

TEACHING WITH COMMONPLACE BOOKS IN THE AGE OF #RELATABLECONTENT

VIMALA C. PASUPATHI

I WROTE AND classroom-tested my first commonplace book assignment in the spring of 2012. At this point in my career as a professor, I had taught a course called “Shakespeare’s Early Plays” every semester for six years, and I was ready for a change in how I approached close reading in my class. The commonplace book assignment I wrote to replace the traditional literary analysis proved to be one of my most generative and successful experiments in twenty years of college teaching, though I didn’t know it when I initially described the assignment in a short essay, published in 2014 in the *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*.¹ The present essay is a follow-up to that piece that provides an account of the goals and concerns that motivated my particular approach to developing a commonplace book assignment within my specific institutional context. In it, I aim to complement the other essays in this volume with a retrospective analysis that ultimately affirms the pedagogical benefits and challenges of teaching with commonplace books in future semesters

Like many of authors of these essays, especially Joshua Eckhardt, Andie Silva, and Dana Schumacher-Schmidt, I appraise the commonplace book as a refreshing, student-centred alternative to the close-reading papers I had written myself as a college student, and continue to advocate for assigning them as a way to pay homage, but also productively unsettle, the relationship between college-level readers and the elite writers of an early modern canon. Unlike many of the assignments discussed in these other essays, however, my own was focused primarily on the ability to recognize common literary forms rather than recurring themes or sentiments that comment upon the world outside the text. Accordingly, my reflections not only entail specific arguments for the value of maintaining this narrow textual focus, but also culminate in a revelation that runs counter to it: that such a focus is never really narrow after all.

I Vimala Pasupathi, “The Commonplace Book Assignment,” *The Journal of Interactive Technology & Pedagogy*, March 11, 2014. <https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/the-commonplace-book-assignment/>.

Vimala Pasupathi is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University.

The 2014 essay I revisit here was itself a post-semester reflection, offering a short description of the results of my first attempt to teach with commonplace books. It was prefaced by the full text of the original assignment, whose basic requirements I described as follows:

In its final form, your Commonplace Book will consist of at least one passage for eleven weeks' worth of assigned primary texts from your textbook. You may wish to annotate or mark up specific words in the passages you choose to show what those various elements within them are doing to construct the overall meaning within. Whether or not you opt to include your own "margents" or marginalia in the book you submit, you will write at least one paragraph (but no more than two) of analytical commentary for each passage, discussing what we will think of in this class as its "moving parts." Your commentary will explain how those parts make meaning in the passage and why they warrant our attention. In addition to the book and commentary, you will write a short analysis of the book as a whole (2.5–3 pages, roughly 600–750 words), that describes its contents, offers observations about what your passages have taught you about Shakespeare's use of language in his early career, and reflects upon your reading practices and how they have changed as the semester progressed.

These details gesture at some of the examples of commonplace books kept by early modern readers, encouraging students to think about the act of commonplacing as a material practice as well as an intellectual and highly personalized one. But if the assignment aimed at reproducing a historical practice, it also betrayed my discomfort with some aspects of that practice. Further down in my instructions, students were presented with an important caveat: "Whereas early compilers tended to copy down what they believed contained exemplary wisdom or beauty, you will be looking for passages that are compelling for the way their diction, form, structure, and other aesthetic features shape a work's content. Thus, your choices need to be guided by more substantive (and more selective) reasoning than simply trying to paste together quotations that sound pretty or seem 'true.'" At the time I drafted the original version of this assignment, I was deeply concerned that students would be encouraged to find the most familiar and most quoted examples from Shakespeare; I did not want to see "to thine own self be true" in their submissions any more than I'd want to see that quotation described in earnest as wisdom in a close-reading paper.

Nearly a decade after drafting this assignment and using it in a class for the first time, I believe firmly in its aims and in its appropriateness for the study of Shakespeare—and even literature broadly. But I have to confess that I still feel a great deal of discomfort with the concept of *sententiae* that is admittedly integral to these texts' name and production in the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. In what follows, I want to think more deeply about what I think of as the Scylla and Charybdis of teaching with a commonplace book assignment: the readily available but fraught links between early modern commonplace culture and what continues to develop as late-capitalist internet culture. In their intersections, we may encourage students' reduction of literary texts to highly subjective notions of "reliability." Reflecting on the factors that conditioned my original sense of the potential pitfalls of these assignments, I will describe my efforts at developing an assignment that would empower individual readers across time and cultures to identify recurring features within early modern texts, while also discouraging their identification with characters' experiences and aphoristic content. I conclude with a meditation on whether the latter is possible in an age in which the social and actual capital of "reliable content" exceeds the cultural and academic capital afforded by studying Shakespeare.

Institutional Contexts, Pedagogical Aims, and Practical Scaffolding

My original investment in creating the assignment stemmed from two main pedagogical goals that are, of course, linked closely to the role of the class within the English department's curriculum and the broader institutional contexts in which I teach it. First, and most fundamentally, my Commonplace Book assignment was driven by a desire to change the kind of student work I'd be reviewing and assessing. To put things bluntly: I wanted to avoid having to read a set of papers that made the same claims using the same often-cited passages. At the same time, I was also compelled by my own growing interests in book history—something that had not been a formal part of my own training in college or in graduate school—to incorporate what I was learning about print culture from colleagues at other institutions.

I teach at a mid-sized private institution that built its reputation around the Liberal Arts and Sciences. Over the last decade, it has taken steps to compete with larger research universities through the inception of professional schools and programs, adding a Medical School, a School of Health Professions and Human Services, and a School of Engineering and Applied Science to existing Schools of Business and Law. This direction is reflected in a changing student body with respect to the prospective majors and minors of each incoming class; although we still have a significant number of students who declare majors in English compared to other departments in the Humanities and Social Sciences, that number has declined from previous decades.

