

# COMMON PROPERTIES OF PLEASURE: TEXTS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN'S CLUBS

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By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the concept of intellectual property had gained currency, and the construction of authorship had been largely accomplished. Sixteenth century rights accorded to publishers to print books "without consent of the authors or against their will"<sup>1</sup> had been replaced by copyright laws that affirmed the unique role of writers in creating texts. The 1710 Statute of Anne established, in England at least, the centrality of protecting the rights of the author,<sup>2</sup> and, as Martha Woodmansee has explained, subsequent debates about the concept of intellectual property in Germany helped define the modern concept of authorship.<sup>3</sup> Elaboration of the concept of genius in aesthetic discussions during the romantic period affirmed the importance of the writer's relationship to the text. The conflation of aesthetic and economic/legal arguments created a context in which copyright laws protecting authors became commonplace and the "man-and-his work" view of texts could emerge.

To be sure, copyright law for literary works, particularly that dealing with texts circulated internationally, was still evolving in the early part of the twentieth century; but by the 1870s the concept of intellectual property was firmly established in the United States, and the construction of authorship had been effected to the extent that literary criticism lavished considerable attention on the background and intentions of authors, and authors became more powerful advocates for their own rights. As Coultrap-McQuin notes, "After the Civil War, authorship began to shed the characteristics of genteel amateurism and increasingly assumed the appearance of modern professions."<sup>4</sup> Writers saw themselves as producing literary commodities. "[P]rofessional authorship at the end of the century adopted some of the trap-

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<sup>1</sup> RICHARD R. BOWKER, *COPYRIGHT: ITS HISTORY AND ITS LAW* 15 (1912).

<sup>2</sup> Statute of Anne, 1710, 8 Anne, ch. 19 (Eng.).

<sup>3</sup> See Martha Woodmansee, *The Genius and the Copyright: Economic and Legal Conditions of the Emergence of the "Author,"* 17 *EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STUD.* 425 (1984).

<sup>4</sup> SUSAN COULTRAP-MCQUIN, *DOING LITERARY BUSINESS: AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY* 194 (1990).

pings of modern businesses, among them market orientation and competitiveness, emphasis on skills rather than inspiration, accommodation to editors' and publishers' wishes, and 'masculine' aggressiveness."<sup>5</sup> During the last decades of the nineteenth century, when pseudonyms such as "a concerned reader" were replaced by the writer's name in magazine articles, and texts came to be viewed as commodities to be bought and sold, the concept of authorship achieved its contemporary contours.

Yet, I maintain that, even as the interrelated concepts of intellectual property and authorship were solidifying their positions in the dominant culture, alternatives to these concepts were being developed by the women's clubs that began to emerge during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. On the surface, these clubs looked benign enough. They maintained a long-standing American tradition of self-improvement. From the colonial period forward, beginning with Benjamin Franklin's Junta, Americans had enacted their egalitarian view of knowledge—a view that contrasted sharply with the European dependence on "the monumental accomplishments of the few"—by joining together in mutual improvement societies.<sup>6</sup> The Lyceum, a mutual education system created in 1826 to promote "the universal diffusion of knowledge" continued the tradition,<sup>7</sup> and after the Civil War, the Chautauqua movement fostered the continuing impulse toward self-improvement. Founded in 1874, Chautauqua sponsored large summer assemblies, as well as small locally-based study groups. The latter, institutionalized as Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles in 1878, claimed more than 100,000 members by 1891.<sup>8</sup>

Women, in the company of husbands, brothers, or fathers, participated in the Lyceum, in Chautauqua, and in other mutual improvement groups, but beginning in 1868, they began to establish their own clubs separate from men. To be sure, occasional groups of women had formed self-improvement organizations earlier in the century. Subscribers to Margaret Fuller's "Conversations" for women in Boston in the 1830s discovered the depth of intellectual work a single-sex group could attain;<sup>9</sup> and women who worked in Massachusetts textile mills during the 1800s miti-

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> DANIEL J. BOORSTIN, *THE AMERICANS: THE COLONIAL EXPERIENCE* 150 (1958).

<sup>7</sup> DAVID C. MEAD, *YANKEE ELEGANCE IN THE MIDDLE WEST* 15 (1977).

<sup>8</sup> HUGH ORCHARD, *FIFTY YEARS OF CHAUTAUQUA* 189 (1923).

