

Part 2

**ADAPTING THE COMMONPLACE
BOOK ASSIGNMENT**

PRODUCTIVE DISRUPTIONS

USING COMMONPLACE BOOKS TO RESIST EUROCENTRISM

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TEACHING A SURVEY of early British Literature can be tricky if your goal is to diversify the voices and perspectives students will read. While it should be relatively simple to engage students in discussions of gender, class, and race within medieval and early modern literature, instructors are still faced with difficult decisions when it comes to selecting a number and range of texts that provide an accurate representation of the period while avoiding the narrative that England was a unique or particularly groundbreaking locus of literary invention.¹ In this essay I discuss how I use the commonplace book assignment to push back against Eurocentric narratives and expose students to global medieval and Renaissance contexts as they read and interrogate British writing. I also keep my own commonplace book in order to offer students a model of what to aim for in their own project and supplement our class with diverse perspectives and potential questions for class discussion. By keeping my book as a form of real-time course prep and embedding it into our course site, I aim to show students that I am undertaking the project with them rather than offering a completed, polished model they have to follow. This approach aims to decolonize the curriculum not simply by resisting notions of an all-male, all-white canon but by prioritiz-

* I am grateful to Matthew K. Gold, Kelly Baker Josephs, and Jeff Allred for their thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this essay. Thank you also to the students in ENG 328 at York, whose contributions challenged me to see new facets of texts I have read and re-read so many times and encouraged me to find more ways to showcase representation in the medieval and Renaissance syllabus.

† This project is particularly critical to the pre-modern and medieval periods, as white supremacists have attempted to erroneously claim Anglo-Saxon literature and culture as sites of white purity. For more on the ways in which race can and should be discussed historically within the pre-modern period, a good starting point is the *RaceB4Race* conference series, <https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race/past>.

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ing individual experiences and expanding, rather than cutting, our range of available readings.

Although the word “decolonizing” sometimes risks becoming a buzz word in pedagogical conversations, at its heart a decolonizing approach is synonymous with responsible, ethical teaching: it requires that we centre the human in the classroom, paying attention to the individuals who might be least likely to see themselves represented in our literature, and encouraging a process of self-guided discovery. In order to accomplish this, we must take into consideration the wide intersectionality of our students (as well as our own), interrogating why and how we teach the texts in our syllabus. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, in order to promote a culture of “self-understanding” in the classroom, it is important that we facilitate a process in which minoritized learners “understand what their own role has been in forging artistic and intellectual achievements.”² The commonplace book assignment lends itself nicely to this aim, since the genre has a long tradition of pedagogical and reflective practice, through which readers become not simply consumers of materials but active participants in the production and dissemination of knowledge.³

As Dana Schumacher-Schmidt and Nora L. Corrigan demonstrate elsewhere in this volume, commonplace books are especially useful in survey courses because they help students manage large amounts of information and draw complex connections across texts. Since creating a “storehouse of knowledge” (to borrow Earle Havens’s phrasing) was also one of the primary applications of commonplacing in the medieval and early modern periods, the commonplace book assignment can show students that journaling and information management are long-held practices, and that “many habits that we take for granted are indebted to the transmission of practices developed centuries ago in medieval and early modern Europe.”⁴ Further-

2 Priyamvada Gopal, “Yes, We must Decolonise: Our Teaching Has to Go Beyond Elite White Men,” *The Guardian*, October 27, 2017, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/27/decolonise-elite-white-men-decolonising-cambridge-university-english-curriculum-literature. It bears keeping in mind that decolonizing is only the first step in a grounded, ethical classroom, as Roopika Risam argues in her talk, “Abolitionist Digital Pedagogies: Beyond ‘Decolonizing’ the Classroom,” *McGill Digital Humanities*, “Spectrums of DH.” Accessed July 2022, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1347337532264583.

3 See this volume’s introduction and the essay by Nicole Hagstrom-Schmidt for further context on the history of commonplacing.

4 Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.

more, the practice of commonplacing opens up spaces for making texts our own—by copying a quote into our journals, we take literal ownership of the words being reproduced, reinforcing the notion that what adds value to a text is not simply its historical position in the (artificial, arbitrary) literary canon, but its contribution to our own lives and values.