“Shakespeare’s Early plays,” one of two Shakespeare courses offered by the English Department at Hofstra University, is described in the bulletin copy as both requiring and ending with the study of *Hamlet*. Because it carried “Distribution,” or general education, credit, it was capped at thirty-seven students, and students in any major might enroll in it to satisfy General Education credits in the Liberal Arts required for graduation. I could rely on having a few English majors register for it, but fewer than you might think. My department required Creative Writing students to take at least one author-centred course, but we had voted to remove a similar requirement in the Literature and Publishing concentrations. As a specialist who likes Shakespeare but publishes primarily on non-Shakespearean drama, I generally found this lack of requirement in these tracks a positive feature. In practical terms, however, it meant that my courses often enrolled more non-majors than majors, including some who majored in Biology and Computer Science and other STEM fields, and that I could typically expect a higher concentration of students studying theater than English or English and Education students whose primary interest was literature. The Department of Drama and Dance maintained a requirement for its majors to take two of the English Department’s Shakespeare offerings throughout the first six years I taught the course; these students were more likely to refer to the plays I was teaching as “shows,” and they were more invested in reading for emotion than for aesthetics.

Given this typical population, my writing assignments in iterations of my course prior to 2012 were aimed at conditioning responses to reading his plays that would be somewhat focused on literary craft, and thereby distinct from what students might be asked to consider in courses focusing on performance theater history. Rather than focus the course predominantly on matters of performance—which, of course, the Department of Drama and Dance at my institution does quite admirably—I felt that I could better contribute to these students’ education by privileging language and the contextual knowledge that individual readers brought (and bring) to the Shakespearean text. Doing so meant emphasizing matters of style and aesthetic features a bit more than I did in my own scholarship; however, because of my training and proclivities as a historicist, I also wanted to provide students with tools to understand those features’ effects and meaning in light of early modern political history and culture. I emphasized language as a vehicle for relaying plot as well as foregrounding larger thematic questions in response to the political contexts that underpinned dramatic representation.

My assignments were, as these descriptions no doubt make clear, literary analysis papers that asked students to connect formal features in dramatic texts to political and social concerns contemporary with these texts' dates of composition or staging. In editions of Shakespeare's plays published by Bedford St. Martin's and Longman, I found excellent resources for preparing students to write these papers; with these editions' thematic chapters and excerpts of early modern works contemporary with Shakespeare's, my classes had everything they needed to bring together form, content, and context. Although I felt increasingly disillusioned with how much my students could really learn about historical contexts in the time we had (and the time they expended), I nonetheless felt pleased that they were reading the text for something other than the plot, actor cues, and character motivations.

Of course, not all of them were actually reading the texts I assigned in the editions I adopted for class. The mixed interests of this general population typically meant at least one or two students enrolled who would be reading the internet equivalents of an earlier generation of teachers' bugbear, Cliff's Notes—that is, Sparks Notes or Wikipedia entries rather than the hard copy editions I was assigning. Even if such sites don't lead students astray, they tend to lead them in the same direction, all but ensuring that multiple students will focus on the same key passages when it comes time to write a paper. In fact, even students who had diligently read the actual assigned edition of the text focused on those passages, and to be fair to all of them, the quotations in question are well known and typical choices because they are indeed crucial to a play's inner-world culture in addition to its place in our own culture today. For a professor reading papers in two fully enrolled sections of Shakespeare, it could mean a significant portion of over seventy papers that highlighted textual evidence that enabled, if not encouraged, the most simple or general assessments of the play from students of any major.

I imagine that experienced teachers of Shakespeare's plays will be able to offer up their own examples of passages they know are significant but that they have also come to despise. For me, there is no better an example than an example I will return to throughout this essay, Petruchio's pronouncement in reference to Katherina in 3.2 of *The Taming of the Shrew*:

I will be master of what is mine own.
She is my goods, my chattels, she is my house,
My household stuff, my field, my barn,
My horse, my ox, my ass, my any thing...

Over time, I noticed that students routinely cited these lines in their comments in class discussion and in their close reading papers when my syllabus

included the play, usually in service of claims that Petruchio had objectified his wife. Despite prompts that encouraged students to write about topics other than the play's representations of marriage or gender, students seemed especially inclined to discuss them, no doubt because they are so clear in laying out what look to them like cultural values. They would sometimes link these lines to lines spoken by Lucentio about Bianca, and, as anyone who has taught this play before might predict, used to draw a contrast between these "good" or "bad" matches or to confirm that both matches are bad.

After a few semesters of reading these papers, I was bored and even resentful of them, even as I could see that some of the students writing them were indeed trying to say something important about the play's representations of gender and marriage. The problem with these papers wasn't that they were poorly executed or unpersuasive, but that their attention to this particular passage (or others of similar status) had foreclosed on the possibility of engagement with other parts of the play. Moreover, I began to suspect students were not writing about marriage because it interested them so much as writing about it because they felt they could. The apparent transparency of Petruchio's logic in various parts of the play made the argument low-hanging fruit. Why consider other lines in the play when these showed such a clear path to a claim?

I knew that discouraging students from this or any other topic was not in itself a constructive solution, and though I temporarily alleviated the problem of my own boredom by assigning different (and less frequently assigned) plays throughout my first twelve semesters of teaching, I found that doing so involved additional preparation time that, given other projects outside of my teaching, I didn't always have to spare. And so, I decided to construct a new kind of assignment as a way to give students both the obligation and the freedom to look beyond those typically cited passages in any assigned work--and of course, to increase the likelihood that the student work I received would be fresh and interesting regardless of which Shakespearean texts I included on the syllabus.

Leading up to this moment, I recognized that I myself had been increasingly focused on parts of my assigned reading that I hadn't been drawn to initially--most particularly the Textual Notes, which, as a student and even as a young professor, I had rarely bothered to read. This shift in my own focus had much to do with what I was learning about the relationships between the printing house and playhouse. I certainly didn't intend to redirect the entire focus on my courses' historical lens from political culture to book history. But I nonetheless decided to make strategic changes to the first few weeks of the course syllabus that would not only address my impatience

with over-familiar passages, but also teach my students about the production and circulation of Shakespeare's works in an emergent literary market. From 2006 to 2011, I had started my course with *Venus and Adonis*, pitching it as an action-packed poem that allowed us to prepare for the complex mergers of poetry, people, and plot that we find in the comedies, histories, and tragedies of the 1590s. I planned to start my 2012 classes with a unit on the history of the sonnets in print as well as the publication history of "A Lover's Complaint." This change in the introduction to the course would enable discussions of authorship, the forms in which people consumed literature, and the various ways that the enterprise of print transformed literary culture in Shakespeare's lifetime. Subsequent units on comedies and history plays would be informed by these discussions even as I intended to take my usual approach of emphasizing these plays' engagement with topical concerns. *Hamlet* would still be the final text assigned in the course, but instead of my previous approach to the play, which featured the Peabody-winning episode of *This American Life* titled "Act V," on performances of the play in a high security prison, I would focus on Hamlet as a reader, master of textual recall, and keeper of letters and a "table book." I also would teach not just one *Hamlet*, but textual variants in three editions, using the "to be or not to be" speech in EEBO's Q1, Q2, and F, as a case study for the mysteries and rewards of reading texts in the forms that were available to sixteenth and seventeenth century readers.

