

Women’s Shakespeare Clubs: Fandom in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America

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In 1929, as recorded and distributed in the *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, a member of the Hathaway Shakespeare Club of Philadelphia explained that what drew her and her fellow club members together to discuss and analyze the works of the Bard each week was “the strong bond of fellowship due to our common literary interest and singleness of purpose” (4.4:119). Meanwhile, in her 2000 book, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*, Camille Bacon-Smith detailed the purpose of ‘fandom’ communities, stating “the clubs in fandom are run by the fans, for the love of the source products— the books, comics, television and movie series around which fans rally— and for the community” (8). These two women are connected by more than just their “common literary interest” and their “love of the source products.” The structures upon which modern fan communities stand

and the products they put forth are also found in the women's Shakespeare clubs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, vice versa, the comradery of spirit and foundations of female community that women found in Shakespeare clubs continued into the female fan communities of television shows like *The X-Files* and *Star Trek*.

In this essay, I will explore the correlations between these two groups of women, using case studies pulled from newsletters such as the *Shakespeare Association Bulletin* and *Shakespeareana*, as well as internet fan sites and blogs. In doing so, I hope to show how women have and continue to utilize specific touchstones in popular culture as a means of forming community, especially in areas where they have been intellectually barred. Noting the importance of fandom as an intellectual and communal outlet for women today, it is clear that Shakespeare was as personal a source text for American women as any fandom source text is in the modern era of popular culture.

Due to the constraints of this essay in terms of length, I will begin by establishing a series of necessary definitions in order to develop a working knowledge of fandom studies. It is also worth noting that Katherine Scheil, the primary expert on Women's

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Shakespeare Clubs, published a book on the topic, *She Hath Been Reading*. Scheil views these clubs through the lens of a larger movement of women's reading clubs. However, I intend to view the subject through the lens of fan studies, in which Shakespeare is not just the reason for women gathering, but rather the fundamental basis upon which these women's relationships to themselves, each other, and the greater world developed.

Henry Jenkins, a leading expert in the field of fan studies, loosely defines fandom as "the social structures and cultural practices created by the most passionately engaged consumers of mass media properties" ("Fandom, Participatory Culture, and Web 2.0"). He further narrows his definition to that of participatory culture, a subset of fandom in which the members actively respond to and interact with their source text, developing a community with "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices... one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (*Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture*

7). Fans employ the use of textual poaching, “appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that turn them to their own individual, contingent, or contextual advantage,” in order to “individualise mass culture by interpreting texts beyond the dominant meaning which has been decided by the elite (academics, teachers, authors etc.) who monopolise the readings” (“Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten” 85; Levine). Common forms of textual poaching found in fandom include fanzines (amateur magazines created and distributed by fans which connects a fan community spread out across large distances), meta/head canon (online or printed theories that fans post analyzing aspects of their chosen media, occasionally creating their own individualized canon concepts through transformative works such as fanfiction and fanart), cosplay (the practice of dressing up as, performing, and embodying a character from a source text) and activism (“fan-driven efforts to address civic or political issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content”) (Brough and Shresthova).

Keeping these parameters in mind, we can fit the primary creative, cultural, and communal products of women’s Shakespeare clubs into these same categories. Fandoms remain an influential and

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important aspect of modern American society, serving as micro-communities that allow their members to express their identities, connect with others, and participate in larger conversations on social justice through identification, communication, performance, and advocacy. How do women's Shakespeare clubs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fulfill the academic parameters of a fan community? What connections can we find between these clubs and the women's fandoms of the late twentieth century? In answering these questions, we can understand the emotional and intellectual motivations that drew these women to Shakespeare, and to each other, week after week to meet on front porches, in parlors, and in library halls to partake in "a common feeling of wholesome hero-worship" for the immortal Bard (Scheil 15).