Overview of Course and Objectives

The survey course, “Medieval and Renaissance Literature” is one of several options available to English majors at York College (CUNY) for completing their pre-twentieth century literature requirement. In terms of preparation, the class composition can vary widely, as students may take this course at several points in their academic career, including in their first semester at York after transferring from other schools. What most of my students will have in common is that they likely have never encountered any early English literature other than Shakespeare. Typically, as I’ve discussed elsewhere, they also enter my classroom with a great deal of trepidation and disinterest when it comes to pre-modern literature.⁵ That being the case, while I want students in my class to gain a sense of the breadth of styles, authors, and genres available in the medieval and early modern periods, I also want their reading experience to be unique to each student rather than simply instructor-mediated. This is especially crucial within the goal of decolonization and liberatory pedagogy, which aims to maximize representation and the range of voices and perspectives available in the classroom.⁶ In particular, I try to make the syllabus design process as transparent as possible, instilling in students the habit of questioning and evaluating their reading assignments as but a small piece of a literary history that is much larger than we could possibly cover in one semester. I also want students to notice the place of distinction British literature earns in our major: why are they required to

5 Andie Silva, “Remixing the Canon: Shakespeare, Popular Culture, and the Undergraduate Editor,” in *New Technologies and Renaissance Studies III*, ed. Matthew Evan Davis and Colin Wilder (New York: Iter, 2022), 257–78.

6 In embracing liberatory pedagogy I follow Paulo Freire’s concept of co-liberation, in which the instructor and students must work together to undo oppressive systems and center learning around subjectivity and knowledge construction (though never at the expense of socio-political awareness of the colonizing forces that guide our society). See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). For a thorough review and critique of how to humanize pedagogy, see María del Carmen Salazar, “A Humanizing Pedagogy: Reinventing the Principles and Practice of Education as a Journey Toward Liberation,” *Review of Research in Education* 37 (2013): 121–48.

study these texts? What kinds of ideas and voices are we privileging over others? And how can we ensure our own voices and ideas in the classroom take authors to task when they fail to represent us (accurately or at all)? As Nedda Mehdizadeh emphasizes, when teaching any texts, but especially pre-modern texts, instructors should help students unlearn the practice of “look[ing] outside themselves and toward an imagined ideal for answers.”⁷ Minoritized students in particular may arrive at college classes unsure about their role as critics and all too ready to accept anthologies as the final source of what texts and authors “matter” in their education. Engaging students in constructive resistance of textbooks and syllabi encourages critical thinking and can challenge us, instructors, to regularly re-evaluate our choices when it comes to representation and inclusion.

In order to ensure students make a habit of prioritizing their own reactions to the readings, I introduced the Commonplace Book Assignment in the second week of our semester (see Appendix), asking them to begin documenting their encounters with each reading throughout the term in whichever ways they found productive—e.g. quotations, collages, poetry, memes, and so on. Because our goal was in part to see each student’s approach as unique and worthy of study, students could choose whether they would work with digital or analogue methods. I had anticipated that those students who were more creatively inclined would prefer working on paper, while students who engaged heavily in social media might enjoy the ease of blogs. As I discuss below, this approach was not entirely successful. Unless the student is skilled in coding or design, digital spaces arguably do not allow for as much originality or visual variation as blank pages, and so digital commonplace books may require more careful instructor guidance in order to achieve a final product that reflects students’ creativity. Nonetheless, there is a lot to be gained from digital commonplacing, such as the ability to share work more publicly and encourage students to think about the afterlives of the work they do in the class. Instructors may want to weigh whether the flexibility of options may make assessment challenging: since the range of end products will vary considerably, rubrics need to take format and (hyper) materiality into consideration in order to support and reward students’ choices of record-keeping.⁸

7 Nedda Mehdizadeh, “Teaching the Travail of Writing: Authority, Empire, and Racial Formation in the (Pre)modern,” *Race B4 Race: Education Symposium*, January 20–21, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGgRgHJ9AhE&ab_channel=ACMRS.

