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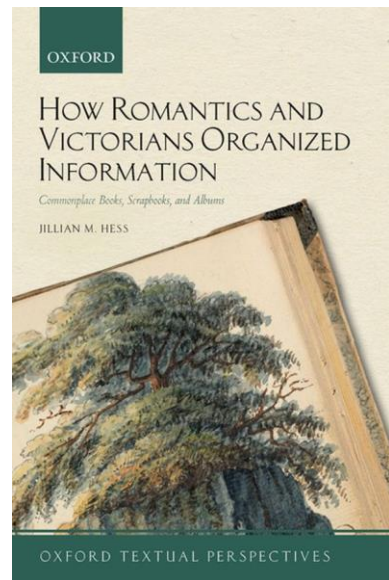
reads

*How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information:
Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums*

by Jillian M. Hess¹

COMMONPLACE BOOKS, SCRAPBOOKS, AND ALBUMS have been the objects of exciting research in the last two decades, picked up and pored over by some of our most talented scholars. In the hands of historian David Allan, commonplace books—a longstanding catch-all term for a variety of manuscript notebooks, but typically understood as a collection of quotations from other works—are central evidence in the history of reading, providing records of how acts of reading were negotiated and even, perhaps, sites where we can witness ‘the meetings of minds that often occurred, on the disputed territory formed by the text, between its author and a single known reader’.² Scrapbooks—another flexible term used commonly to describe collections of drawings, prints, and, later, clippings of newspapers and other mass-produced print—in the hands of literary scholar Ellen Gruber Garvey demonstrate how nineteenth-century readers managed the overwhelming proliferation of cheap, disposable printed material in their world by treating it as detachable bits of text and image that could be reconfigured and thereby revalued in cut-and-paste activities best described as ‘writing with scissors’.³ Albums—keepsake books to which solicited friends and family contribute signatures, poems, mottos, or sketches—in the hands of Samantha Matthews or Lindsey Eckert reveal the ubiquity of a supposedly minor and private poetic form, album verse, that offers, for Matthews, a ‘shadow-history of Romantic poetics’ or enables, in Eckert’s phrase, a ‘Book Historical poetics that recognizes how materiality shapes poetry and its historical reception’.⁴

This is reflexive work that examines the material culture structuring literary experience and shaping how writers and readers understand what they



¹ Jillian M. Hess, *How the Romantics and Victorians Organized Information: Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

² David Allan, *Commonplace Books and Reading in Georgian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 19 & 20.

³ Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ Samantha Matthews, *Album Verses and Romantic Literary Culture: Poetry, Manuscript, Print, 1780–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6; Lindsey Eckert, ‘Reading Lyric’s Form: The Written Hand in Albums and Literary Annuals’, *ELH* 85.4 (2018): 974 (973–97).

are doing when they pick up a pen or open a book. But this interest in commonplace-book traditions and historical album culture is also part of a larger turn in literary studies away from what Tom Mole has called ‘punctual historicism’—the privileging of the context of composition or first publication as the most important for understanding a literary text—and toward the contexts of reading and reception, a turn that ultimately challenges our long-standing conceptions of writing and reading, writer and reader as distinct activities and roles separated by time, place, and function.⁵ As Mai-Lin Cheng has noted, commonplacing is ‘a kind of writing that belongs principally to the culture of reading’.⁶

Surely this growing interest in the writing of readers is prompted by a need to make sense of our own participatory media culture where, thanks to the bidirectionality of the internet, reading and writing happen nearly simultaneously and with the same tool in a constant but ephemeral recirculation of texts and images. Scholars studying commonplace books and other manuscript notebooks are not simply looking for historical antecedents to our current ways of inhabiting an ‘information age’ where there is always ‘too much to know’ and ‘too much to read’, although that is, indeed, an impulse driving some of the most important work in this field.⁷ The best of this work borrows from contemporary media concepts to interrogate our historical assumptions about the boundaries between writers, readers, and books, rethinking the book as a “conditional document” whose identity is unstable and distributed’, and redescribing the relationships between writers, books, and readers, between published books and manuscript notebooks as less linear and sequential and more open-ended, collaborative, and fluid.⁸ The best of this work also finds in the historical practices they describe new ways to think about our present media culture and new resources with which to reflect on our own scholarly methods and tools.⁹

Jillian Hess joins this impressive field with an ambitious monograph. *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information: Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums* is published in the *Oxford Textual Perspectives* series, an English literary studies series edited by Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker that promises ‘informative and provocative studies focused on texts . . . and the technologies, cultures, and communities that produce, inform, and receive them’. In lucid,

⁵ Tom Mole, *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artifacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 21; see also William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ Mai-Lin Cheng, ‘Domestic Extracts’, *SiR* 60.4 (Winter 2021): 468 (467–85).