In the late nineteenth century, the women's club movement began gaining steam, particularly as an intellectual outlet for middle class women who were denied the opportunity to express themselves in the presence of their husbands. By the turn of the twentieth century, an estimated two million American women were members of women's clubs and organizations. Similar to church groups or philanthropy clubs, reading clubs were intended both

for intellectual discussion and socialization with the other members. Kate Flint argues that “what distinguishes the reading group from . . . other sites of shared discussion is the fact that its members continually, at some level, return to a text and to their encounter with it, both as individuals and as members of a community” (517). During this same period, over five hundred women’s clubs formed, all with a single purpose in mind: to passionately study and discuss the works of William Shakespeare.

There are numerous records of such foundings in local bulletins, national Shakespeare journals, and club minutes, in which the members set forth the reasoning behind the founding of clubs with such a specific mission. The 1896 edition of the Michigan State Library Bulletin extolled the virtues of clubs that focused on a single subject, rather than the more common, and more generic, reading clubs of the era: “The provision of continued study on one subject prevents the waste of thought and energy common in clubs which take up a topic one week only to drive out of mind the next by one totally different” (1: 1-2). In 1892, Kate Tupper Galpin began her women’s Shakespeare club in Los Angeles as “an unfailling remedy for breaking the crust of the mind in rust, and releasing latent powers of which the possessor had

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never dreamed” (Lyons and Wilson 158). In an 1896 edition of her newspaper column, *Women's Kingdom*, Laura Eaton, a member of the Osage, Iowa Shakespearean Women's Club, spoke specifically to the communal nature of such a club which uses Shakespeare not just to enlighten a single women, but to bring empowerment to all women who partake in the study together. She wrote, “we all feel that instead of walking alone, that we had all the time been walking by our sisters. I know for the first time the true mission of the Shakespearean Club. Not wholly self-culture, but it is to enter into, brighten and beautify the lives of all women in this city, who have few pleasures and fewer opportunities” (“Mitchell County Press”).

The ‘pleasures’ and ‘opportunities’ that Shakespeare clubs provided women were possible because, as Lawrence Levine explains in his discussion on Shakespeare in *High Brow, Low Brow*, many nineteenth-century Americans viewed literature as part of the popular culture rather than as a purely elitist activity. Due to the social accessibility to the material that stemmed from this outlook, women had the freedom to interact with the text as they wished, forming emotional connections with the material itself, as well as with the community that formed

around the material. It also created a more permeable membrane for entry that developed into the “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” that Jenkins put forth in his definition of fandom. However, as Mark Dufett explains in *Understanding Fandom*, a fan is not simply someone who has committed to exploring and understanding a particular set of works. In order to enter a fandom, one must continually return to the source media, committing to “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given narrative or text,” or, in other words, organize weekly meetings to contemplate the meanings of *King Lear* and *Hamlet* (Sandvoss 8). As fans begin to build up their emotional connection to a source text, they tend to move toward and create structured communities, in person, online, or by mail, through which they can share their opinions, acquire more knowledge, and create new material. However, as these organizations form, organization-specific vernacular, rules, and hierarchies form with them. We can see examples of this phenomenon in the form a pseudo-spiritual structure, both in an *X-Files* mailing list which called itself the OBSSE (Order of the Blessed St. Scully the Enigmatic), as well as in the Marion Shakespeare Club of Marion, Iowa. The OBSSE structured itself according to the hierarchy of

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the Catholic church in order to emulate the religion of their “blessed one,” X-Files character Dana Scully. The members refer to each other as ‘sisters’ and the site moderator as the ‘abbess.’ The Marion Shakespeareans referred to their club meeting place, both literally and figuratively, as the “sanctuary.” Women who joined the “charmed circle” of the Shakespeare club, as Shakespearean K.D. Brenneman recounted in her article commemorating the club’s first homecoming, were referred to as “One of us,” the capitalization evoking a reverential theme evident in much of the club’s traditions, as with the OBSSE. The OBSSE site included a “frequently asked questions” page in which all OBSSE jargon is listed in detail, including various names for the community’s patron saint, such as “she whose eyebrows are like the vaults of Heaven” and “she whose blazers we are unfit to button” (Wakefeld 133). The Marion Shakespeareans also viewed the object of their obsession as a spiritual entity. When a new member joined the club, Brenneman said that the “charm of the magician, Shakespeare, fell upon here and will always remain” (“Archived Materials”).