<sup>9</sup> See generally CAROLINE WELLS HEALEY DALL, *MARGARET AND HER FRIENDS* (1895) (describing the composition and meeting habits of the group and presenting a complete account of a series of group meetings).

gated the drudgery of their daily tasks by forming reading groups.<sup>10</sup> Despite these occasional outcroppings, women's clubs, the organizations that wove themselves into the fabric of nearly every American city, town and village, did not really emerge until after the Civil War. During the period between 1870 and 1920, women's clubs expanded widely, manifesting diverse forms and purposes. Some, like Sorosis, the New York City contender for first club in the nation, emerged out of a specifically political agenda to provide professional women writers a forum similar to that of the all-male Press Club. Founder Jane Cunningham Croly, having been denied admission to a Charles Dickens reading held at the Press Club, sought members who were hungry for the society of women, "that is, with those whose deeper natures had been roused to activity, who had been seized by the divine spirit of inquiry and aspiration, who were interested in the thought and progress of the age, and in what other women were thinking and doing."<sup>11</sup>

The New England Women's Club, established in Boston in 1868, the same year as Sorosis, announced its purpose in these terms: "Its plan involves no special pledge to any one form of activity, but implies only a womanly interest in all true thought and effort on behalf of woman, and of society in general, for which women are so largely responsible."<sup>12</sup> The feminism implicit in these and similar statements of purpose for women's clubs was softened by the care which clubs took to portray themselves as affirming, rather than undercutting, domestic values. According to this view, women who met to discuss religion or literature or art would be more effective moral guardians of their homes. Most women's clubs carefully distanced themselves from suffragist groups, thereby preserving club membership as socially acceptable for ordinary women.

Framing women's clubs as socially acceptable for ordinary women unwilling to pay the social costs associated with radical behavior and specifically linking the clubs' mission to women's domestic role no doubt contributed to their dramatic growth. By 1906, 5000 clubs had joined the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and it has been estimated that this number represented

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<sup>10</sup> LUCY LARCOM, *A NEW ENGLAND GIRLHOOD* 240-42 (1889).

<sup>11</sup> JANE CUNNINGHAM CROLY, *THE HISTORY OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN AMERICA* 15-16 (1898).

<sup>12</sup> KAREN J. BLAIR, *THE CLUBWOMAN AS FEMINIST: TRUE WOMANHOOD REDEFINED 1868-1914*, at 32 (1980).

only five to ten percent of the clubs in existence.<sup>13</sup> Precisely because clubs portrayed themselves as furthering domestic aims, clubwomen often naturally fell into the role of "municipal housekeepers," concerning themselves with libraries, kindergartens, sanitation, parks, and a variety of other public issues. Patriarchal culture came to expect this kind of "service" from women's clubs, as the following excerpt from The Reverend Harvey Colburn's history of the Ladies Literary Club of Ypsilanti illustrates. Colburn begins by explaining that in the early days of the town, the church was the center of social activities, but with the advent of the Literary Club in 1878, a "decided change" began to be felt.<sup>14</sup> The club applied to the National Federation of Women's Clubs and joined in 1896. Thereafter, there was a "noticeable change in programs and methods . . . from a purely self-centered club, they began to work along civil and social lines."<sup>15</sup> The fact that a man was authorized, in 1922, to recount the history of a woman's club, one that had been conducting its own business for over forty years, had purchased its own house, and had become an institution within the community, raises complicated questions. We might assume that the Ladies Literary Club, having achieved its own status, turned to Colburn as a representative of a peer institution. Alternatively, we might assume that just as many women's clubs sought approval, tacitly or overtly, from religious leaders when they initially organized themselves, so too the Ladies Literary Club still felt compelled to seek the "blessing" of that most patriarchal of institutions, the church. Whatever the explanations behind it, Colburn's history demonstrates the public expectation that women's clubs should assume the kinds of civic and social responsibilities that would justify the accolade "municipal housekeepers."

Historians of women's clubs have emphasized this connection between private and public life. Karen Blair, for example, describes clubwomen as domestic feminists (women who redefined idealized ladydom to give themselves access to public life) for whom clubs provided a kind of waystation between private and public life. She explains:

[Clubs] provided a meeting place for women, allowing them to know each other, to develop pride in their strengths, to grow

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 96.

