

The History, A History, and Liminal Spaces: Common Books in Three Keys

Susan Miller

University of Utah

*A lecture presented by the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and
Rhetorical Studies Minor*

**Speaker Series
No. 16 ♦ 2000**

**Lillian Bridwell-Bowles,
Series Editor**

The History, A History, and Liminal Spaces: Common Books in Three Keys

Susan Miller

University of Utah

*A lecture presented for the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and
Rhetorical Studies Minor*

**Speaker Series
No. 16 ♦ 2000**

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Erika R. L. Rivers, Editor

THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
227 LIND HALL
207 CHURCH STREET S.E.
MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55455

Director: Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Professor, English
Associate Director: Hildy Miller
Assistant to the Director: Ann Browning
Research Assistants: Kristin Brown, Elizabeth Leer, Erika Rivers, Michael Seward,
Mary Strunk, Sara Van Wormer

Policy Board: John Carlis, Associate Professor, Computer Science; Terence Collins, Professor, General College; David Frank, Associate Professor, Mathematics; Laura Gurak, Associate Professor, Rhetoric; Elizabeth Leer, Graduate Student, Curriculum and Instruction; Holly Littlefield, Teaching Specialist, Carlson School of Management; Toni McNaron, Professor, English; Carol Miller, Associate Professor, American Studies; Rosemary Park, Associate Professor, Education; Jim Perry, Professor, Forest Resources; Gerald Rinehard, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Carlson School of Management; Don Ross, Professor, English; Muriel Ryden, Professor, Nursing; Michael Seward, Graduate Student, Creative Writing; Geoffrey Sirc, Associate Professor, General College; Ruth Thomas, Professor, Family Social Science; Constance Walker, Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instruction; Art Walzer, Associate Professor, Rhetoric

Copyright © 2000 by The Board of Regents, University of Minnesota
All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 1-881221-41-5

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all personnel shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.

Preface

Professor Susan Miller of the University of Utah delivered a keynote address, *The History, A History, and Liminal Spaces: Commonplace Books in Three Keys*, as part of CISW's Speaker Series on April 10, 2000. Offering many interesting anecdotes derived from her study of commonplace books in Virginia, Miller's talk examined these ordinary texts to determine what people "wrote before composition was a freshman requirement." According to Miller, commonplace books collapsed the distinction between private and public discourse. She concluded her discussion with the reminder that commonplace books, "can also remind us to recognize those spaces between the official discourses, and to honor those human abilities that always remain outside institutions."

Professor Miller teaches writing, theories of rhetoric and composition, and cultural studies at the University of Utah. Her recent book, *Assuming the Positions: Cultural Pedagogy and the Politics of Commonplace Writing*, received the CCCC/NCTE Outstanding Book award. Miller has also directed composition at Ohio State University, the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, and the University of Utah, where she was founding director of Utah's cross-curricular University Writing Program.

The Center's Annual Colloquium and its Speaker Series contribute to its primary mission, which is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. These activities, along with faculty development workshops, conferences, publications and other outreach activities, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the university community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,
- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics for writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Dr. Miller's lecture as part of the ongoing discussion about the history of literacy and the book in America, which is a focus of the Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies (CLRS) Graduate Minor. We encourage readers to enter into this dialogue with us by contacting the Center for more information about the CLRS minor and other publications related to the improvement of undergraduate writing throughout the academy.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Erika R. L. Rivers, Editor
July 2000

The History, A History, and Liminal Spaces: Common Books in Three Keys

I can't begin today before expressing my enormous gratitude for this invitation to the University of Minnesota. I have for years thought of your research and teaching as a model, a template for a writing studies that includes both composition and rhetoric. As a non-doctrinaire leftist, I think that "writing studies" should entail studies of writing and reading practices whose interest lies in their materiality. This emphasis certainly includes their social and economic histories, but as well their embeddedness in immediate physical and social circumstances around writing. So I'm delighted to share even briefly in the new work you undertake to study, the history of the book. As we all must certainly be, I'm very grateful for the inspiration and canny energy Lilly Bridwell-Bowles brings to the context and particulars of this project, and I'm grateful to benefit, as I'm sure you must be, from those qualities as well as from her friendship.