In addition to complicated and deeply set subcultural community structures and vocabulary, fans are distinguished from other cultural consumers

by “their off-by-heart knowledge of their text and their expertise both about it and any associated material” (Dufett 19). Many Shakespeare clubs used knowledge of their source texts as both an intellectual and a social commodity, with women recorded as having quoted lines of Shakespeare to each other to prove their points. Some clubs instituted a hierarchical fan-superfan dichotomy, similar to those Bart Beaty wrote about in his exploration of Hollywood franchise fandoms, stating that “the insider/outsider relationship is formed around the ability to recognize obscure and often trivial relationships, many of which may never be developed in a meaningful way” (322). While casual members may not be aware of their outsider status, members who have invested heavily in the fandom are hyper-aware of their insider status, maintaining it as the ultimate reward, one that is frequently referenced and used as leverage when fans may choose to enter the fan community. This relationship was particularly emphasized in the Kate Tupper Galpin Shakespeare Club of Los Angeles where members received “certificates” when they had completed study of twenty plays, a physical representation of knowledge dominance (Lyons and Wilson 158). However, the certificate program also fulfills the qualification set out by Jenkins of “some

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type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” The experienced members of the clubs would work with new members to pass along their knowledge and help them achieve the goal of ‘super-fandom.’ The Marion Shakespeareans also participated in competitive displays of knowledge. Instead of saying “present” during meeting attendance, members would perform a chosen line from a Shakespearean text, only being marked as present if they quote the line correctly. Additionally, members would receive ‘points’ in a credit system for particularly compelling analyses and displays of knowledge, quantifying their knowledge for means of competition. In doing so, the greater ‘hive-mind’ of fandom knowledge grew and the level of discourse in the club increased dramatically, contributing to the shared knowledge space that Pierre Lévy referred to as the ‘cosmopedia,’ which makes available to the collective intellect all knowledge gathered by the group, accessible through the individual members’ personal knowledge base (214).

According to Jenkins and in conjunction with fandom’s need to provide “strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations,” members of fan communities thrive from epistemophilia, not simply

pleasure in knowing but a pleasure in exchanging knowledge. The Marion Shakespeareans, for example, engaged in correspondence with wide networks of other Shakespeare clubs, sharing in new ideas and information, as well as providing thoughts of their own. In addition, they, like many other clubs across the country, paid dues to be members of the state and national federations of Shakespeare clubs. While records show that the Marion Shakespeareans were at first hesitant to join the larger network of clubs for fear of loss of autonomy as an organization, the group later determined the power of the national connections forming in the federations were of greater importance to the growth of their chapter.

Part of the way members of Shakespeare clubs fulfilled their epistemophilia was through their own methods of textual poaching. These methods served to elevate the deification of Shakespeare that also emerged around this period. As any interaction with a source text that involves textual poaching inevitably leads to a challenge to the author's authority, the women engaging in conversations with the text were simultaneously acting reverentially toward "William Shakespeare, poet by the grace of God" and "evok[ing] the scorn of the class" when elements of the work did not fit with a club's desired interpretation

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(Long 45). In order to discuss and opine on the implications of new forms of Shakespeare interactions, clubs networked through a variety of journals, including the *American Shakespeare Magazine*, *Shakespeareiana*, the *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, and its later incarnation, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, which all printed news of Shakespeare clubs, shared members' personal essays, and encouraged clubs to continue sharing details of their chapters' endeavors in studying Shakespeare. One could see similarly titled publications in the Star Trek fanzine boom of the late 1960s. Women published fanzines under the names *Star Trek Lives!*, *Spockanalia*, and *The Enterprise Papers* for the purpose of using Star Trek to forge intellectual and emotional connections with other women and to share in their creative output. The far reaching national Shakespeare publications held similar goals, the editor of one such journal included a supplication at the end of one issue, writing "we are separated geographically by immense distances and only in exceptional instances can we meet face to face, but this is the place where we can talk to each other... Here Shakespeare will introduce us, each to all" (Scheil 17).