<sup>14</sup> Papers of Ladies Literary Club of Ypsilanti (on file with the Bentley Historical Archive, University of Michigan).

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

sensitive to sexism, and to become aware of the possibilities for abolishing inequities through Domestic Feminism. In addition, club life taught women the speaking and organizing skills which they later applied to civic reform.<sup>16</sup>

In this view, women's clubs provided the necessary abilities and confidence for women who wished to assume the civic and social responsibilities that Reverend Colburn urged upon them. In this view, clubs served as a means to the end of public service and public life.

Writing about women's study clubs of the same period, Theodora P. Martin paints a more complicated picture. While acknowledging that some women's clubs did enable women to "turn[] from the realm of abstract thought to the arena of practical action, from education for self to education for service,"<sup>17</sup> Martin observes that clubs true to the "original purpose of self- and mutual education, remained on the scene to become a permanent part of informal adult education."<sup>18</sup> These organizations, which Reverend Colburn would categorize as "self-centered," were not conceived as waystations or as a means to any other kind of existence. They existed as ends in themselves.

My own research indicates that these so-called "self-centered" clubs, clubs that resisted joining the General Federation of Women's Clubs, or adding large numbers to their membership, or participating in public service projects, may have had as profound an effect on those outside their realm as their more public-oriented sisters. Specifically, in fostering literary activities that resisted the concepts of intellectual property and authorship as defined by the dominant culture, these "self-centered" clubs offered an alternative way of thinking about writers and texts.

These types of women's clubs resisted both the aesthetic and legal/economic dimensions of the concepts of intellectual property and authorship. One form of resistance appeared in communal rather than individual ownership of texts, texts both used and produced by the club. It was very common for club members to subvert the economics of text commodification by purchasing a single text and passing it around among members. The Chautauqua Institution, which operated its own printing house and developed curricular materials for its Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles, was often a source of materials used by wo-

<sup>16</sup> BLAIR, *supra* note 12, at 118.

<sup>17</sup> THEODORA PENNY MARTIN, *THE SOUND OF OUR OWN VOICES: WOMEN'S STUDY CLUBS 1860-1910*, at 4 (1987).

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

men's clubs. The annals of the Chautauqua Institution are filled with complaints regarding the difficulty in determining how many people were actually using Chautauqua materials because it was so common for women's clubs to purchase Chautauqua texts and circulate them among the membership.<sup>19</sup>

This economic subversion took aesthetic shape in the ways women's clubs used their texts. In many clubs reading aloud was a common practice, and, at the same time that it offered another kind of resistance to the economic forces that commodified texts, this practice redefined the nature of reading to make it more communal and corporeal. Rather than interacting in isolation with a written text, club members shared responses, frequently inserting their own voices into the reading. They interrogated texts, laughed at them, and felt free to disagree with them. This excerpt from the March 26, 1897, records of the Friday Club of Jackson, Michigan, illustrates:

Mrs. Robb began the afternoon by reading in a half-hearted way from that most unsatisfactory essay of Emerson's—as she thinks—"Love," interrupting herself every three sentences by protests against the truth of the statements. . . . But the battle of the afternoon was fought over the story "Where Ignorance is Bliss" by Margaret Deland, which Mrs. Root placidly called into our midst—the variety of ethical opinions of the Friday Club is only limited by its number of members, and the joyous part of all is that we are so satisfied that we are right, secretly excusing our sisters' lack of accord with us—with the charitable thought "that though a dear woman she is a little narrow-minded," in a word, we have reached a higher moral plane of development—this makes us all happy and hurts nobody. We decided once or over again, singly, doubly, in groups, all together by turn in season and out of season (especially sister Ruth) that the hero was a fool and so was she, that the hero was indeed a moral hero, but the girl a fool, that the hero was a fool and the girl wise.<sup>20</sup>

When we compare this response to a reading with the kinds of responses encouraged in literature classes of the same time period, we see just how subversive the Friday Club's manner of reading was. *Dominated by a combination of historical and*

<sup>19</sup> See Charles Robert Kniker, 1978—*Centennial of a Forgotten Giant: The Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle*, in CHAUTAUQUA LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC CIRCLE HISTORY AND BOOK LIST 1878-1985, at 3 (1985).