I want to tell three stories today that I think are relevant to your new curriculum, to put into play what it may mean to have chosen the term "history" of the book as its name. My title is exceedingly transparent. It outlines the reversal of usual hierarchy in my arrangement of these stories. I begin with what has been taken to be the history of commonplace books, a story certainly obscure to me when I innocently decided to find out what people wrote before composition was a freshman requirement. In the next section of the paper, I imagine a history, a shifted historiography in which the commonplace book becomes an example in very different conditions for intelligibility. Here, these humble, home-made yet museum-piece volumes occupy the space of simultaneous gifting and receiving, not power relations, a space so difficult to substitute

for the usual hierarchies that I am told its best analogue in our Imaginary is good sex. A history, I hope, allows us to see commonplace books as having a much greater purchase on discursive practices than they have been imagined to have. Finally, I attempt to imagine commonplace books as liminal discursive spaces and point out the advantages for cultural studies of their liminality.

My first story, therefore, is THE formalist history of the commonplace. That history will appear, I think, to be “normal” even after we see how these ambiguous texts make normal history itself at the least ironic. Like this Big History, however, these books are also always personal compilations of consequential acts, never verifiable containers of a Hegelian intellectual “progress,” yet always its component. We know nothing of their earliest forms, although Moses’s handlists of basic laws were certainly a model. But THE history of commonplaces now starts in rhetorical education, as Aristotle instructs schoolboys to copy passages on scrolls, to make portable memories that will enrich and guide composing. In the *Topica*, he alludes to the relationships that this history stresses, between the individual who composes and notable discursive practice. He says students should “select . . . from the written handbooks of arguments, and . . . draw up sketch-lists of them upon each several kind of subject, putting them down under separate headings . . . In the margin, too, one should indicate also the opinions of individual thinkers” (1.14.105b). Quintilian also requires students to absorb the language of others by memorizing specific passages to increase the flow of words. But this increased fluency is realized as a voluble memory, not as an easy access to novelty. He casts commonplaces as loci, the topics of common ideas that should visually “appear,” to be hung on well-stocked, familiar mental images (*Institutes* X.5.11-14).

Western educational practices never wavered from these ancient pedagogic instructions. But they receive uneven attention in the modern literary or rhetorical history they helped to legitimate. Well after Harold Bloom proclaims the “anxiety of influence,” students may read Milton without identifying his early school exercises (prolusions) as commonplace assigned topics that display what has been said, for instance, about “whether day or night is more excellent.” As a Renaissance minor in graduate school, I had no idea, because his modern editor evidently did not, that Ben Jonson’s *Timber—or, Discoveries upon Men and Matter as They Have Flowed Out of His Daily Readings*, was exactly as its title said: a collection of Jonson’s copying, not his pithy insights. As Milton’s “creativity” after he was blinded should indicate, memories well-stocked by personal collecting were the honored content of literary composition before a later property-right was invested in printed words.

Of course we all dream of trans-historical “originality.” This wish makes it possible to track history as Hegel does, narrating trains of genius that do, yet must not really, progress. But it is more interesting to forego his counter-factual literary desire to appropriate God’s work, noting instead how commonplace collecting has served not only to stock composing, but to character-building. Kept more accurately in memory than in often mis-copied texts, these pre-print collections stimulated individual participation in collective identities and their regulation. As Mary Carruthers says of commonplace medieval “florilegia,” “one cannot think at all . . . about the world of process and matter... except in commonplaces, [the] concentrated ‘rich’ schemata of the memory, [that we use to make] judgments and [form] opinions and ideas” (178). Collecting commonplaces has

been, that is, *the* way to mold character as guided individual participation in the ethical experience of others.