8 As I revise this essay in the middle of yet another pandemic-imposed virtual semester in 2021, I must acknowledge there are many reasons why digital commonplacing may

As Joshua Eckhardt similarly discusses in this volume, it is important to scaffold the work of commonplaceing so that students are motivated to work early and often, as the strongest commonplace books benefit from iteration and reflection. Our project required four “checkpoints,” during which students had to bring their commonplace book to class or to office hours and report on their progress. While the first two checkpoints were intentionally informal affairs (a student could catch me before or after class or email me a link to their work in progress, for instance), the third checkpoint asked students to exchange books and add contributions to each other’s project and the last checkpoint had to be completed during a scheduled one-on-one meeting so the student and I had the chance to discuss how to revise and finesse their final submitted project. Prior to this last checkpoint, I also asked students to draft a reflection essay evaluating their progress and analysing four standout entries.

It is important to carefully consider what the goal of the commonplace book assignment is: in my case, I was less interested in using this project as a way for students to practice literary analysis than as an opportunity for them to find their own reasons for reading the assigned texts.⁹ I therefore constructed my prompt to leave plenty of room for what counted as an “entry” in their commonplace book. Adam Smyth points out that commonplaceing typically involves “a willingness to rework material,” and thus commonplace books often showcase a “resistance to ideas of coherent, completed wholes.”¹⁰ In my assignment rubric, I expanded on these definitions to consider “resistance” as an opportunity for pushing back either critically or playfully. The assignment rubric (see Appendix) therefore reinforced that students would be rewarded for bringing their unique perspective to the

be a more practical choice for both students and the instructor. Yet even this term I ended up asking students to make analogue commonplace books, both as a way to encourage off-screen time and to give students a memento of their experience in the course. This approach, however, requires additional work on both the student and the instructor’s ends: the student must not only produce formal papers describing and analyzing their work, but must find a way to document their material object, and the instructor must carefully consider how to grade the process, product, and subsequent critical analysis.

9 Those wishing to engage students in complex close-reading and cross-textual analysis may want to turn to Pasupathi’s essay in this volume.

10 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 Press, 2010), 90–110 at 99 and 103.

process of textual analysis, even and especially when those perspectives rejected what our readings might be presenting as objective truth.

Projects aimed at centring students' voices must include active plans for how the instructor will support students in disrupting the presumed textual authority of the canon. As Cassie Miura argues of Shakespeare courses, teaching the pre-modern period with care and inclusivity means making space for students to question canonicity and find ways to "situate their own attitudes and critical perspectives as part of an ever-changing historical narrative" so that they may find themselves "actively shaping a work whose meaning is always indeterminate."¹¹ For many students, making this move from acknowledging that meaning and value are culturally assigned signifiers to seeing themselves as producers of knowledge can be difficult. I was not entirely surprised, for instance, to find out that many of my students felt a considerable amount of anxiety about the commonplace book project, because they did not grasp how their informal, unmediated responses to the texts could be evaluated for a grade. They worried that there would be a wrong way to engage—for instance, by disliking or rejecting the ideas presented in the text, or by "misreading" important themes or symbolism. While this concern is likely to crop up for a diverse range of students, those students who belong to minoritized groups might feel especially reticent about seeing themselves as a source of authority when it comes to literary analysis.¹² In-class, student-led discussions can assuage these anxieties, but instructors should also consider reserving some class time for students to explore historical examples of the commonplace book as a way to expand what counts as knowledge, and who gets to make intellectual interven-

11 Cassie M. Miura, "Empowering First-Generation Students: Bardolatry and the Shakespeare Survey," *Early Modern Culture* 14 (2019): 44–56 at 50. This whole special issue on "First Generation Shakespeare" is worth a closer look for those interested in making early modern literature in general and Shakespeare in particular more relevant and productive to first-generation students.