<sup>20</sup> Minutes of the Friday Club of Jackson, Michigan (Mar. 26, 1897) (on file with the Bentley Historical Archive, University of Michigan) [hereinafter Friday Club].

philological approaches, the study of literature in schools and colleges allowed little room for affective responses and multiple interpretations. At the secondary level, teachers frequently used school editions edited by William Rolfe. The following questions from a Rolfe examination on Milton suggest the approach to literature encouraged by these texts:

- 1) Write a sketch of Milton's life to 1638.
- 2) Briefly outline L'Alegro.
- 3) Give examples of obsolete words in the poems.
- 4) Give examples of words used in a different sense than they are used today.
- 5) Which of these words (a list follows) are from Anglo Saxon and which are from Latin?<sup>21</sup>

On college campuses, where departments of English were not yet two decades old, the same combination of history and philology (linguistics) dominated the classroom. Writing in the *Dial* in 1894, Wright Martin Sampson, chair of the English department at the University of Indiana, asserted this about teaching literature:

There are many methods, but these methods are of two kinds only: the method of the professor who preaches the beauty of the poet's utterance, and the method of him who makes his student systematically approach the work as a work of art, find out the laws of its existence as such, the mode of its manifestation, the meaning it has, and the significance of that meaning—in brief, to have his students interpret the work of art and ascertain what makes it just that and not something else. Literature, as every reader profoundly feels, is an appeal to all sides of our nature; but I venture to insist that as a *study*—and this is the point at issue—it must be approached intellectually.<sup>22</sup>

Sampson's distinction between response and study, between feeling and intellect, reflects a view common in the nascent college English departments of this period. Struggling against the idea that the study of literature could not possibly be intellectually challenging enough to justify college instruction, English professors, particularly those trained in philology, espoused a "scientific" approach to the field, one designed to emphasize

<sup>21</sup> William Rolfe, *Examination on Milton*, reprinted in ARTHUR APPLEBEE, *TRADITION AND REFORM IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH* 37 (1977).

<sup>22</sup> Martin Wright Sampson, *English at the University of Indiana*, in *THE ORIGINS OF LITERARY STUDIES IN AMERICA: A DOCUMENTARY ANTHOLOGY* 53 (Gerald Graff & Michael Warner eds., 1989).

intellectual rigor. Along with the emphasis on the rigors and difficulties associated with studying literature came a denial of feeling or anything that might be perceived as "soft." Sampson's insistence on the "study" of literature, as opposed to mere apprehension of it, reflects this perspective.

Given this larger context of an emphasis upon philological and historical structures, and classrooms where readers assumed that they were to learn what the text had to teach them and to control passion with reason, the proceedings of the Friday Club are all the more remarkable. In insisting on the possibility of pleasure, of "liking" a text, members of the Friday Club demonstrate an affective investment in the system of signification and allow for a multiplicity of meanings to emerge from that signification. In so doing, they disrupt the "classroom" intellect of the dominant culture.

In a related way, reading aloud, thereby infusing the text with breath, voice and presence, invested texts with a corporeal dimension. As Derrida reminds us, the figure of the book has dominated our thinking and our educational institutions, making texts the transcription of something prior.<sup>23</sup> The effect of this concentration on the book has been to subordinate the physical. What McLaren calls the "schooled body" participates in the "liturgy of the everyday" in schooling, a liturgy that ritualizes discursive practices.<sup>24</sup> In the late nineteenth century, as now, the discursive practices of schooling privileged the book. The reading aloud of women's clubs offered resistance to the book-dominated view of discourse, at the same time that it offered an alternative erotics of learning. The following excerpt from E. G. Loomis's account of the meeting of the Friday Club for September 20, 1889, suggests the effect of this resistance:

I confess to having been more interested in the sight of the dear familiar, new-old faces than at first in the reading, and to have paid very little attention to the selection from Lubbock, read by Mrs. Root. About the usual quota of Emerson was read and comments made over some knotty passages. It seemed to me that we as a club have benefitted by our association, in the matter of conversation—or of being able to think

<sup>23</sup> See JACQUES DERRIDA, *OF GRAMMATOLOGY* (Gayatri Chakrovovty Spivak trans., 1974).