This access to ethics, and to *an ethos*, certainly defines early humanist motives for literary modes of education. Erasmus's *de Copia* is perhaps the first explicit example linking commonplace-based composition to conduct. Melancthon and Vives, among others, advise commonplace bookkeeping specifically to aid the artificial, "secondary" memory that will grant access to both learning and its display. These collections allow the possession of ideas not only by students and teachers, but by anyone who wants to be, or to be thought, "learned" [166]. They become populist "repositories," access to discourses and textual structures that both elite and non-elite traditions share.

This form of populist textual character-building distinguishes Renaissance educational programs that moved toward relatively democratic policies. Yet, Mary Thomas Crane argues in *Framing Authority* that commonplace collecting then begins to maintain what she calls "a [new] version of authorship, that [is] collective instead of individualist, published instead of private, inscriptive instead of voice-centered, and aphoristic or epigrammatic" in ways that are outside the lyric and the narrative, yet shape and inform their traditions (4). Renaissance manuscript poetry collections, in her view, are not access to new individualism. They extract and reproduce "already-written material as an integral part of the process of composition, which cobbles together new texts from words others have used" (Max Thompson, 411 [401-15]).

THE history of these books therefore requires us to situate a text's signs of origination, its "author-function." Foucault divorces this sign or origination from our construction of productive consciousness, making it a product of the economy of

publishing. But as Roger Chartier explains in *The Order of Books*, “[commonplace books] characteristically show no sign of the author-function. [Their] unity . . . comes from the fact that its producer is also its addressee” (Chartier 56).

I will take up that characteristic lack of authorship. But for now, it is important to note that the “already-written” composing process that Chartier is describing makes these books primarily copies, and secondarily objects to be read. As compilations for memory work, they do not begin as places of writing selves. But they hereby also require us to acknowledge Barthes’ much later characterization of the libidinal murmur of discourse, a history in which texts and meanings float rather than march, where phrases, allusions, concepts and syntax bob up unexpectedly, but never without precedent. Despite their ready adaptation to a story of manly influences from ancient to later masters, commonplace books remind us that this story of influence is a way to control narration. Commonplace books help create that story themselves. And they embody desires to make an archive from enormous masses of detail.

I haven’t time to thoroughly elaborate THE standard history of commonplace books, but I do want to add two important chronological developments that prepare for A history to follow. Commonplace books have also been seen as harbingers of the rationalist, anti-rhetorical projects of Modern philosophy, as personally alphabetized, numbered, and topically labeled blank pages for noting memorable passages from civic, religious, academic, and later literary sources. They imply that a new science can repair the disabled storage technologies of its new categories for “reality,” largely by writing. As writing becomes a popularly shared practice across classes, these books embody conventions that can control supposedly natural desires. Much like the small

compartments in jewelry boxes and beading kits, their pre-ordained headings and outlines represent an organized “mind” and its exchange value, especially when their print versions become relatively inexpensive. These books become tickets to newly prestigious registers of neat expression and to civic covenants in a new social contract that will exclude the all literate as not-quite-human.

In this eighteenth-century space, Joseph Addison’s *Rectator* (nos. 411, 412) assigns to private writing a new “property of the Imagination,” which becomes equivalent to middle-class propriety. This quality of a self emerges precisely for a readership that owns little or no material property. Consequently, Locke’s break with absolute authorities is made plausible by the insightful, self-selected exemplars that verify personal access to transcendent faculties. Commonplace books hereby become visible as self-sustaining articulations of Locke’s philosophy of property, as results of “working”—working an ore into metal, but also working “through” and working “out” personalized relations to circulating discursive practice. Locke’s advice on how to organize commonplaces in *A New Method of Making Common-Place Books*¹ makes it clear that they contain this property, realized as *propriety*. Their writing does not produce “MY STYLE” nor “MY IDEAS,” but a pre-capitalist private investment in language. Language I collect, that is, is worthy insofar as it resonates with common social values. Its possession assures my socialized identity, in a mode of self-composition that the modernist individual later transforms into *his* consciousness, not into human connections. Commonplace books hereby offer a material history of human ontology, a way to gather one’s self and to assure that an “I” endures substantially, in a fixed space that holds mobile language. They comfort the necessarily covert insecurity of the universalized, supposedly coherent

