



She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America

Katherine West Scheil

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In the late nineteenth century hundreds of clubs formed across the United States devoted to the reading of Shakespeare. From Pasadena, California, to the seaside town of Camden, Maine; from the isolated farm town of Ottumwa, Iowa, to Mobile, Alabama, on the Gulf coast, Americans were reading Shakespeare in astonishing numbers and in surprising places. Composed mainly of women, these clubs offered the opportunity for members not only to read and study Shakespeare but also to participate in public and civic activities outside the home. In *She Hath Been Reading*, Katherine West Scheil uncovers this hidden layer of intellectual activity that flourished in American society well into the twentieth century.

Shakespeare clubs were crucial for women's intellectual development because they provided a consistent intellectual stimulus (more so than was the case with most general women's clubs) and because women discovered a world of possibilities, both public and private, inspired by their reading of Shakespeare. Indeed, gathering to read and discuss Shakespeare often led women to actively improve their lot in life and make their society a better place. Many clubs took action on larger social issues such as women's suffrage, philanthropy, and civil rights. At the same time, these efforts served to embed Shakespeare into American culture as a marker for learning, self-improvement, civilization, and entertainment for a broad array of populations, varying in age, race, location, and social standing.

Based on extensive research in the archives of the Folger Shakespeare Library and in dozens of local archives and private collections across America, *She Hath Been Reading* shows the important role that literature can play in the lives of ordinary people. As testament to this fact, the book includes an appendix listing more than five hundred Shakespeare clubs across America.

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