<sup>24</sup> Peter McLaren, *The Schooled Body*, in *CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, THE STATE, AND CULTURAL STRUGGLE* 190 (Henry Giroux & Peter McLaren eds., 1989).



aloud with less timidity and with more directness.<sup>25</sup>

E. G. Loomis's clear affection for the members of the club, expressed as it is in physical terms, demonstrates how feeling takes precedence in the Friday Club where the schooled body is released from its liturgy of the everyday. This sentence could be dismissed as mere sentimentality were it not followed by the one in which Loomis describes the benefits conferred by the club—the ability to “think aloud (or participate in intellectual discourse) with less timidity and with more directness.”<sup>26</sup> Loomis thus shows how the physical affection expressed in the first sentence contributes to the intellectual development of clubwomen.

The production of texts in women's clubs likewise resisted dominant concepts of intellectual property and authorship. Collaboration played a major role in writing. Members shared their personal libraries (a practice that accounts for the majority of public libraries in this country being established by women's clubs) as they gathered material for writing. Frequently, women's clubs institutionalized collaboration by requiring members to consult with one another before presenting a paper. Boston's Saturday Morning Club, for example, stipulated this: “Papers shall be read to the president (or to someone designated by her) at least a week before the discussion date.”<sup>27</sup> The Friday Club of Jackson, Michigan kept records of its meetings in a series of “little books.” Because the club had no hierarchy of officers, the little books were passed from one member to another after each meeting, and the recorder for the week, who would later read her “composition” aloud to the club, was free to draw upon other entries in the little book. As Zellie Emerson, writing in November of 1889, expressed it, writers created texts that benefitted from what we would call intertextuality:

Shall I allow myself to be carried away by the poetic fancies and melodious measure of a Carlton, or imitate the quaint humorous style of a Robb, steal the deep wisdom and philosophy of a Gibson, or making *their* best my own, fuse the whole into one gigantic and glorious production, or thus cast suspicion on the originality of their matter and style, since mine must necessarily be the *épitome* of what is best in all?<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> E.G. Loomis, Comments on a Meeting, Friday Club, *supra* note 20 (Sept. 20, 1889).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> Procedures of the Saturday Morning Club (on file with the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College) [hereinafter Saturday Club].

<sup>28</sup> Zellie Emerson, Friday Club, *supra* note 20 (Nov. 1889).

The intergenerational structure of women's clubs contributed directly to this kind of intertextuality. It was very common for several generations of the same family to belong to a given women's club. As they joined one another in consuming and producing club texts, mothers and daughters embodied the continuity and connection that psychologist Nancy Chodorow has described.<sup>29</sup> Rather than perceiving themselves as differentiated individuals, mothers and daughters in clubs defined themselves in relationship to one another. Terms such as fusion, fluidity, mutuality and continuity defined their relationships and shaped their use of texts as they borrowed language across generations.

Not surprisingly then, clubwomen resisted the boundaries between texts with acts of appropriation, imitation, and general playfulness. Club anniversaries frequently prompted appropriation of texts across generations. Frances Darling's 1968 paper about Maud Ward Elliot includes a long excerpt from a letter written by Maud to the club in 1946.<sup>30</sup> Maud, the daughter of Julia Ward Howe and one of the charter members of the Saturday Morning Club when it was founded in 1871, wrote her letter to the club on the occasion of its sixty-fifth anniversary. Maud, then ninety-two years old, recounted how she had, when she was seventeen, chided her mother about her frumpy friends ("the bonnets of some of those early suffragists were fierce" she claims) and suggested that it might be worthwhile to have a club for young women such as herself.<sup>31</sup> Frances Darling, writing twenty-two years later, incorporated a good deal of Maud's text into her own.

Separated from what we might describe as the agonistic kingdom of inscription, where writers struggle against the power of one another's texts, women in clubs moved freely from their own texts to those of others, participating in a shared world they created. Unlike the dominant culture, where ownership created boundaries between one text and another,<sup>32</sup> the boundaries between texts written in women's clubs were often more blurred. In contradistinction to the dominant culture's ethos of individual ownership, clubs assumed communal ownership of texts. This community-property view of texts was expressed most often in

<sup>29</sup> See NANCY CHODOROW, *THE REPRODUCTION OF MOTHERING: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF GENDER* (1978).