Enlightenment “individual,” installing on sequential pages a fleeting, thus troubling and largely unverifiable accountability for disparate actions of the mind.²

Of course, such insecurity about the durability of *identity*, not about its prestige in attachment to a particular linguistic register, has kept even the wealthy sons of wealthy sons from rising up and tearing out the throats of those who correct their writing. Often, these books tell, their fathers were the family source of corrective propriety before we were assigned this task by institutions that place civic authority in the state. THE history of commonplace books closes, that is, with a regulatory tale in which we wait in the wings to be leading characters.

We are all familiar with institutional powers that end THE history of commonplace books as private libraries of access to discursively enabled characters. But to open an entirely transparent window onto state-sponsored emphases on ethical self-regulation, I want to highlight one post-revolutionary attempt to prevent further revolutions: a French Jacobin proposal to intervene in bad habits of royalist thought by inspecting “private morals.” By instituting what was cannily called a “family book,” the draconian Jacobins attempted to graft the new citizens of their civic Imaginary onto ethical characters, already circulating in pre-Revolutionary civility. Their plan predicts how nineteenth-century State education was to create a new “mass,” which could be made politically conformist outside the religious self-surveillance that Anglo/European revolutions had set aside.

This French proposal suggests not only that historic analyses of commonplace keeping can mark ruptures in the philosophy of human identity that Locke and Hume represent. Equally important, it also shows how commonplaces easily become the

purloined letters of hegemony, transparent and so overlooked controls of shared cultural memories. Here, as Furet and Ozouf's *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France . . .*³ describe, the family book was "to contain civil records—birth, marriage, deeds—and others relating to the interests of the family, so each family would have information about itself. The book would tell this private history in moral terms, to make the record an example for celebration. But, because it would at all times serve the Republic, as . . . 'domestic surveillance' to help ensure public morality. As an infallible substitute for individual recollection, these books were repositories of virtue. As ritual writing they would reconstitute republican society upwards from its basic unit, the family (317).

Of course, we feel relief that this particular grass-roots colonization of writing was never realized, even if we are not entirely sure, as the state's teachers of writing, that it has not been realized. Nonetheless, it is appropriate to end *THE* history of commonplace books and begin *A* history, my second story, with this reference to the social powers of families, for it is exchanges among them that *A* history addresses. As I said initially, *A* history of commonplace books places them in very different conditions of intelligibility, under a rubric that exposes the deeply hierarchical structures of *THE* history I've just told. It allows these humble, home-made yet museum-piece volumes a much greater purchase on culture than they are taken to have within the categories that histories usually rely on: high and low, published and unpublished, written and copied, authentic and counterfeit, or original and derivative texts.

I am aware that any call for a "new" history of books of any kind echoes clichéd critiques of historiography. Many now apply Lyotard's assertion that we must forego Big

History, at least as anything but the Enlightenment individual's favorite bed-time dream. Like literary New Historicism, cultural studies, representations of experience undertaken by feminist historians like Joan Scott or the "new anthropology" and ethnography, Lyotard's relies on owning up to personal, cultural, and temporal standpoints that elevate anecdotes to the status of evidence. However, like post-humanist histories of literacy that point out how nineteenth-century German ideologies inform separations of literate from supposedly oral cultures, these new social constructivist methods reinstate the categories of high/low, inside/outside, and good/bad that they seemed to want to undo. Thus my version of **A** history does not explicate commonplace books as representations of gender, race, and class—the rubrics we have seen absorbed into a social turn. But that social turn, we have now also seen, is stabilizing the old categories that many of us hoped these formerly marginalized classes could critique. That is, as I tell **A** history of commonplace books here, it is not socially turned toward the women, slaves, children, or other satellites around Virginia's First Families, the keepers of the collection I have analyzed. Instead, it portrays an alternative paradigm, within which these memorialized documents produce another significance.