It was when I was setting up topics and readings for the *Hamlet* unit that I started to imagine a basic plan for a commonplacing project, with an aim of cultivating in my classroom the first two of the sixteen traits Adam Smyth ascribes to commonplace culture: the understanding of reading as "an active, interventionist practice with connotations--as the Latin verb *legere* suggests--of collecting, gathering, picking out," and the conviction that it "generates writing."² Of course, in this respect, the students in my class would depart from the practices of some readers from the period, particularly those who merely transcribed material without commentary, explanation, and attribution. My prompt would necessarily foreground the modern, academic principles of citation and documentation. Students could copy freely from texts just as their early modern counterparts did, but they would also need to acknowledge the sources of their copied (and now copyrighted) material and the labour of the twentieth-century editors.

2 Adam Smyth, "Commonplace Book Culture: A List of Sixteen Traits," in *Women and Writing, c. 1340–c. 1650: The Domestication of Print Culture*, ed. Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Phillipa Hardman (Woodbridge: York Medieval, 2010), 90–110.

Moreover, I knew my students would need to do more than just “read with a pen in hand,” like the early modern readers Smyth describes; they would also need to produce formal, analytical prose in order to comply with my university’s standards for courses that counted towards General Education graduation requirements in the Liberal Arts. And so, in addition to the analytical paragraphs they would write about individual entries in their books, they would also submit a separate holistic analysis. This document would describe the contents of the finished project; offer observations about what chosen passages taught them about Shakespeare’s use of language; and reflect upon their reading practices, including how they had changed as the semester progressed. Of course, even this departure represented a return to the practices of early modern readers, whose books, as Smyth notes, could exhibit “a self-reflexivity, an interest in method, [and] a foregrounding of the process employed to produce the manuscript.”³

At this point, I was not entirely certain how best to guide students’ selection of passages, and I put off the task of drafting assignment criteria by making additional changes to the syllabus that better supported the work I imagined my students doing. I began to assemble links to digital images of these books from a variety of rare book libraries, and I added a blog post to the syllabus, Adam Hooks’s “How to Read like a Renaissance Reader,” to provide some more overt scaffolding. I switched from the single context-focused editions of plays to anthologies that devoted significant portions of their introductions to matters of print history, and these additional readings would be supplemented by in-class lectures that distilled the basic insights afforded by textual and bibliographic scholarship, including many of the studies cited in other essays in this volume.⁴ Finally, my syllabus that semester included a last-minute addition, Alan Jacobs’ “‘Commonplace Books’: The Tumblrs of an Earlier Era,” a short post that appeared on *The Atlantic Monthly’s* online site about a week before my semester was to begin.⁵ In every respect, the

3 This is trait fourteen in Smyth, “Commonplace Book Culture,” 108.

4 Specifically, I drew on Smyth, “Commonplace Book Culture”; Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowery, and Heather Wolfe, “Hamlet’s Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004): 379–419; and Peter Stallybrass and Zachary Lesser, “The First Literary *Hamlet* and the Commonplacing of Professional Plays,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59 (2008): 371–420.

5 Alan Jacobs, “‘Commonplace Books’: The Tumblrs of an Earlier Era,” *The Atlantic*, January 23, 2012, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/01/commonplace-books-the-tumblrs-of-an-earlier-era/251811/. Although I did not know it at the time, Jacobs’s piece in the *Atlantic* is a revisiting of the practices he described in an

publication of Jacobs's post just before the start of the term seemed both fortunate and affirming; in the couple of weeks between the start of the semester and my distribution of the assignment prompt, I had every intention of exploiting the explicit connections Jacobs had made between early modern practices and newer modes of reading and writing that had emerged with the widespread use of the internet and electronic media.

The Meme-ing of Life (and Literature)

At the time, seeing Jacobs' post was more than just affirming: it made me think that something was "in the water," for *everybody* seemed to have book culture on the brain. Now, of course, I know it was not something in the water so much as many things on Twitter. And the "everybody" I had in mind consisted primarily of the people in my Twitter timeline. Much of what I had been learning and thinking about in the months leading up to these changes had originated from that platform. The MLA-produced volume, *Teaching Early Modern English Literature from the Archives* was still a few years from publication, but many of its authors had already drafted the essays that would appear within it; I had gotten to know them as well as several other scholars and librarians on that platform who shared and commented on various online resources on a daily basis.⁶ A sub-group from within the sub-group known as "Academic Twitter" offered a steady stream of images from sixteenth- and seventeenth-century books and manuscripts; I was eager to share what I saw with my students so that they could see evidence of early modern reading practices, and I knew I was not alone in that desire; there were many other scholars of this period on Twitter who became my friends as we strategized online how to incorporate medieval and early modern book history and culture successfully in our "IRL" and "F2F" classrooms.

I felt especially happy to have my students read Jacobs's post, which highlighted the highly personal and creative nature of commonplacing. His comments resonated with Smyth's description of the practice as the "creation of a private (or semi-public) text through the appropriation of public texts," one of the sixteen traits that Smyth ascribed to early modern commonplace culture.⁷ I loved the idea that readers could be moved, literally,

earlier piece: "A Commonplacebook," *First Things*, May 2008, www.firstthings.com/article/2008/05/a-commonplace-book.

6 See Heidi Brayman Hackel and Ian Frederick Moulton, eds., *Teaching Early Modern English Literature from the Archives* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2015).

