From the earliest of times, Shakespeare’s works have been specially admired by women. I wrote a couple of weeks ago about the “Sociable Letter” written by Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle and published in 1664. A woman, for who could describe Cleopatra better than he hath done, and many other females of his own creating, as Nan Page, Mrs Page, Mrs Ford, the Doctors Maid, Bettrice, Mrs Quickly, Doll Tearsheet, and others, too many to relate? The Shakespeare Ladies Club is best remembered for its support for a statue of Shakespeare to be put into Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey in 1741.

In the 1730s a group of women known as the Shakespeare Ladies’ Club promoted performances of Shakespeare’s plays and supported the creation of the Shakespeare monument in Westminster Abbey. The Shakespeare Ladies’ Club (SLC) has been accorded a footnote in the reception history of Shakespeare, but no one has yet taken account of their importance for women’s participation in the intellectual and cultural life of eighteenth-century London. By tracing the dynamics of this group, we may increase our understanding of women’s reading habits, their effect on the theatrical repertoire, and their role in the public life of clubs and philanthropic endeavours. The convergence of several factors made the SLC possible; this article contextualises the SLC within the literary and cultural life of the eighteenth century, and examines the importance of the SLC in the life and work of one member, Elizabeth Boyd.