However, to construct them in **A** history, it is important to register that the French proposal radically changed the *content* of its family books. Clearly, they were to be modern commonplace compilations. But equally visible is the difference between rather dour collections of discursive monuments -perhaps copies of the new constitution—which they might have contained and the enormous variety of genres and expressions that would have resulted, the actual content that the Virginia collection and many others actually do contain.

As my Virginia study recounts, commonplace books as I found them are comprised by the historic spectrum of literate practices: copies of documents, genealogical work and slave records, accounts, personal journals, correspondence, literary compositions, and other modes of graphic production. They tell the names of young men who come to call and of the hundreds of books that a woman named Maria DeRieux read. They include a petition to have a husband declared insane that is filed with Blackstone's legal definitions of idiots, maniacs, and other disabled souls who nonetheless retain all rights to their property. They keep a letter written by a local boy the night before he is to be shot for spying, a minute account of a correspondent of Maria Edgeworth educating her young stepsister, an early slave owner's outcries to his profligate son, and, a letter begging forgiveness for an unnamed romantic indiscretion. Hugh Grigsby-the-proliferate left books that open to inlaid, enameled, and water-colored drawings. They also record their family fun, including games they played, notes to girlfriends, elaborate charted ways to determine a lady's age, and a recipe for curing deafness.

What is most obvious about such a collection is that these texts—inserted and pasted remnants, pictures, and handwritten memoirs—are inserted, pasted, drawn, and penned under conditions of privacy. In a space where ownership went without saying, these family records evoke our own secretive recordings, and the twenty-first century uses of the password. Yet, here they are so often shared among family members, including children who doodle over high seriousness, that this contemporary analogy is probably inappropriate, even though it allows us partially to understand; the possessiveness of discursive properties that commonplace books always embody. Yet, it

is equally obvious that I can tell you about Werner Wormeley's debts or Rachel Mordecai's rather dull step-sister because these private records are so carefully catalogued, preserved, and displayed for use in a textual museum, Virginia Historical Society (VHS). We can, that is, only imagine the private exemptions from surveillance I have sketched because they are in fact not private, but entirely public property, and more. These commonplace books, now actual gifts to the state, are and always have been donations. They represent a cultural duty to continuity and preservation that duty can only be realized when their husbandry of discourses is freely shared, even before they leave the estates, in all senses of that word, in which they are written. They remind us of socialized values that are visible, for instance in Athenian "liturgies" the motives behind Socrates' donation, get required, battleship. Such donations to **A** history are entirely embedded in complexities of gifting and of receiving, but not necessarily in the power relations of **THE** history, either as a grande recit or as more contemporary visions of socially turned narratives.

This interference is not just theoretical. Commonplace books represent an obligation to make public what is made alone, but never in discursive privacy, a state only now even imagined. This obligation is certainly clear in the over-sized books of Samuel Simpson, who after the Civil War, penned **Preserve this for Future Generations** in boldface across each page of his scathing self-critique of slave-holding. In many equally self-conscious annotations and commentaries; in frequent verbal and visual frames around passages; and especially in the complicated attributions that introduce so many of these volumes, the duties of private writing precisely on pages of history are verified. These books tell **A** history of property simultaneously kept and

given, not only kept for and given to the VHS to shore up family celebrity, but kept as a duty given to the textuality of which they are a part.

Anthropologist Annette Weiner explains these acts of collapsed private/public categories as an alternative to the persistently hierarchic, individualistic capitalism that frames THE histories we always tell. She claims that, the central issue of social life is keeping-while-giving. How to keep some things out of circulation in the face of all the pressure to give things to others is the unheralded source of social praxis.⁴ Weiner addresses precisely the paradox of hierarchy and marginalization that positions so-called “private” writing. That is, no history whose paradigm separates private from public discourses can account for the texture of our experience. Her view sets aside discourse hierarchies that make it impossible to understand the “intricate symbolic meanings . . . [that] encode . . . the reproduction of social relations,” especially “historical documents that authenticate and confirm for the living the legacies and powers associated with a group’s or an individual’s connections to ancestors and gods.”