⁷ See Ann M. Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁸ Deidre Lynch, ‘Paper Slips: Album, Archiving, Accident’, *SiR* 57.1 (2018): 99 (87–119); Johanna Drucker, ‘Distributed and Conditional Documents: Conceptualizing Bibliographical Alterities’, *MatLit* 2.1 (2014): 12 (11–29); Janice Radway, ‘What’s the Matter with Reception Study? Some Thoughts on the Disciplinary Origins, Conceptual Constraints, and Persistent Viability of a Paradigm’, in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, ed. Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor 327–51 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 336; see also Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ See Andrew M. Stauffer, *Book Traces: Nineteenth-Century Readers and the Future of the Library*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

confident prose, Hess delivers on that promise, touching on a wide range of literary figures and texts—Coleridge, Walter Scott, George Eliot, the Hunt circle, Tennyson—while steadily focusing our attention on the ‘relationship between knowledge formation and technologies for organizing information’. Hess is interested in epistemic frameworks, and she approaches these nineteenth-century texts not as a literary, social, or book historian, but as a self-described ‘media archeologist’ who has combed through over 300 manuscripts to identify and analyze the discursive structures and patterns (the *topoi*) of the commonplacing method, an age-old and ongoing system of information management defined here as ‘a system of collecting quotations and other bits of information for personal use’.

This approach enables Hess’s first major claim: that commonplacing as a practice did not fade away at the end of the Romantic period with the rise of the novel, the spread of literacy, or the ubiquity of cheap printed materials, each of which has been cited as playing a role in the decline of the commonplace tradition. Rather, commonplacing adapted to social and technological developments throughout the nineteenth century by incorporating new tools, formats, reading practices, and epistemic values. John Locke’s influential commonplacing system dominated this notebook practice throughout the eighteenth century, and publishers used the philosopher’s name to sell commonplace books even at the turn of the nineteenth century despite growing frustration with both Locke’s method and Latin index. In 1811 John Taylor and James Hessey offered a pre-formatted commonplace book with a new name, *The Literary Diary; or, Improved Common-Place Book* that included Locke’s index at the same time that it suggested readers might choose *not* to use it and instead record entries in diary form as a daily record of reading. Recognizing that readers had less and less need to transcribe material given the ever-growing availability of cheap books, newspapers, and periodicals over the course of the century, publishers next began to offer commonplace books with new indexing systems for references rather than extracts and new formats for cut-and-pasted scraps of text and illustration. Carefully tracing these developments in her first chapter, ‘Anatomy of the Commonplace’—a chapter that will become my go-to recommendation for students and colleagues seeking a smart, efficient overview of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century commonplacing—Hess argues that commonplace books and scrapbooks should not be treated as distinct traditions. Examining printed, commercial commonplace and scrapbooks for what they reveal about how the Romantics and Victorians thought about and performed commonplacing, Hess carefully traces the emergence of scrapbooks from within commonplace books, showing how they retained older methods and formats to organize both print clippings and handwritten extracts in multi-modal volumes that enact the ‘equivalency of scraps of paper and scraps of thought’.

After this first chapter, the book is divided into two parts: ‘Organizing Ideas’ and ‘Organizing People’. The three chapters of the first part examine what Hess considers ‘three epistemological virtues’—imagination, objectivity,

and empiricism—and trace how these different modes of thinking prompted different organizational methods of commonplacing. The chapter on objectivity, for example, takes up the laboratory commonplace notebooks of Humphry Davy and Michael Faraday to track the century's changing notions of objectivity and what it meant to study science, while the chapter on empiricism moves through the antiquarian collecting practices of Walter Scott, George Eliot, and Shakespearean scholar, James Orchard Halliwell, connecting their individual commonplace and notebook practices to the conceptions of history underlying their literary projects. With careful attention to the manuscript notebooks of these writers, Hess demonstrates how changing epistemic cultures influenced commonplacing's changing forms, as compilers 'abandoned Locke's index in favor of diaristic entries, real-time notes, and material cuttings'.