12 For studies on how to center students' prior knowledge as a form of scholarly expertise, see Milagros Castillo-Montoya and Jillian Ives, "Instructors' Conceptions of Minoritized College Students' Prior Knowledge and Their Related Teaching Practices," *Journal of Higher Education* 92 (2021): 735–59. A recent study on first-year doctoral students also showed that students who identified as female or as an under-represented/minority "had significantly lower levels of perceived disciplinary knowledge" compared to their male, non-minoritized peers. If that is the case for upper-level studies, we should consider addressing the problem in our approach to undergraduate education. See Allyson Flaster, K. M. Glasener, and John A. Gonzalez, "Disparities in Perceived Disciplinary Knowledge Among New Doctoral Students," *Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education* 11 (2020): 215–30.

tions in the circulation and production of literature. I had the opportunity to take my class to the New York Public Library so we could explore some of the books in their Special Collections. Although the NYPL did not have any medieval or early modern examples in their catalogue, seeing the records of anonymous or little-known readers in the library and being able to access that reader's inner thoughts nonetheless energized the students. The library visit encouraged them to think more concretely about why they might record their own thoughts for posterity and even analyse their own practices as valuable subjects of study. Luckily, we now have digital projects like *Book Traces*, which stores high-quality images of marked and annotated rare books and even invites students to contribute by submitting transcriptions.¹³ As Heidi Brayman Hackel observes, the study of annotated books and commonplace books helps refocus our understanding of early modern culture to include "less extraordinary readers, who often remain invisible in the historical record only because of their occasional traces in books."¹⁴ Seeing such readers made extraordinary through archival preservation encourages students to likewise envision their own voices as worth memorializing.

Intentional Disruptions

Throughout the semester, I promised students I would keep my own commonplace book, maintained through our course site. I had anticipated that the students who decided to keep digital commonplace books might have a hard time figuring out what made their work different from a traditional blog, and I wanted to showcase a variety of formal and informal ways to create and customize their entries. For instance, through my commonplace book I could demonstrate how tagging and categorizing entries would be an easy way to offer multiple avenues for user interaction, which would also help students think through what themes had surfaced throughout the project as a whole. Although I did not prescribe what platform students should use for their work if they chose a digital format, I also hoped that my sample book would encourage them to make a WordPress site hosted on our insti-

13 My experience with our visit to the NYPL helped me see that any interaction with primary sources can be extremely productive for students, so even though *Book Traces* focuses on nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts this resource should be valuable for instructors without access to rare books libraries. See <https://booktraces-public.lib.virginia.edu/>.

14 Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

tution's domain, the CUNY Academic Commons (CAC). Our entire course was already running on this platform, and students needed to register a Commons account to submit other assignments, so choosing the CAC would make life easier for both them and me (since I was familiar-enough with it to troubleshoot any potential tech problems). Finally, as I discuss below, this format allowed me to more or less combine my lecture notes with my practice of commonplacing, which meant that I was not doubling the amount of labour involved in prepping the course.

From the beginning, I planned to use my commonplace book as a space where I could offer the class productive intersectional and global perspectives to supplement and contextualize the British literature texts assigned from week to week. Although I strive to include at least a few texts from outside of Britain and occasionally outside of Europe in my syllabus, it never feels like there is enough space in the term to successfully teach a Global Englishes *and* a British Literature class without doing a disservice to both. This is especially true for my course, which is designed to be a survey of both the medieval and the early modern periods together. By infusing my digital commonplace book with non-white, non-male textual and visual references, I hoped to bridge some of the gaps left by the course schedule and to consistently remind students that the pre-modern period was as diverse and complex as our world is now. Rather than assign students to read or comment on my book (which would be counter to my goal of not overloading the syllabus), I instead projected pages from my commonplace book on the screen in class as part of my short introductory lectures for the week. For instance, the week the students were to read Marie de France's *Lanval* and *Chevrefoil* I used my commonplace book to offer supplementary information about how knight and chivalric codes operated in other parts of the world, such as the Samurai in Japan, or the Furusiyya in the Middle East. Before starting class discussion, I showed students some of the illustrations I had found online of knighthood cultures from around the world and went over how I had framed them in my digital commonplace book. As we went over these choices together, we had a broader conversation about masculinity and the illusion of social order. In addition to helping disrupt the notion that England was unique in its cultural practices, I also hoped that my commonplace book entries would encourage students to research additional contexts on their own and to see their commonplace books as a place to document their research practices.