In her framework of, *A history of commonplace books* sees them as the common places that contain sources, mutations, exchanges, and resistances to all identity categories. That is, this entirely other history sees the commonplace book as an exchange among families. They keep while giving them, within and outside their local habitats. This writing preserves local experiences as property, just as it includes the future in the texture of common social arrangements, especially those around exchanges.

By being kept private, these books substantiate the authority of their scribal writers who simultaneously bring about what is usually perceived as autonomously

“public” discourse. As records of a culture transmitting its own moments, they maintain the material circumstances around any transactions. They leave to others future “claims, as personal records, wills, and letters often do. But they are equally robust holdings of cultural capital themselves. The ability to “keep” these books, both to inscribe and to preserve them across generations, is therefore equally an ability to attract status and to maintain it in an imagined future. But their simultaneous giving, in recirculations of cultural doxa, introduces to this future only commonly held and personally kept dogma and opinion. As such examples of “keeping-while-giving,” they name the texture of experience as reciprocity, not as power relations. We engage that reciprocity by paying them attention, noticing that it is in giving without losing, receiving without entirely absorbing, that our cultures, and our books, actually take shape. What they uncover “historically” is not, therefore, just a difference among books, those written and those read. It is a different model of historical inquiry that sets aside epistemic anxieties about what we can and cannot know for sure about history, and about how history excludes and includes us. Instead, this other paradigm for history affirms our participation in enduring yet always situated human circumstance.

I think I have already told most of my third story, of liminal spaces, the empty connective tissue that is always neither here nor there. But I am not going to end by claiming that commonplace books are hybrids of any sort. Their discrete identity, like the discrete identities of other book categories that your program will take up, exposes one discursive surface. This surface is connected to the other histories you will undertake, but not identical to them. That is, between other layers, both **THE** history and **A** history of commonplace books allow us to see a particular production of discursive identity, one

made by juxtapositions of copy and original, custom and invention. Commonplace discursive artifacts cannot, I think, be used entirely to forecast studies of Palm Pilots to come. But they do project an alternative phenomenology of the book, one outside usual judgments. Their liminality is visible in their status as both intrinsically worthless family valuables, private repositories of prominent circulating and recirculating textual traditions, and as a space for writing where scribes and authors are, and are not, kept separate.

Their study thus also draws attention to the cultural functions of any writing. As simultaneously important and inconsequential material goods, the ambivalent, mobile status of these texts allows us to rethink authoritarian, selective, “tasteful,” evaluations of texts. These left-over “papers,” with little market value, are consequently both a substantive and an “excess” discourse. Their “energy, as Batille says of any excess, can be used for the growth of a system . . . or it must be spent without result. In the interest of the first outcome, of growth, however, I will hope that you can take advantage of these books, if only by hearing their voices as you read others coded as more respectable. They have absorbed the memories of the “system” that now embeds discourse in professional study. Especially in their uses as sites of education, the trying out of identities, and of applied, practical local authorship, they increase our literate properties. But now, outside their circumscribed places of origin, they can also uncover the cultural energies of writers for whom the act of making a text was a productive luxury, a claim on and witness to mental, emotional, and social prosperity.

Consequently, commonplace books are themselves a discursive and material “excess,” what can be kept-in-giving. Their analysis enacts a specific educational

“supplement.” They can portray for professionals the active, mobile creation of the social by writing, and thus enlarge accepted histories of literacy in which texts have been records, not events. As I’ve said, their liminal relation to intertextuality as the connective yet unformed spaces between official statements, tells a great deal about the discourses of institutions, which warrant the studies you are now undertaking. But despite that institutional sponsorship, commonplace books finally can also remind us to recognize those spaces between the official discourses, and to honor those human abilities that always remain outside institutions.