Class of Topeka, Kansas (apparently a white women's group), claimed, "We were allowed the privilege of walking in company with grown-up critics, dramatic and literary, who themselves seldom escaped minor criticism from us, our senses having been sharpened under such a healthful regimen" (Wood 1887, 326-27, italics in original). On the other side of the Atlantic, the members of the St. Andrews Club for Women were engaged in similar activities, with a program that included lectures and discussions, as well as play readings; one distinguished guest was Julia (known as "Snow") Wedgwood, who gave a lecture on *Julius Caesar* in 1893.

It would seem that many of these clubs drew up their own lists of rules regarding membership and had their own social protocols and rituals, not unlike those developed by the reading groups that have flourished in our own time, especially in the 1990s. Some of these rules survive in local libraries and public records offices. One example is the Shaksperian Reading Society (later known as the Clifton Shakspeare Society), founded in 1876 in Bristol, England. The original rules limited the Society to twenty-five members, "seven Ladies and eighteen Gentlemen," who met fortnightly

to read the plays and engage in criticism; every fifth session was devoted solely to textual criticism led by an outside speaker. New rules in 1879 allowed for seven associate members (including two ladies) and set out "By-Laws" for the textual sessions: Speakers should address the chair, the chair controls discussion, and so on, perhaps implying that some sessions had become unruly or acrimonious. Later changes to the rules in 1883 allowed for six "corresponding members," who could send written papers for discussion, and established a Library Fund, to be managed by one lady and two gentlemen. Women members took on responsibility for the "critical departments" of the society, examining topics in the plays such as Biblical and Religious Allusions, Puns and Jests, and Tradition and Folklore, and women also, unsurprisingly, took on the burden of the Society's administrative and secretarial work (Griffiths 1889, 3).

The Royal Shakspearean Club of Stratford-upon-Avon was established as early as 1824, but with no female members. The first entry in their minute books recording female visitors to club meetings is in February 1894, when one Mrs. O'Flanagan contributed to the critical discussion, but a resolution was passed at the club's Annual General Meeting on 23 April that year allowing "lady visitors" to be admitted, and their presence was a regular feature from then on (Royal Shakspearean Club 1894, 155, 218). Women appeared on the club's car in the Jubilee Procession of 1896, and Charlotte Stopes gave an invited paper in 1898. In London, women were fully involved in the New Shakspeare Society, founded by Frederick James Furnivall in 1873, which met monthly at University College. They gave many papers and became involved in the publication activities of the Society, which included the production of facsimiles, edited reprints, and parallel text editions. But the New Shakspeare Society seems to have concentrated on critical discussions rather than readings (*New Shakspeare Society, passim*).

After this brief survey, what can one conclude about the significance of play reading for the women whose activities I have mentioned? Was it, as the title of our 2006 Shakespeare Association of America session put it, "Second-best, Sublimation, or Art Form?" (Stanley, Potter, Thompson, and Tribble 2006). Perhaps it was all of these, but I would like to focus on the concept of "second-best." Presumably a play reading is considered "second-best" to an actual performance, professional or amateur, though those of us lucky enough to be able to attend the staged readings in the "Read Not Dead" series at Shakespeare's Globe in London would want to argue that "second-best" is very much worth having and frequently reveals enormous potential in the texts being read.

It ought to have been "second-best" to hear a woman in her late fifties or sixties reading *Hamlet*, but we have Hazlitt's testimony to the contrary, stating that Sarah Siddons's reading was even more powerful than Edmund Kean's celebrated stage performance. Dismissed as "the second sex" by society and barred from the universities and the professions, women in the nineteenth century used

play-reading groups to educate themselves and others and to develop their self confidence about speaking in public. Women since the Early Modern period have indeed been transforming "second-best" into an "art form," as Patricia Parker has demonstrated in her chapter, "Coming Second: Woman's Place," in *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (Parker 1987, 178-233). As she explains, women such as Rachel Speght in 1617 were able to exploit the second version of the creation story given in the Book of Genesis to argue that the creation of Eve after that of Adam could be seen as a case of the best coming last, the creation of woman being the final climax of the ascending order of creation and the ultimate moment of fulfillment of God's plan, without which man himself would be imperfect or incomplete.

But even without such ingenious attempts to re-read one of the most powerful myths of our culture, which defines half the human race as being "second-best," cannot we value something like play reading for its own sake and not downgrade it by comparing it to the completely different activity of professional production? As Agnes Lathe puts it, people can be "stimulated in their reading to an astonishing degree by even the poorest representation" (Lathe 1890, 60), and it seems likely that in the nineteenth century, as indeed in the twenty-first, the practice of reading plays aloud in a supportive social group, with the occasional opportunity for "some inquiring member . . . to ask for information," was (and is) an important aspect of the dissemination and appreciation of Shakespeare.

Online Resources

"Read Not Dead and Rarely Played" [cited 1 September, 2006]. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. Bankside, London. <http://www.shakespeares-globe.org>.

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