7 Smyth, "Commonplace Book Culture," 99.

to re-produce some part of their reading in another location, that they could be prompted, by some mix of obligation, desire, and habit, to transform their responses to their reading into *another text*. I imagined collecting from each student an amalgamation of their spiritual, educational, and recreational reading, not just a repository for another's expressions, but a place to record their own. Though enabled by the enterprise of print and the mass production of texts, my students' books would be uniquely their own; they would draw on old texts and an even older practice to make new objects that were irreplicable and irreplaceable. My thinking in this regard was reinforced by Smyth's description of the "subtle, double-edged sentence of ownership of the transcribed materials by the compiler: a sense of ownership which strikes a balance between the appropriation of materials as the compiler's own, and a recognition that excised aphorisms can always be passed on, can always be taken up, by later readers." I was also influenced by book arts (including amateur scrapbooking as well as professional papercrafts) and other on- and off-line forms of "maker culture." In the "maker-spaces" that were increasingly popping up within computer labs and Digital-related centres on college campuses, manual and digital work was combined in creative enterprise.⁸ I wanted my students to take part in these kinds of movements, and was excited to encourage them to make their books (or "books") in whatever modes or forms they found compelling.

The prospect that they might, like Jacobs, use an online repository and social media platform like Tumblr seemed inevitable, and, in my initial mindset, this combination of early modern text and "new new media" made perfect sense. I felt certain that many of the practices we can observe in early modern commonplace culture seemed to me to be alive and thriving in platforms of that sort, most obviously in the form of memes, a term originally coined by Richard Dawkins "to describe small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation."⁹ As Limor Shifman notes, Dawkins's original conception of memes is "highly compatible to the way culture is formed in the Web 2.0 era, which is marked by platforms for creating and exchanging user-generated content."¹⁰

Of course, the public circulation of memes online was a fundamentally public and collective practice rather than the mostly private acts that we

8 See, for instance, Anne Wong and Helen Partridge, "Making as Learning: Makerspaces in Universities," *Australian Academic & Research Libraries* 47 (2016): 143–59, and Addie Matteson, "Invention U.," *School Library Journal* 63 (2017): 38–42.

9 Quoted in Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), 2.

10 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 18.

assume to be at work in extant commonplace books; yet in the production and consumption of memes, I nonetheless could point to a clear intertextuality that demanded all of the hallmarks of active reading. Memes require and give pleasure by way of the reader's ability to recognize features of form and interpret their meaning; their circulation hinges on both repetition and the readers' capacity to understand it, as well as repetition with a difference—elements that are also readily apparent in many literary constructions. When readers demonstrate that recognition and their pleasure in it by "Liking," "favouriting," and sharing by a virtual button, they used a different way to copy a particularly meaningful construction, but one that is arguably just as tactile; with the life of web content simultaneously assumed to be unstable and "there forever," such acts are no more or less transitory than the marks left in book or their reproduction and relocation into others.

With Jacobs's analogy linking commonplacing to Tumblr in mind, I could not help making the connection that memes circulated online in forms that often make "original" authorship elusive or unknowable, not unlike content reproduced in the commonplace books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time when the concepts of authorship and copyright were still forming and undergoing significant change. Despite the fact that time stamps and IP addresses might identify a post as "original," verbatim posts passed off as original thought and "stolen" jokes abound.¹¹ There are also posts with memes that do seem concerned with recognizing the genius behind a single creative act: the query "Who made this" (often without the mechanically correct question mark, and often demanded in all capital letters) frequently appears in re-iterative posts—and the effect is such that the poster who asks for the source becomes the de facto source, or at least the one that gets the most credit in the form of re-circulation and approval.¹²

Finally, the circulation of memes is further akin to the commonplacing of early modern passages in the relationship that both enterprises have to the industries in which they are a form of symbolic bartering currency:

11 Articles about stolen jokes abound; see, among them, Mihir Patkar, "The Ongoing War Against Stolen Tweets, And How You Can Help," *MakeUseOf*, May 22, 2015, www.makeuseof.com/tag/stealing-tweets.

12 On the topic of evolving copyright law, see Steve Collins, "Digital Fair: Prosumption and the Fair Use Defence," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 10 (2010): 37–55, and Laura Levinson, "Adapting Fair Use to Reflect Social Media Norms: A Joint Proposal," *UCLA Law Review* 64 (2017): 1038–79.

both are “of” an economy that is both within and outside of *the* economy. A meme that goes viral on social media sites can certainly be monetized by advertising (and they *are* necessarily “paid for” by ads and “promoted content” in the majority of “free” platforms where they are shared), but much of the machinery’s economic underpinnings are beyond most users’ immediate interests, if not always outside of those users’ awareness. Likewise, the “verbal symbolic goods”¹³ that Jonathan Lamb describes as Shakespeare’s “wares of wit,” transmittable as “interactive assemblies” of structured imagery and diction, circulated within a physical marketplace of material goods that included printed books; yet their consumption in these books transpired in forms that were external to and irrespective of that marketplace. Readers who were copying material into their own commonplace books may have been motivated to do so by a sense that such acts could elevate their own status, but, like the twenty-first-century users who shared memes purely for entertainment, many readers did so without financial profit as an immediate or primary motive.¹⁴

The interconnectedness of my pedagogical interests and what I witnessed in my own online social activity certainly fueled my enthusiasm for the changes I was making in my course. It also caused considerable anxiety. There is, of course, a long tradition of exploring and validating the use of new--and now “new new” and post-“new new”--media in college classrooms.¹⁵ Although Olivia G. Stewart found “no strong consensus on social media, their affordances, or how they should be taken up in the classroom” in a 2016 review of this literature, there is no shortage of advocacy for incorporating it into more “traditional” pedagogy.¹⁶ For instance, in an article from 2010, Mia Moody argued that social media can be useful for “foster-

13 Jonathan P. Lamb, *Shakespeare in the Marketplace of Words* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

14 In Trait 13, Smyth identifies “a connection between common-placing and improvement,” listing financial gains as merely one potential form that improvement could take among many other types of advancement, “linguistic, moral, social,” and “spiritual” (“Commonplace Book Culture,” 108).