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Maud Ward Elliot to Saturday Morning Club (1946), *Saturday Club*, *supra* note 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> The possessive form 's derives from the male form, e.g., "John his hat" became "John's hat."

the requirement to submit a copy of one's paper to the club archive. The record book of Seattle's Century Club includes this statement: "Papers read before the club will become the property of the club, and a fair copy on sermon paper must be filed with the Corresponding Secretary."<sup>33</sup> Members of the Ladies Literary Club of Ypsilanti, Michigan made decisions about the disposition of papers. In the fall of 1898, for instance, the minutes include this: "It was moved and supported that Mrs. Dickinson's paper on the telegraph be printed in the local papers."<sup>34</sup> Presumably, Mrs. Dickinson had no objection to this publication of her work, but it was a decision of the club rather than her own choice. In 1897, the president of this same club admonished members to "be more careful in preserving club papers than heretofore"<sup>35</sup> and on another occasion in this year, the same president urged members to "notice particularly the papers as they are read at each meeting"<sup>36</sup> so they could vote on which papers to set aside for Reciprocity Day the following year. Reciprocity Day, an occasion when two or more clubs came together to share their best work, provided a wider audience for club papers. Clearly, members of the Ladies Literary Club saw papers written by individual members as club property to be disseminated as the club saw fit.

In the early days of Boston's Saturday Morning Club, one of the highest compliments that could be paid to a member was to request that she put a copy of her paper in the club's Green Trunk. The Green Trunk served as the club archive before the Saturday Morning Club established its collection at Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library in 1976. Actually, there were several green trunks. Minutes for the April 26, 1958, meeting of the Saturday Morning Club include this:

At the Annual Meeting held at the apartment of Mrs. Rugg, the members of the Saturday Morning Club were invited to examine the contents of the famous "Green Trunk," a very small affair indeed, that contained the earliest records of the Club. As the records multiplied, another larger trunk was procured to hold the "Green Trunk" itself, plus the overflow, and later a third still larger one to hold these two. And still our

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<sup>33</sup> Record Book of the Seattle Women's Century Club (on file with the Northwest Collection of the Suzallo Library, University of Washington) (1901).

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of the Ladies Literary Club of Ypsilanti (Fall 1898) (on file with the Bentley Historical Archive, University of Michigan).

<sup>35</sup> *Id.*

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

records accumulate.<sup>37</sup>

The green trunk symbolized the importance of preserving club texts. The fiftieth anniversary celebration in 1929 featured a play written by club member Abbie Farwell Brown entitled *The Masque of the Green Trunk*. In addition to recounting some of the club's history, this play underscored the importance of preserving club texts by making the club archive—the green trunk itself—the star of the drama. When the “Mother” character presented the green trunk to the “Daughter” character in the play, she said:

Take with you the little Green Trunk and the materials that I have used to start with. Truth (*puts in a tape measure*), and Thoroughness (*scissors*), and Sympathy (*needles*), and Loyalty, (*thread*) and Tact (*wax*) and Humor, (*a red pincushion*), mustn't forget that! (*Chuckles.*) There you are! Therefrom will the Tradition grow.<sup>38</sup>

The attributes of truth, thoroughness, sympathy, loyalty, tact and humor suggested ways of approaching club texts, as well as dealing with individual club members, but tradition was the most important feature, and the texts the club held in common created this tradition.

Owning texts in common did not mean that access to them was entirely open. Many clubs specified who might look at club records. A 1921 letter from one Saturday Morning Club member to another discusses who may gain access to the trunk and specifies that a letter of permission is required for anyone wanting to look at texts contained in the trunk.<sup>39</sup>

Clubs did not limit access to their texts because they were inferior. Indeed, many clubwomen were professional writers. A majority of the members of New York's Sorosis Club made their living by writing. Julia Ward Howe and Ednah Dow Cheney, Louisa Mae Alcott's biographer, were both well-known writers, but the texts they wrote for the New England Women's Club remained the property of the club. Abbie Farwell Brown, author of *The Masque of the Green Trunk* as well as of many other Saturday Morning Club papers, published a number of books and many articles; however, the texts she wrote for the Saturday Morning Club did not enter the commercial world.

The view of intellectual property that commodified texts gave little quarter to the pleasure to be derived from texts. In

<sup>37</sup> Minutes, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27 (Apr. 26, 1958).

<sup>38</sup> Abbie Farwell, *The Masque of the Green Trunk*, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27 (1929).

