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Material Cultures 2010 proposal

Memorial Genres:
Commonplace Books and Poetry Anthologies in 19th-century New England

The history of the commonplace book, a collection of excerpts from longer works compiled by a reader for personal use, began with classical rhetoric and continued through the Renaissance. By the 18th century, the commonplace book tradition had reached the United States via the educational practices of early American colonists. Readers in 18th- and 19th-century America collected commonplaces not only as aids to study, but also for leisure reading; the commonplace book in the United States overlapped with similar formats such as the diary, the scrapbook, and the autograph album.

In this paper, I will examine 19th-century American commonplace books of poetry, focusing on New England. I will explore the commonplace book's intersections with a closely related print genre, the verse anthology. Anthologies had several purposes during this period: to provide material for public recitation, to gather samples of favorite works, and (increasingly, from the 18th century onward) to establish a sense of British and American literary history. I will argue that the commonplace book and the anthology in this period share a memorial function, whether the aim was public recitation or private reading. I will also argue that manuscript commonplace books and printed anthologies influenced and reflected each other's features. Readers who assembled commonplace books sometimes planned their collections to resemble print anthologies, including illustrations and navigational elements such as tables of contents and indices of first lines. A number of print anthologies from this period, in turn, resemble commonplace books in their topical organization, their mixture of prose with verse, and their use of short quotations rather than entire poems. These two interconnected genres highlight the importance of the concept of memory within the reading culture of the period, and bring to light readers' tastes and habits at a time when poetry found a widespread audience.