The two chapters of the second part argue that Romantics and Victorians leveraged the commonplace-book tradition to imagine, represent, and negotiate social relationships. Indebted to scholarship on the sociality of Romantic album culture and featuring a trove of understudied commonplace books associated with the Keats-Hunt circle—collections that belonged to Tom Keats, Richard Woodhouse, Leigh Hunt, and the Leigh sisters (whose coterie included John Hamilton Reynolds, Benjamin Bailey, and James Rice)—Hess shows how commonplace books incorporated elements of albums and were increasingly understood as social sites where people were collected in textual and other bibliographic forms. John Hamilton Reynolds, for example, describes how he can open his commonplace book and turn to the letter 'B', find the excerpts of Byron's verse he has copied, and, 'lo! There he is!—"In his habit as he lives!" There is his low soft voice, like a stormy wind controlled; there is the fine breadth and paleness of his forehead'. With a multitude of wonderful extracts such as this, Hess uncovers how these Romantics understood their reading and writing as thoroughly social and personal activities. For the last chapter of the book, she follows the *topos* of social memory located in metonymic representations of the body—hands, handwriting, strands of hair, graveyard flowers—from the notebooks of the Hunt circle into Tennyson's Butcher's Books: the long, blank books that butchers traditionally used to keep records of their profits and losses and which Tennyson filled with extracts and memories associated with Arthur Henry Hallam as he mourned the loss of his friend and began composing *In Memoriam*. Hess's chapter on the various notebooks of Tennyson and the Tennyson family presents commonplacing as a compositional method for *In Memoriam*—'a poem that assembles a litany of commonplaces drawn from elegy's long history'—and offers new insights into Victorian mourning culture.

These chapter overviews in no way do justice to the richness of Hess's archival discoveries and the strength of her analysis, but I have moved quickly in order to focus at least a little more attention on what I presume will be a central point of interest for readers of *The Coleridge Bulletin*. Coleridge's notebooks are the subject of the book's longest chapter, which anchors the

first section on epistemic virtues and commonplace form. While Hess eschews author and text names in chapter titles throughout the book, her chapter on Coleridge is, nevertheless, the only one devoted to a single writer, and it touches on Coleridge's methods of notetaking throughout his life, from his school-days up to the publication of *Aids to Reflection* and beyond. As readers are surely aware, the twentieth century saw heroic editorial work on Coleridge's vast and disorderly collection of notebooks: Kathleen Coburn published four volumes of *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* between 1957 and 1990, and, after her death, Anthony John Harding published the fifth and final volume in 2002. Seamus Perry also published a selected edition that same year, having already proclaimed Coleridge's notebooks to be the 'undeclared prose masterpiece of the period'. Hess agrees with Perry, but in her own terms, presenting Coleridge's notebooks as 'the most ambitious reckonings with commonplace-book form after Locke'.

Scholars have not typically considered Coleridge's notebooks as commonplace books, but Hess makes a strong case for their reassessment, and not simply because Coleridge, himself, referred to them as such. Placing them within the context of Romantic-era note-taking practices—and not, for example, in the context of Coleridge's biography or the composition of his major works—allows us to witness how Coleridge wrestled the commonplace method into a hybrid form (a combination of diary, travelogue, and memorandum) that fit his understanding of the 'fusive' powers of the imagination working toward synthesis and organic unity. In other words, Coleridge, over a lifetime of notetaking, revised commonplacing into a method that matched Romantic-era theories of mind. Hess finds this happening at the level of the notes, themselves, tracking how Coleridge altered extracts from other writers in the act of copying them out, bending the thoughts of others to his own line of thinking even as his thinking accommodated the thoughts and words of others. 'In the service of knowledge production', Hess notes, 'Coleridge rarely transcribes without modifying', a practice that made him vulnerable to charges of plagiarism when he later mined his notebooks for published compositions. Ultimately Hess argues that Coleridge's notebooks demonstrate his understanding of reading as an act of writing and work to dissolve the boundaries between reader and writer, a conception of media and knowledge formation that seems surprisingly close to our own.

Readers more interested in Coleridge the poet, philosopher, or writer than in Coleridge as a 'great theorist of the commonplace' will, nevertheless, find much of interest in this chapter and will surely appreciate the expertly guided tour through Coleridge's collection of notebooks. Readers interested in book history, media archeology, the material cultures of reading, and the evolution of the commonplace tradition over the course of the nineteenth century will return to this book over and over again.