Our periodic "checkpoint" dates served as soft deadlines for students to remember to update their notes in case they were not working on their

commonplace books at least once a week. These checkpoints also gave me another opportunity to remind students that I was keeping my own book and show them how I processed my own reading and study notes for class. In keeping with requirements established in the assignment's rubric, I used my commonplace entries to highlight subversive interpretations and help the class find parallels between the pre- and early modern world and our own. For example, when we read *The Dream of the Rood* my weekly post linked to a blog on gender fluidity in medieval manuscript illustration and paired it with quotes from our text. I hoped that students who visited my commonplace book to find inspiration for their own work might see this as an opportunity to consider the complex intersection of devotional writing and sexuality in the period.¹⁵ Indeed, one of my students felt inspired to find contemporary yonic illustrations to compare against medieval illuminations, leading to some fascinating blog entries on the ways devotion can be a surprising outlet for women to openly envision and discuss their sexuality. I balanced some of these historical research entries with more informal posts that included memes, excerpts, and links to fanfiction adaptations (such as excellent pieces that centre Grendel and his mother as the protagonists in *Beowulf*).¹⁶ These entries therefore served as lecture notes and as a simple way to show that I too am a learner of medieval and early modern literature—constantly thinking about my own place as a reader and interpreter.

One might argue that there is something inauthentic in using a commonplace book as a formalized teaching supplement, since by definition commonplace books are typically designed to showcase one's personal reactions and engagements with the texts they read. But if we look to the tradition of printed commonplace books, we may see that even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries editors and compilers often conceived of ways to use a publicly disseminated commonplace book as a way to model critical thinking and "encourage new, better ideas within [their] readers."¹⁷ Indeed, I would argue that it is actually not possible to have an "authentic" reaction to read-

15 Sophie Sexon, "Queering Christ's Wounds and Gender Fluidity in Medieval Manuscripts," *History Matters* (blog), August 8, 2017, www.historymatters.group.shef.ac.uk/queering-christs-wounds-gender-fluidity-medieval-manuscripts/ Accessed February 24, 2022.

16 See John Gardner, *Grendel* (New York: Vintage, 1989), and Susan Signe Morrison, *Grendel's Mother: The Saga of the Wyrd-Wife* (Alresford: Top Hat, 2015).

17 Jillian M. Hess, *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information: Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 35.

ings one has read and studied many times before as part of their academic training. Whatever an instructor decides to include in a commonplace book designed to serve as a model for students will be impacted by their expectations of an A-level project. Rather than attempt the impossible (and somewhat insincere) task of creating a truly unmediated record of my experiences as a reader, I aimed to record and make transparent my experience as an instructor. The materials in my commonplace book documented the earnest and real-time process of teaching myself how to make the course more inclusive of a wider range of literatures and contexts. Instructors employing such a tactic might additionally consider it as an opportunity to discuss printed commonplace books and the role of pre-culled materials marketed towards middle-class readers in the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries.¹⁸

Keeping your own commonplace book may sound like extra labour in an already prep-heavy course such as this British Literature survey, but instructors who prepare lecture notes or slideshow presentations may find that a lot of the normal prep for the week would easily lend itself to formal and informal commonplace entries. In the spirit of commonplacing, I intentionally left many of my entries without any context; some pages would include nothing but images, while others had notes and screenshots. By design, none of my posts included the kind of writing that would have required formal drafting. In class, I would open up our discussion by calling students' attention to my entries as a way to share what was in my head as a reader that week, and I used these moments as an opportunity to encourage questions about global contexts or different ways of close-reading our texts. In future versions of the course, I would like to try short free-writing assignments where the students analyse my own and each other's books to think about how we can use primary sources to glimpse into the inner lives of real-life readers and consumers of texts. Working on my sample commonplace book also helped me bring more care and empathy to my assessment of students' projects. Like some of my students, I also ran into challenges keeping up with the entries from week-to-week. Although I required students to produce at least ten total entries, my own book ended up with only eight. As a result of my own struggles with time keeping, at the end of the semester I decided to ask students with missing entries to think of ways to remix or

18 See Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) and Earl Havens, *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Beinecke University Library, 2001).

reorganize the work they managed to complete (e.g., with an index or list of keywords) as a way to make up for missing assignments.