<sup>39</sup> Eleanor W. Allen, *Letter*, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27 (1921).

contrast, pleasure took a central place in the way women's clubs saw and dealt with their texts. As the Mother character in *The Masque of the Green Trunk* makes clear, clubs placed a high value on humor and the pleasures associated with it, and this was particularly true for their texts. Clubwomen especially valued texts that made them laugh. Papers that gave members special pleasure were designated for club archives and became part of the collective consciousness of the club, as this entry from the October 19, 1970 minutes of the Saturday Morning Club illustrates: "It was agreed that Miss Tetlow could read an old paper rather than write a new one. This gives the club a particular treat because her papers are ageless in their interest and stimulating."<sup>40</sup>

Not only did clubwomen adopt a stance quite different from that of the dominant culture so far as ownership of their own texts was concerned, they also extended this subversive view to texts produced by the dominant culture by imitating or parodying them. Many of the entries in the record book of the Friday Club of Jackson, Michigan were playful imitations, and the Bible provided a ready model. The minutes for March 20, 1891, read:

And behold all the women were sore afraid, and again they said one to another of a surety, this is the place of departed spirits—for we hear sounds of instruments which are not, and we see the form of one who is afar in a distant city. But behold there was one among the women who had much wisdom, and she cried out in a loud voice saying—fools and unbelievers. Know ye not of one Edison who has learned the secrets of the lightning and who can shut up sounds of stringed instruments and of song, that one can command the sounds at will, and the sounds will come forth freely, even as water from a jug?<sup>41</sup>

Bakhtin describes parody as introducing the "permanent corrective of laughter"<sup>42</sup> with "a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high and straightforward genre."<sup>43</sup> Playful parodies abound in the records of women's clubs. Texts, ranging from poems by Whittier and essays by Emerson, served as the object of mimicry for writers in women's clubs. These texts, like the Biblical parody quoted above, undercut some of

<sup>40</sup> Minutes, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27 (Oct. 19, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Minutes, Friday Club, *supra* note 20 (Mar. 20, 1891).

<sup>42</sup> MIKHAIL M. BAKHTIN, *THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION* 55 (Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist trans., 1981).

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

the "seriousness of the lofty direct word" in texts privileged by the dominant culture.

Clubwomen often appropriated texts from the dominant culture to create dramatic productions. Over the years, the Saturday Morning Club staged a number of plays. Several of them were based on texts written by club members (such as *The Masque of the Green Trunk*), but many others were based on texts produced outside the club. The Saturday Morning Club produced *In a Balcony* in 1889, *Antigone* in 1890, *A Winter's Tale* in 1895, and *Pride and Prejudice* in 1904, adapting each text to their own purposes.

Club records indicate that the most prized of its productions was *Antigone*. In addition to cutting Sophocles' text, Saturday Morning Club members adapted the text in several ways. The cast was composed entirely of women and both public productions were open to women only. Because the women's voices were lighter and did not carry as well as those of the men, the Saturday Morning Club's members decided to augment the Chorus of Theban Elders with a Chorus of Maidens. At a celebratory breakfast held a few days after the final presentation of *Antigone*, club members appropriated other texts as they relished their success. The record of the breakfast meeting includes the following:

Miss Quincy responded for the Elders with some very amusing verses in the style of *Hiawatha*. Ellen Dennie (one of the directors) responded to the toast in her honor with a poem that began:

Theban Elders! Theban Elders  
 Are there, in the English language  
 Fitting words for just this moment  
 To express the joy and rapture  
 Which I owe to your great kindness  
 For a gift so rare and perfect,  
 Full of generous thought and feeling;  
 Thing of beauty, joy forever,  
 Keeping fresh in mem'ry's vision  
 Beauty evanescent, fleeting?  
 If so, I have failed to find them.<sup>44</sup>

Most of the toasts and poems read at this celebration borrowed, as this one does from Keats' *Endymion*, freely from texts circulating in the dominant culture. As would befit a group subverting the commodification of texts, the Saturday Morning Club

<sup>44</sup> Minutes, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27 (1891).

donated the several thousand dollars of profits on *Antigone* to charity.

In both their consumption and production of texts, clubwomen subverted the concepts of intellectual property and authorship. In valuing pleasure over economic profit and emphasizing aesthetics over functional concerns, they posited texts as communal property rather than economic commodities. They wrote with a playful intertextuality that undercut the ideology of authorship.