15 On the term “new new media” in reference to interactive media platforms, see Paul Levinson, *New New Media* (Pearson, 2009), 2nd ed, 2012. One of the earliest attempts to grapple with the effects of new media is John Seely Brown’s “Growing Up Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education, and the Ways People Learn,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 32 (2000): 11–20. Neither of these encapsulates the “newest” media trends, which will no doubt be old news quickly.

16 Olivia G. Stewart, “A Critical Review of the Literature of Social Media’s Affordances in the Classroom,” *E-Learning and Digital Media* 12 (2016): 481–501 at 482.

ing rich dialogue” and “encourag[ing] critical discussions on topics such as media stereotypes” in traditional communication courses.¹⁷ Writing in 2018 as a part of an International educational symposium, Marta Sánchez-Saus Laserna and Mario Crespo Miguel proclaimed that “social media have been revealed as one of the most powerful communication tools that exist today, and, specifically, can be very useful in pedagogical innovation in higher education.”¹⁸

With respect to the memes that circulated on those sites, the work of Shifman has already ensured they are studied as culturally significant objects in a variety of academic fields. For instance, in an essay from 2018, Lynn McNeil identified in them some of “the traditional and informal qualities of folk communication” and therein characterized memes as “modern folklore.”¹⁹ Still others have emphasized their utility for facilitating what and how students learn. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, for instance, have argued that early forms of memes such as LOLCats “could be highlighted by teachers in educationally productive ways to help learners relate what they already know and do as remixers to aspects of their classroom learning.”²⁰ In what is perhaps the most confident of essays along these lines, the librarian Ciro Scardina describes memes as “a beautiful tool to explain a concept and for students to express their knowledge on a topic and flex their critical-thinking skills.”²¹

17 Mia Moody, “Teaching Twitter and Beyond: Tips for Incorporating Social Media in Traditional Courses,” *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* 11 (2010): 1–9 at 2.

18 Marta Sánchez-Saus Laserna and Mario Crespo Miguel, “Social Media as a Teaching Innovation Tool for the Promotion of Interest and Motivation in Higher Education,” paper presented at the *2018 International Symposium on Computers in Education (SIIE) Computers in Education (SIIE)*: 1–5 at 5. Available at www.researchgate.net/publication/329901028_Social_media_as_a_teaching_innovation_tool_for_the_promotion_of_interest_and_motivation_in_higher_education.

19 Lynne McNeill, “LOL and the World LOLs with You: Memes as Modern Folklore,” *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 97 (2017): 18–21.

20 Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, “Remix: The Art and Craft of Endless Hybridization,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52 (2008): 22–33. They argue, “While educationally satisfying and productive integration of remix theory and practices into classroom learning is no simple matter, we would argue that time and effort expended in pursuing principled appropriations and leverage of the qualities they have that incline young people to invest so much of themselves in creative remix will prove educationally beneficial for learners and teachers alike” (32).

21 Ciro Scardina, “Through the Lens of Popular Culture: Why Memes and Teaching Are Well Suited,” *Teacher Librarian* 45 (2017): 13–16 at 13.

But social media and Literary studies have “a troublesome relationship,” as Camelia Grădinaru’s titular phrasing describes it.²² Perhaps it is fine for an inter-disciplinary group of scholars to posit that “Shakespeare has a lot to say about Social Media and Social Networks,” but I was (and continue to be) wary of over-selling such connections.²³ I truly loved my own social network and thinking about memes, especially those which demonstrated sophisticated political commentary and wit in their combinations of allusion, word, and image. Yet the more I reckoned with the scope and scale of discourse on the internet, the more inclined I was to separate the pleasures of intellectual work in commonplace books from the leisure and labour of posting online. This inclination, as I will discuss further in the final section of this essay, had much to do with noticeable shifts in the language used to describe the latter activity, if not also a change in the nature of the activity itself.

In July of 2010, for example, Susan Gunelius, a “contributor” to Forbes.com, described “The Shift from CONsumers to PROsumers,” noting that the latter term was a term that had “been around for years in the marketing world,” and had recently “transformed from meaning “professional consumer” to meaning “product and brand advocate.” “The leaders of this shift,” she explained further, “are the members of the social web—bloggers, microbloggers, forum posters, social networking participants, and so on, who spread messages, influence people around the world, and drive demand.”²⁴ Changes like this one help lay bare the internet’s ever-expanding relationship to capitalist enterprise, and though my small circle of academics on Twitter did our best to ignore this fact, the users who shared memes on

22 Camelia Grădinaru, “Social Media and Literature: A Troublesome Relationship,” *Argumentum: Journal the Seminara of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory & Rhetoric* 16 (2018): 35–50. Versions of the uneasy relationship between the two can be found at the start of the twenty-first century in articles such as Mae Miller Claxton and C. Camille Cooper, “American Literature and the World Wide Web,” *The English Journal* 90 (2000): 97–103, in which the authors describe the internet as “a cross between satellite television and a flea market” but nonetheless go about exploring “how this important resource can help students relate to American literature in exciting new ways” (97).

23 Víctor Hugo Masías, Paula Baldwin Lind, Sigifredo Laengle, and Fernando A., Crespo, “Shakespeare, Social Media and Social Networks [Viewpoint],” *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 34 (2015): 17–30 at 17. (I suppose I should admit here that, in my view, it is not really fine.)

24 Susan Gunelius, “The Shift from CONsumers to PROsumers,” *Forbes*, July 3, 2010, www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2010/07/03/the-shift-from-consumers-to-prosumers/#5ba8509433df.

social media platforms for fun also experience constant exposure to marketing and the promotion of “brands.”