Commonplace books can be places for students to detail and memorialize their own culture and explore similar practices and histories outside of Europe. Instructors should consider their goals for this assignment and craft learning outcomes that support authentic reactions to the text, such as incorporating textual push-back as part of the official goals for the course. While my own assignment did not focus on the commonplace book as a place for students to practise the academic writing process, it is possible to incorporate critical-thinking work into the act of commonplacing. Throughout my course, I used short writing assignments and formal papers where I asked students to consider thematic parallels between our readings and modern culture. One response paper for instance invited students to research cultural differences across popular genres such as utopias and chivalric romance. Students were also asked to write reflection papers analysing how their commonplacing skills changed over the course of the semester. This work could easily be accomplished through students' commonplace books instead of papers, either as in-class exercises or by reserving a portion of the commonplace assignment rubric for assessing students' research and analytical skills.

By and large most students really embraced the project, though I noticed that the analogue books had a tendency to be more complex in terms of design and creativity. In particular, students who kept digital books were more likely to reproduce existing material than to create their own original illustrations or creative writing. I was happy to see, nonetheless, that my intersectional approach to my own sample commonplace book helped inspire students to adapt and revisit texts from a broader range of perspectives and to take ownership of the ideas presented in our reading assignments. Marc Torres, for example, used his commonplace book to insert himself as the protagonist in a number of our texts.¹⁹ For instance, one of his entries built on our discussion of Margery Kempe's motives for writing her memoir, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, questioning the convenience of a divine-appointed mandate that allowed one to forgo their responsibilities. In a short, two-panel cartoon, Torres drew himself having visions of a crucifix on his wall telling him that "we shouldn't do academic papers! They're a waste of time! Time I could be using to write a short story!" Similarly, in his entry about Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* Torres offered a list of the conditions

19 All students are named and cited with permission.

for his own ideal society, which included a demand that every citizen abide by his passion for skateboarding, which should be “always appreciated, and people must take pictures of any skateboarding they come across.” In both cases, Torres used his commonplace book to critique arbitrary social norms and reflect on how artists were able to bend those norms, using literature to create worlds that better reflected their own needs and desires. By personalizing Margery Kempe’s subversive assertions of her agency and More’s rhetorical musings on what makes an ideal society, Torres found himself more interested in medieval and early modern literature:

Whenever I read something now, I try to understand it immediately and then I try to think about how I can make it my own. I’m an artist first before anything else, and because of my commonplace book, I have found a way to make the readings important to me; I’ve made them meaningful in ways that I can enjoy over and over again. I will definitely be making a new commonplace book, but it will be for my personal readings. (Marc Torres, Commonplace Book Reflection)

Another student in the class, Isamar Perez, similarly used her commonplace book as a way to insert herself in our readings. Finding that she often had to study while taking care of her young son, Perez decided to frame a large portion of her commonplace book as a reflection on the role of family and motherhood. In her entry for *Beowulf*, she identified with Grendel’s mother and her fierce drive to protect her child, excerpting quotes from the text that highlighted the positive qualities she saw in Grendel’s mother (Figure 1).

In another entry, Perez designed a family crest (an activity I had suggested in class) and gave the page to her son for colouring. In the next page, she and her son practised their handwriting and signatures, modeling historical commonplace books that included similar practices. Perez’s book therefore became more than a class assignment: it encouraged her to consider bringing together her home and school lives, and to use her perspectives as a woman and a mother to subvert the sexism inherent in texts like *Beowulf*. While such critiques are available in the scholarship about pre- and early modern texts, by arriving at these conclusions through their lived experience students learn to trust their own interpretations before seeking outside “authoritative” readings—a valuable and crucial step in the process of becoming a budding scholar.

As these examples show, decolonizing the curriculum must continuously move beyond adding BIPOC authors and history to one’s syllabus: we must also decolonize our teaching by asking ourselves what kinds of knowledge we privilege and how we employ or question authority in the classroom. As Dennis Sumara argues, commonplace books can offer “generous space for interpretation” and invite an active participation in the creation of mean-