As with Star Trek's fanzines, the Shakespeare publications started out as entirely non-fiction

information dispensers, providing details on what clubs had formed when and what activities they had recently planned. As members grew more comfortable with the format of the journals, they began using them as more than just mode of communication, but rather as modes of expression and creation. They first tried their hands at producing analyses, or what we would refer to today as meta or head canons, including such topics as ‘Is Hamlet Insane?’ ‘Shakespeare’s Use of Eleven’ ‘Was Oberon a Meddler?’ ‘Shakespeare’s Manifestation of Abnormal Characters’, ‘Shakespeare’s Historical Plays’, ‘Elemental Beings as Agents of Enchantment’, and ‘The History of Rome as it pertains to Coriolanus’ (Croly). However, as with the Star Trek Zine-makers, Shakespeareans sought to engage more personally in the works that they had dedicated so much of their time to, with one woman, Miss L.B. Easton of the San Francisco Shakespeare Class, noting in an issue of *Shakespeariana* that “married ladies have so many claims upon their time, material, domestic, and social, that one has to handle them very gingerly, in order to obtain any results whatsoever” (3). Thus, in order for these women to get the most out of their fan community, they had to develop their own personal engagement with the text, which they could later share with the rest of their

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group as a form of short and long distance socializing. These personal engagements developed in the form of transformative works such as fanfiction, including parodies, spin-offs, and inspirations. For example, “The Seven Ages of Woman: Shakespeare Up to Date,” a companion piece to the original speech in *As You Like It*, dealt with the issues of misogyny and women’s stereotyping through the use of parody (Fortnightly Shakespeare 1:2). Paula Smith, a Star Trek fan in the 1970’s employed the same coping mechanism to deal with misogynistic writing on *Star Trek: The Original Series*. She published a fanfiction called “A Trekkie’s Tale” in the second issue of the fanzine *Menagerie*, which parodied (and named) the ‘Mary Sue’ trope, by exaggerating its transgressive features. Another form of transformative work that there is record of Shakespeareans creating is the crossover AU fanfiction, in which characters from more than one work interact with each other in a story in an alternative universe to that from which the characters originally derive. The president of the Fortnightly Shakespeare Club, Anna Randall Diehl, who encouraged her members to partake in the fanfiction phenomenon, created her own Shakespearean comedy, called “The Marriage of Falstaff.” The story is “set in ‘Castle Montague’ in

Hoboken, New Jersey, Falstaff ‘becomes a happy Benedict,’ accompanied by fellow characters Romeo, ‘the gracious host of Castle Montague,’ a tamed Petruchio and a Kate who did not go to the ‘taming school,’ and a Juliet who ‘entertains Will Shakespeare’s friends’ and ‘flirts without a balcony’” (Fortnightly Shakespeare 1:4). In addition to using revisionist writings as a creative outlet, women used them to address complex social issues by creating dialogue with the author. Randall Diehl, for example, recognizes the hints of strength that Shakespeare gives his female characters, and uses those hints to create a narrative of female empowerment, in which Petruchio is tamed and Kate is free and in which Juliet is no longer doomed to die for love. In these works, the writers are employing the standards of wish fulfillment used in Jenkins’ textual poaching to respond and relate to Shakespeare on a personal level. In writing transformative works, they facilitated their own empowerment, and in sharing them, they facilitated the empowerment of their communities.

In addition to fans empowering their own communities, a common theme found across fandom is ‘fan activism,’ in which fans, inspired by their source material, attempt to incite some form of social change. The motivation for such activism often

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includes identification with a character, theme, or experience within a work, mapping the fictional content onto real world concerns. Fan groups characterize their activist goals as a “mission” that they must complete, either in deference to source of their identification or to the creator of the work. The women of The Shakespeare Club in Concord, for example, 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” (Leahy and Whetstone 9). Our friends at the OBSSE, as mentioned above, also attempted to model their behavior after their character role model, with one such “sister in St. Scully” establishing the Scully-like attributes that members should strive to hold themselves to, writing “Scully is my Saint, I shall not prance/ She maketh me search for irrefutable/ She leadeth me to a logical explanation/ She restoreth my faith/ She leadeth me in the path of science for truth’s sake. . . .” (Wakefeld 132). Fans then take this identification and apply it to issues that the community as a whole is passionate about.