I had not yet read scholarship or other writing on the subject that allowed me to process these developments, for, as David Beer and Roger Burrows note, we live in a world “where ‘internet time’ now runs at a clock speed several orders of magnitude faster than that of academic research.”²⁵ Still, it was clear to me even then that I was witnessing what these authors describe as “the transformation in the nature of the relations between production and consumption as they become simultaneous and even ambient in the routine activities that generate the content of Web 2.0.”²⁶ What had once been referred to as an “information superhighway” was also a garage for “content gurus,” agents who could advise advertisers and other “influencers” on “The 3 R’s” of Content Marketing: Relatable, Readable, Reusable.”²⁷

When I was designing my new assignment, sites like Twitter and Tumblr contained what Rebecca Onion would describe a couple years later as “whole cottage industries built on ‘relatable’ content,” pockets of the internet I knew existed but rarely inhabited, in which “Twitter accounts like @JustRelatable (1.8 m followers) and @relatable (2.3 m followers) tweet out meme-ified photos that rely on shared experiences for their humor.”²⁸ Although I had only a vague understanding of the status and purpose of accounts like those, it was more than enough to temper my original excitement. I did not like to think of the early modern production of commonplace books as akin to the “delivery” of “relatable content,” and yet I feared that the comparison might have traction with my students all the same. After all, if proverbs and maxims were cultural “commonplaces” or touchstones in the sixteenth century, weren’t they then simply the “relatable” content of another time?

Instead of working through a clear answer in either the affirmative or negative, I pushed the question out of my mind and revisited the basic guidelines I had drafted for my students’ commonplace books with the

25 David Beer and Roger Burrows, “Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0: Some Initial Considerations,” *Sociological Research Online* 12 (2007): 67–79 at 67.

26 Beer and Burrows, “Sociology and, of and in Web 2.0,” 73.

27 TGP Direct, “The 3 R’s of Content Marketing: Relatable, Readable, Reusable,” August 23 2016; Modified September 1, 2016. Accessed January 17, 2019, www.tpgdirect.com/the-3-rs-of-content-marketing-relatable-readable-reusable/.

28 Rebecca Onion, “The Awful Emptiness of ‘Relatable,’” *Slate.com*, April 4, 2011. The Twitter accounts mentioned by Onion in this article are no longer active or are now claimed by different users.

intention of keeping it out of my students' as well. In direct contradiction of Smyth's reminder that "extant commonplace books rarely conform to... neat templates," I ended up constructing an assignment that was highly prescriptive.²⁹ Moreover, I ended up drafting something that made clear that the kinds of lines that Lesser and Stallybrass described as "sententious passages suitable for transcription into a commonplace book" *would not be suitable at all*.³⁰ Under its auspices, students would learn to privilege what Smyth described as "the sentence" and "little block of text," while rather paradoxically rejecting the element he describes alongside those units, the "portions" that "might easily yield aphorisms."

Although I would keep in language that allowed them to choose the format that suited them best, I would direct them to make a book whose contents would illuminate, above all, common figures, images, and grammatical structures and their effects in Shakespeare's works. I would supplement the assignment prompt with lessons on rhetorical figures from early modern books on prosody, including a handout in which I modeled the kinds and combinations of passages they might choose to put in their books. In this handout, I would include (and recontextualize) the passage I had found so tiresome in papers in prior semesters, Petruchio's pronouncement, "she is my house, my household stuff, my field," as well as other entries, two instances in which characters take leave of loved ones (Julia's instructions "All that is mine I leave at thy dispose, / My goods, my lands, my reputation" in *Two Gentleman of Verona* [2.7.86–7] and Pistol's request to Nell in Henry V, "My love, give me thy lips. / Look to my chattels and my movables" [2.3.45–46]); as well as Solinus's comment in *Comedy of Errors* that "...were it not against our laws, / Against my crown, my oath, my dignity,... / ...My soul would sue as advocate for thee" (1.1.143–45), and Antipholus of Syracuse in the same play telling his twin, "It is thyself, mine own self's better part...My food, my fortune and my sweet hope's aim" (3.2.59, 61).

Placing Petruchio's list alongside other passages with constructions characterized by similarly possessive phrasing would not change its basic sense; in fact, other uses of similar constructions actually amplify its sense of Katherina's objectification. Still, it would allow me to promote analyses that were less exclusively focused on the general assessment of his misogyny and more attentive to force that specific forms of language could exert in aggregate in addition to each respective text. Whereas a quotation

²⁹ Smyth, "Commonplace Book Culture," 90.

³⁰ Stallybrass and Lesser, "The First Literary *Hamlet*," 378.

featuring Petruchio's listing of "my ox, my ass, my anything" can look like "low-hanging fruit" in papers focused on Katherine's status in her marriage, I hoped that in a commonplace book, its placement alongside other passages using similar grammatical structures would register instead as the result of careful reading. As a scholar, I was most invested in early modern politics and history; as a teacher, I found myself valuing students' identification of devices and their detection of linguistic patterns. Somehow, my attempt to incorporate more book history into my course resulted concomitantly in what looks to me now like a retrenchment into form.

Form and "Relatable" Content

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with teaching formalism or focusing on aesthetic features in literary texts. And to be fair to the internet, the surprisingly formalist turn my assignment took was not solely the product of my being "extremely online" in 2012. At least part of my prohibition on the assembly of *sententiae* came from a longstanding and fundamental lack of faith in the very *idea* of "the common." The internet had merely provided me with some additional reminders that I harbored this distrust. Here I do not mean to say that I had bought into assumptions about Literature (with a capital "L") as an elite cultural form. Rather, I mean that I was sometimes deeply sceptical of the prospect that my students and I could inhabit common ground--not just with our early modern author and his characters, but even with one another. I had grown up in a dual-cultural household and had learned throughout my childhood and teenage years that I could be both an average American kid and a girl who turned out, in a given context, to have little in common with her white friends.

I was also reaching the point where I was not at all confident that my cultural references and jokes would land in a room full of students who were mostly of "traditional" age, even if they were relatively diverse in their ethnicities and backgrounds. Drafting the assignment, then, brought to the surface a basic tension between a desire for students to understand the practices of early modern readers but also avoid a basic assumption that characterized their practices of commonplacing: that literate people could, by virtue of that literacy, recognize universal truths about humanity. I wanted them to see the value in literary craft--something I was willing to locate in prosody and diction, but not in words "to live by."