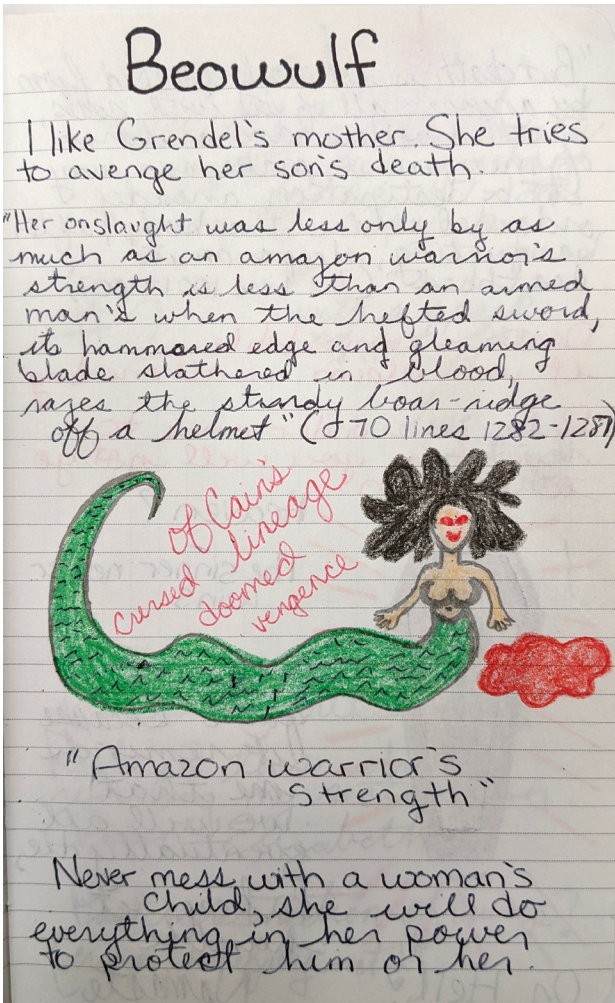


Figure 1. Isamar Perez, Commonplace Book, entry for *Beowulf*.

ing, serving "as archival sites for creative and critical interpretation."²⁰ By creating my own sample book alongside the class, I made my research process public and invited students to think about the wide range of texts that should belong in a conversation about the medieval and early modern periods in England and beyond. Documenting these curricular choices can give instructors an opportunity to discuss canon formation, periodization, and Eurocentrism in an honest, low-stakes way. Both students and instructors may thus be invited to consider their own role in the reception history of texts and demand more representative curricula not just in the texts they read but also in the valuing of social knowledge creation.

20 Dennis J. Sumara, "Learning to Create Insight: Literary Engagements as Purposeful Pedagogy," *Changing English* 8 (2001): 165-75 at 165, 167.

Appendix

THE COMMONPLACE BOOK ASSIGNMENT

As you will learn this semester, readers often copied and altered quotes from their reading and put them into commonplace books for easy access and remembrance. Alongside quotes, these readers would write poetry, ideas, and even recipes. We might see these as an early form of social media: they offer a place to keep ideas, to shape one's own (sometimes) public persona, and to share our experiences with our friends and peers.

Your final project for the class will gather creative and analytical reactions to our readings over the course of the entire semester. Your completed commonplace book will include **at least one entry for ten weeks' worth of readings**. How you engage with our readings will be entirely up to you, but you can find inspiration in the links shared on our course site. Your goals are to create a final project that ticks off most of Adam Smyth's list of Sixteen Traits for Commonplace Books²¹ (see below) and, most importantly, shows off your critical growth throughout the term.

But what do I actually write in it?

You can and are encouraged to use this book as a journal to keep track of your readings, interests, and questions. You can copy direct **quotes** that stick out to you, **illustrate** a passage that stuck in your head, or even write original riffs or **adaptations** inspired by our readings. Maybe you want to find a **recipe** for a food from the period, or look up **places** our texts mention? You can also use your entries as a journal about your **reading habits**, e.g.: when, where, and how often did you sit down to read? How were you sitting? How was the lighting? The noise level? Did you fall asleep? Get excited? Bored?

Invention

First, you will want to decide on the **format** of your book. You need to decide whether you're going analogue (i.e. using pen and paper) or digital (using an online tool like a blog, tumblr, twitter, etc). It will be difficult to switch formats down the line, so choose wisely in regards to your comfort and creativity level.