The Marion Shakespeareans engaged directly with their texts in order to guide their social activism.

Following the passage of the nineteenth amendment, the Marion women returned to Shakespeare to contemplate the topic, “Has woman’s power been greatest when yielded through men?” (“Archived Materials”). Other club women found earlier inspirations for their own suffragist opinions, with the members of the Peoria, Illinois, Women’s Club (who performed Shakespeare annually) supporting suffrage as early as 1907. The Woodland, California Shakespeare Club read plays and also “wished to work actively for women’s suffrage, for the improvement of the lot of women and children, for town beautification, and for many other civic matters” (Scheil 10). The Pasadena, California Shakespeare Club “became a forum and launching-point for numerous “progressive” ideas of the new century, including public kindergarten, public restrooms, Juvenile Court and the Pasadena Humane Society... initiated by Shakespeare Club volunteers” (Scheil 10). Many such women studied the texts to find examples of strong female characters who displayed agency that could be paralleled with the fight for the vote. Favorites cited by the Marion Shakespeareans included Juliet, Ophelia, Imogen, Portia, Helena, and Lady Macbeth. Club members treated characters “as if they were real

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personages whose virtues were to be emulated, or their weaknesses decried” (Scheil 52).

While these characters span a broad spectrum in terms of strength and agency, the ladies of the club read deeply into each one, finding textual evidence that provided personal empowerment for the women who identified with them. Similarly, modern fan-run activist organizations, such as the Harry Potter Alliance or Firefly fans’ ‘Can’t Stop the Signal’, mobilize civic participation by relating social movements to the experiences of the source text, using iconic imagery and thematic relevance to galvanize the base. Another form of civic engagement between the two groups is charity performance. The Fortnightly Shakespeare Club, for example, participated in a charity performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* “for the benefit of the Home for Blind Women” on Long Island (1:5). In a similar act of performance charity, cosplayers who dress up as fictional characters at the base of their fandoms often raise money, awareness, or, in many cases, smiles, by donning the persona and performing as their characters.

Considering all that these women have done in Shakespeare’s name, all of the time, energy, and passion that they poured into an intense immersion of

their souls in his works, how can we understand Shakespeare's role in the larger conversation of fandom in America? Scholar Mark Duffett describes fandom's contributions as "the ways it can heighten our sense of excitement, prompt our self-reflexivity, encourage us to discuss shared values and ethics, and supply us with a significant source of meaning that extends into our daily lives" (18). As the object of fandom, Shakespeare seeped into his fans' minds, empowering the community in their understanding of his works, and becoming the whetstone upon which their ideas and ideals were sharpened. Fandom empowers women specifically through the deeply set sense of ownership that comes hand in hand with engaging in conversations with the text. At a point in history when American women's value was being challenged, the fact that Shakespeare provided women with sources of inspiration and a sense of belonging speaks to Shakespeare's legacy as a cultural touchstone which rooted itself throughout American history. By viewing Shakespeare through the lens of fandom, we can see how he and his works have permeated the American psyche. One quick search of Tumblr will show countless ways fandoms have supported its members and called for change in their names. One quick search of *Archive Of Our Own* will

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reveal countless fanfiction, metas, and head canons through which members of a fan community interact with and respond to their source texts. Searches across the thousands of Shakespeare club archives spread across this country in attics, basements, and libraries will garner similar results. There is strength and power in loving something, and greater strength and greater power in coming together to create that love. Through Shakespeare, American women found community and voice, and through American women, Shakespeare retained a cultural relevance within America, not as an object of sophistication, or even an object of entertainment, but as an object of internal identification and community engagement.

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