Certainly, being able to point to precepts that were "common" some five centuries ago, could be a useful step in exposing those so-called "truths" as something other than universal. But even if a college class could impress

upon students the distance between early modern values and their own, I also feared that discussing commonplaces in a Shakespeare class would necessarily lead them to the too-narrow conclusion that sentiments that recurred in Shakespeare's works were necessarily indicative of values that were widespread in early modern English culture. At least where I teach, his works might be the only ones composed before the twentieth century that students read with any regularity; it is highly possible that what seems to be "common" in his plays, for instance, could stand, in a student's mind, for all of the period and region. As popular and influential as Shakespeare might have been in his own time or subsequently, scholarship on early modern drama and literature more broadly often teaches us the multiple ways he and his work were exceptional.

Along these lines, the act of deeming something "common," even if one frames it or locates it historically, can put much greater pressure on the text and in some ways gives the sentiment a weight that might not be warranted. Take, for instance, the passage I mentioned before, the proclamation that Kate is her husband's "goods, [his] chattle, [his] house." Should these lines be understood to be a common sentiment about women's status after they are married? Without proper historical contextualization, a student might not be in a position to evaluate the degree to which Petruchio's sentiments are commonly held, particularly since it's difficult to determine the degree to which others *in the play* share them and since the play does not provide a definitive answer as to whether he himself sincerely believes them. It is one thing to discuss this slippery aspect of the play's plot and character. But the stakes feel higher when such things are entered into a book as a "common-place." Freeing passages from their immediate context in a specific work's plot can constrain them in another sense.

Bound up in these worries was a related concern that reductive assessments of early modern culture would put a student on a fast-track to equally reductive (and more troubling) claims about the "truth" of such maxims in the twenty-first century. Sometimes, I do think modern analogies can be genuinely productive and even the most effective way to engage students with the social worlds depicted in the Shakespearean text.³¹ But I did not want to see facile arguments about the present in my students' formal academic writing, and such comparisons would be invited and fraught in some-

31 See, for instance, my posted lectures on Medium.com (<https://medium.com/@engvcvp/>) on *The Merchant of Venice* and Joan of Arc's trial documents, which link historical texts to contemporary movements (with hashtags), respectively #Black Lives Matter and #MeToo.

thing called a “a commonplace book.” It was in this particular regard that my concerns about “the common” as a concept and my anxiety about “relatable” memes in social media converged; I imagined a book with the title “Ten times characters in Shakespeare’s works were ‘relatable’”—an amusing and even smart heading in some ways, but one I saw as more appropriate for a BuzzFeed “listicle” than work for a college course.

I realize that the thought process I have just outlined might sound idiosyncratic and even a bit neurotic. But there is some evidence that my concerns were not unfounded, though I wouldn’t see them affirmed explicitly until a little over a year later. The first sign I was on to something was the article on Slate.com by Rebecca Onion that I have already cited in this essay. In “The Awful Emptiness of “Relatable,”” Onion described “the persistent abuse of the word” that she noticed “while teaching college classes in 2011 and 2012”—not coincidentally, the same period in which I was reorganizing my course on Shakespeare’s early plays and drafting my new assignment. Initially, Onion admitted, she found her students’ use of the adjective in class discussions gratifying, if only because it seemed to affirm that she had “picked the resonant thing to assign.” However, the initial feeling quickly gave way to aversion, leading to her express reservations that in many ways mirrored my own. “I soon noticed,” she wrote,

that the comment, when made in discussion, cut conversation short. Students would nod at each other across the classroom, clearly feeling like they’d cracked that nut. Yeah! Relatable. That’s when the word began to irk me. No teacher likes a critique-killer. The word bothers me most, I’ve since decided, because it presumes that the speaker’s experiences and tastes are common and normative. “Relatable” is in the eye of the beholder, but its very nature is to represent itself as universal. It’s shorthand that masquerades as description.³²

In further support of the adjective’s “awful emptiness,” Onion cites an email conversation with Adam Hooks, the author of “How to Read like a Renaissance Reader.” In his email, Hooks commiserated with Onion, identifying the use of “relatable” in a student’s paper or in-class comments as an indicator of their “failure to get beyond one’s own concerns to confront the unfamiliar and the uncomfortable.” Doing the latter was, after all, essential for understanding literature from earlier periods; how could I compel students to “confront the unfamiliar” with an assignment that privileged “common” sentiments?

32 Onion, “The Awful Emptiness of ‘Relatable.’”

The second sign my concerns were legitimate—I won't dare say "relatable"—to others came a few months after the publication of Onion's article, when I witnessed a version of the very phenomenon I had been so eager to foreclose upon in my assignment. The offending actor was not a student in my class, but rather, the public radio personality and editor Ira Glass, whose Tweet about a production of *King Lear* would spark a national conversation. He wrote, "@JohnLithgow as Lear tonight: amazing. Shakespeare: not good. No stakes, not relatable. I think I'm realizing: Shakespeare sucks."³³ Glass later went on to qualify and even retract his comment, but his brief under-140-character statement elicited a number of long-form responses in prestigious publications, eliciting condemnations of the "Scourge of Relatability" from Rebecca Mead at *The New Yorker*, and an earnest consideration of the question, "Should Literature Be 'Relatable'?" from Anna North in *The New York Times*.³⁴

The awfully empty Shakespeare critique and abundant responses to it appeared well after I had drafted and taught my assignment, but the Glass dust-up further bolstered my confidence in the decisions I had made. At the time, I *did* think "relatability" had become, as Mead claimed, "widely and unthinkingly accepted as a criterion of value, even by people who might be expected to have more sophisticated critical tools at their disposal." And, like Mead, I thought it was a problem. Was it not my duty as a professor to provide students with "more sophisticated critical tools" and design assignments that would encourage their use?