In one way, all this might seem of little consequence. After all, we are talking about a marginal group, one that enjoyed less than full participation in the dominant culture. So what if these quaint groups of women were enacting alternatives to dominant conceptions of intellectual property and authorship? I want to argue that these alternatives did have larger consequences.

The immediate response of the dominant culture provides one measure of the power attributed to women's clubs. Almost from their inception, women's clubs were ridiculed and belittled in the popular press. Cartoons lampooned them, articles questioned their motives and accomplishments, and the very phrase "woman's club" became a term of ridicule. Newspaper accounts of the Saturday Morning Club's all female production of *Antigone* demonstrate the alternately patronizing and hostile responses evoked by this production. Only women were allowed to purchase tickets to the production, a show so popular it ran two extra performances to accommodate all who wished to see it. Here are some excerpts from newspaper accounts of the production:

The attention to detail was seen in pretty feminine touches . . . in the remarkable fact that every actor was letter-perfect in the hard text . . . it being generally understood that the author was dead, there were no calls for him, but an enthusiastic ovation was given the actors after the play . . . . The doorkeepers were women, the ushers were women, and a low-toned request at the door made most of the women of the audience take off their hats and bonnets. In consequence, the differing types of the Boston feminine head might be studied to better advantage than is usual in our audiences . . . . To the onlooker, the procession was a veritable beauty show . . . .<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Excerpts from several 1890 newspapers including the *Boston Post*, *Boston Herald*, and *Journal* (on file in Minutes, Saturday Club, *supra* note 27).

Perhaps the most telling of all the newspaper accounts was this one:

A Boston woman entered a Washington Street bookstore the other day and asked for a copy of "Antigone." The salesman replied that the demand had been so great of late that they hadn't a copy of any edition left in the store. Whereupon she retorted angrily, "Well, I do think, since I buy so many books here, you might send me the new stories which you know I shall want to read as fast as they come out."<sup>46</sup>

Just as the male response to women's inherent power over life (through giving birth) has been to constrain and circumscribe that power by deprecating women, so these commentaries suggest fears and anxieties about the power manifested by women who mount their own productions without the aid of men. Although men were quite accustomed to excluding women from education, social gatherings, and a variety of other spheres, the idea that women should be similarly exclusionary posed a real threat, especially since fundamental concepts such as intellectual property and authorship were subverted within that sphere.

More complicated and compelling evidence of the consequences of the literary activities of women's clubs is suggested by considering the literacy activities common in women's clubs. Jean Wyatt argues that reading and writing play a major role in changing one's mind, and changing one's mind means giving up traditional orientations to reality and abandoning reliance on distinct categories.<sup>47</sup> In the ways they read and wrote, clubwomen called the traditional relationships among writer, text and public into question. They inscribed themselves in unconventional and playful ways, blurring dominant categories of author and text as they did so.

The self-reflexive practices of writing and reading texts in women's clubs gave participants an unusual opportunity to develop subversive thought. It is worth noting, in this regard, that the unofficial and often-repeated motto of the Friday Club was "Men may come and men may go but we go on forever." Writing and reading statements like this one became what Patricia Yeager calls "emancipatory strategies."<sup>48</sup> Precisely because they were playful in consuming and producing texts, clubwomen took

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> See JEAN WYATT, *RECONSTRUCTING DESIRE: THE ROLE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS IN WOMEN'S READING AND WRITING* (1990).

<sup>48</sup> See PATRICIA YEAGER, *HONEY-MAD WOMEN: EMANCIPATORY STRATEGIES IN WOMEN'S WRITING* (1988).



power from their literary activities. Play is, as Schiller has explained, an inherently liberating force because it causes "reality to lose [its] seriousness."<sup>49</sup> Playfulness in literary activities thus enabled clubwomen to change their minds, to develop what Wyatt calls "new fantasies."<sup>50</sup> These new fantasies, or reconstructed desires, became the first step toward effecting changes in the material world.

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<sup>49</sup> FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER, *THE AESTHETIC LETTERS, ESSAYS AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL LETTERS* 71 (J. Weiss trans., 1845).

<sup>50</sup> WYATT, *supra* note 47 at 219.