21 The class and I read Smyth's article in preparation for this assignment. See note 10, above.

Form a **habit**. It will be hard at first to remember to commonplace regularly. The best way to get used to this is to a) choose a format you already use and enjoy and b) always read our assignments with your commonplace book at hand. You will find that “playing catch up” and trying to create too many entries at once will not only hurt your grade but make your book look lazy and haphazard.

Copy and **analyse**. Early modern readers used their commonplace books for organization, learning, and memory. You can and are encouraged to use this book as a journal to keep track of your readings, interests, and questions. Because this book will be somewhat public, however, keep in mind that writing is often a type of **rhetorical performance**: you’re trying to showcase your thoughtfulness, wit, and creativity.

Keep track of **checkpoints**. Check the schedule to see when you will be required to showcase your work and discuss it with me. Your goals for each checkpoint are:

- CP #1: Your book should exist and have at least a couple of entries.
- CP #2: You should have started thinking about recurring themes, motifs, or points of analysis.
- CP #3: You will be asked to contribute to a peer’s commonplace book (what you add is up to you, but this should be a substantial contribution, not just a “great job” comment).
- CP #4: In-person office hours appointment to discuss how your project is wrapping up, plans for completion/revision, and reflection drafts.

Composition

You will be asked to turn in a short reflection draft (3 pages, roughly 700 words) upon your final checkpoint outlining and analysing the three most productive/creative/analytical entries in your commonplace book. Regardless of how many direct quotes you used throughout the book (I expect you’ll have a few if you use your book to take reading notes), **your reflection must make direct reference to our readings**.

Upon submission of your completed commonplace book, you will be asked to turn in a revised and expanded version of this reflection, which will introduce your book, explain your goals (at the start, and how they evolved over time), analyse three entries in detail, and offer a conclusion. Your conclusion should offer observations about what your passages have taught you

about medieval and early modern literature and should reflect upon your reading practices and how they have changed as the semester progressed.

You're encouraged to be flexible, playful, and even (on occasion) mindless about what you include in your book. But there are a few guiding rules:

- your book should contain passages from or critical notes/questions about at least one reading from every remaining week of the term;
- at least 2 of your entries should be annotated close-readings (you can take a picture of your notes or print a fresh copy of the text to annotate and include in your book) which demonstrate that you are able to engage critically with our readings and make note of relevant literary devices, themes, and cultural issues;
- your book should show an effort to draw connections across texts and ideas, as well as trying to make sense of the values and concerns of the medieval and early modern periods as a whole;
- be creative! Showcase your originality. Don't just have written text in your book. Think about images, sounds, colours, and typography.

You can, and are encouraged to, keep adding to and revising old entries as you go and try to create "paths" across your entries (e.g. through an index, colour coding, or table of contents).

Holistic Grading Rubric

Your commonplace book will be evaluated according to Smyth's Sixteen Traits of Commonplace Books. An A-level final commonplace book will attend to:

- Critical interventions (trait #2), or your ability to interact with the texts, showcase your own voice, and demonstrate your capacity for critical thinking.
- (Dis)Order (traits #5, 6, 9), or your ability to find common threads, themes, and issues among your notes and observations, and to restructure or organize your book accordingly (this may be accomplished digitally through categories on a website, adding separate notebooks on Evernote, reordering, tagging your notebook with post-its, moving pages around in a binder, creating new boards on Pinterest, etc).
- Creative interventions/resistance (traits #7, 8, 11), or your ability to rework the texts we read to make them your own (examples include

cutting and pasting, writing poetry/text that responds to the reading; curating photos/images related to the text; illustrating narratives; making soundtracks; etc.).

- Collaboration (trait #12), or your ability to intervene in each other's work and challenge your peers. This will be done at least once this term (see our schedule) but you may do it as often as you and your classmates wish (just make sure you tag/sign your interventions).
- Materiality (trait #15), or your attention to detail in making and keeping your commonplace book. This includes thinking through design elements like the theme of your site, the balance of image, text, and original work in your Pinterest/Evernote, using colourful pens, stickies, stickers in your notebook, etc.
- Reflection (trait #14), or your ability to critically evaluate your own work. You will be asked to perform a few check-ins throughout the term and to write a longer reflection at the end of the semester to accompany your book.