Looking back on how I developed my commonplace assignment more than five years later, I am not entirely sure that words like "sophisticated" are apt for describing the approach I ultimately took. In the present moment,

33 Ira Glass, Tweet. July 28, 2014, 12:12 A.M., <http://twitter.com/iraglass>.

34 Rebecca Mead, "The Scourge of 'Relatability,'" *The New Yorker*, August 1, 2014; Anna North, "Should Literature Be 'Relatable'?" *The New York Times*, August 5, 2014. Mead critiques the "expectation...that the work itself be somehow accommodating to, or reflective of, the experience of the reader or viewer. The reader or viewer remains passive in the face of the book or movie or play: she expects the work to be done for her." For North, distaste for the word "relatable" really comes down to a "bigger question of what it means to read about lives like one's own, and who gets to have that opportunity." Because "for some readers, relatability, whatever its status, may be hard to come by," the word we use to describe "the feeling of being represented" is less important than the fact that it signifies "an experience more readers deserve to have." Although the debate North invokes here is longstanding and beyond the scope of this essay, I will note here that I am sympathetic to this position, and sensitive to the fact that Shakespeare simply cannot resonate for everyone.

at least, I don't see sophistication so much as the mix of fervor, cautiousness, and fear. Certainly, it is easy to see now that there are many responsible and generative ways to deal with the concerns I had about "the common" in the classroom, and I am not especially proud that I did not attempt them. For instance, Jenna Lay's excellent assignment for her seventeenth-century poetry course in 2014 takes overt recourse to it, citing the beginnings of early modern reading practices in the "*loci communes*," of antiquity, or the "common places," where ideas could be located if they were needed for certain situations."³⁵

Still, given the high and diverse enrollments of my own classes, I think my commonplace book assignment was successful. I never knew what to expect when I received my students' submissions, and their choices were always aesthetically rich and often surprising. Although I was and am still an avowed historicist, I built the assignment around the convictions that all language in literature is worth reading closely, and that being attuned to the grammar, syntax, and diction that make up speech in Shakespeare is a skill that would be transferable to their confrontations with language in contexts outside of the literature classroom. In intent and effect, it was a call for students to think more deeply about the aesthetic and formal features of not-famous, but nonetheless compelling lines in Shakespeare. It also was a challenge to find meaning in a simultaneously less predictable and more habitual fashion.

I have not taught "Shakespeare's Early Plays" since the spring of 2015, but I have since reused my commonplace book assignment with minimal changes in other courses in subsequent semesters. I found that with adequate contextualizing of early modern reading practices, it worked equally well in theme-based literature courses with a more diverse reading list. In the subsequent iterations, I removed the language suggesting that students consider constructing their books on social media platforms, something that I had proposed originally, but that only a single student tried in that first semester. From that small statistic, I surmised that my students were perhaps more like me than I had thought, hoping to keep some parts of their lives online separate from their study of literature in college.

As I consider how I might continue to use the assignment in future semesters, I can't help but recall the humorous concluding gesture that Onion made in her essay on relatability: "Let's just erect a 700-foot, solid-ice

35 Jenna Lay, "A Digital Commonplace Book," <https://eng364.cas2.lehigh.edu>. Accessed January 17, 2019.

wall between social media and the classroom.” The joke in this construction hinged on a reference to the television show *Game of Thrones*, now itself long-gone but still a source of ubiquitous memes. The show’s invocation of the ice-wall here neatly encapsulates the earnest desire to separate the internet from one’s teaching as well as the obvious impossibility of doing so. In its original published version Onion’s exhortation was hyperlinked, directing readers to a wiki that explains the reference by taking recourse to the urtext for it, the books on which the show is based. The explanatory webpage to which it linked not only confirmed the relationships between multiple texts, but also made clear that the expressed desire to keep these worlds separate was not so strong after all. In this way, Onion playfully undermined the sense of finality conjured by her own pronouncement, emphasizing the futility of the effort further with a winking, smug concluding sentence consisting of a single word—“There.”—indicating feigned satisfaction with a mission accomplished.

I found Onion’s final word and the accompanying image both amusing and timely as I began writing these reflections so many years after the publication of my 2014 essay. In early 2019 memes about walls were proliferating online, with and without references to the now-completed show. At that time, then-current President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, reportedly “brought a Game of Thrones Meme to His First Cabinet Meeting of 2019,” eliciting derision from both the cast of the show and Chuck Schumer, the Senate Minority Leader.³⁶ I was struck then by the relative longevity and broad applicability of common tropes. I continue to be impressed by their capacity to find purchase in the most formal of settings. Even when they are unwelcome, they mean something and, through constant reuse, continue to structure how we make meaning.

Obviously (to use another typically remixed meme from another fantasy franchise), one does not just walk into the classroom and say, as Senator Chuck Schumer said in response to the President, “Enough with the memes.” Teaching with an assignment that is premised on identifying recurring patterns means teaching students how to identify without necessarily identifying with parts of a literary text; it also means acknowledging that words

36 Megan McCluskey, “Trump Brought a Game of Thrones Meme to His First Cabinet Meeting of 2019,” Time.com, January 3, 2019; Ashley Hoffman, “The President Used a Game of Thrones Meme: The Cast Wasn’t Having It,” Time.com, January 3, 2019; Alejandro de la Garza, “‘Enough With the Memes’: Schumer Slams President Trump After Another ‘Game of Thrones’ Reference,” Time.com, January 6, 2019. All articles listed here accessed January 17, 2019.

and word structures take on value in social networks and are therefore also inevitably bound up in commercial transactions and personal brands. By encouraging students to locate the value of literary properties in something other than what is readily reproducible for sales or “likes” online, we can foster both recognition of, and a sense joy of in, the capaciousness of language. This broad goal may be all that is possible if we continue to live more of our lives and do more of our reading and teaching online. Even if we don’t, the structures of commercial enterprise and popular media will still be capable of permeating any wall of ice that we might wish to erect to safeguard the integrity of our intellectual projects.

Of course, nothing I suggest here is new, and to prove it (and to conclude), I will share the results of the post-semester exercise I conducted at the end of the term when I first taught my commonplace book. At that time, I was pleased with my relative success in charting the narrow course away from “the common” and beyond the reach of brands and “relatable” content and to celebrate, I asked my colleagues on Twitter to supply me with examples of their favourite literary constructions that, like Petruchio’s, made significant use of repeated possessive pronouns. Within minutes they assembled a number of fantastic examples, including (but not limited to) the lines from the Declaration of Independence, “we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor;” and Emma Lazarus’ poem “The Colossus” invoking “your tired, your poor, / your huddled masses.” In the same spirit that animates Onion’s conclusion, I imagined adding these examples to the table-book in my head, writing them down next to the line “My first, my last, my everything,” from the Barry White song of the same name, and the commercial refrain “My Doctor said Mylanta,” already recorded and living there for more than a decade, rent-free. *There.*

