The Commonplace Book

Your final project for the class will be the culmination of a series of regular, and primarily self-monitored close reading exercises that you will work on over the course of the entire semester. 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.

This assignment is intended to build upon your understanding of “How to Read like a Renaissance Reader” (detailed for us by Dr. Adam Hooks) and to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate that you have done so over the course of the semester. As you have learned from this and other assigned reading, early modern readers (a group that includes readers in Shakespeare’s time) would take the portions of text from their reading and copy them into Commonplace Books for easy access and remembrance. Dr. Alan Jacobs has compared these books usefully to the Tumblrs that abound on the Web now; we might also envision them as an early (and somewhat more private) form of what we now see on Pinterest.

Of course, English 115 carries the LT designation, and so, for the purposes of this assignment, your Commonplace Books must involve academic writing—and more of it than what we typically see on Pinterest or Tumblr pages. Moreover, just as your own book will be somewhat distinct from these newfangled examples of common-placing, it will also require some important modifications to the early modern conventional practice of common-placing.

First, early commonplace books typically contain works by multiple authors, often assembled with no attribution or identification, and relayed without commentary or extensive justification. Your commonplace book should contain only works by Shakespeare or attributed to him (identified according to MLA documentation style), and, for the most part, should include only works assigned in this course. Additionally, the readers who compiled early commonplace books also copied quotations from texts by hand, whereas your modern versions may contain quotations compiled in an electronic environment, and your paragraph(s) of commentary on them **must be typed**.
Another difference between your project and the early modern commonplace book will stem from the distinct objectives I am setting before you. 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.”

Additionally, the fact that these books sometimes include miscellaneous and trivial notes suggests that those who compiled such books were not making a concerted effort to keep the material within organized for the consumption of others, whereas you are producing your own book as a record of your reading for my assessment. In many cases, early modern readers who kept Commonplace books simply copied passages that struck them as significant at a given moment for reasons they did not see fit to record, transcribing additional passages later which have no obvious relationship to previous ones. Because you will construct your book for an audience other than yourself, and because you are required to write analytical commentary for each passage, you must aim to demonstrate with it that you have been reading with deep engagement and effort throughout the semester. You must, therefore, not only have a rationale for your choices, but also provide an explicit explanation of that rationale in clear prose.

That said, you should not, in fact, begin this project with any specific organizing principle in mind or attempt to impose some artificial notion of cohesion in its entries. Although you may ultimately opt to assemble passages that all contain, for instance, a particular device, or that rely on different valences of single word, you should generally try to avoid selecting multiple passages based on narrow criteria or an interest in specific themes.

Although you may link the passages’ particular elements to thematic or conceptual resonances to organize your passages in the final version of your book, your discursive observations about the passages within should not be solely focused on “big-picture” aspects. You’ll have many opportunities to write about themes in other work you complete for this class; for this assignment, your objective is to consider a variety of instances that showcase Shakespeare’s use of language—his deployment of devices and images, and the ways in which he structures words and ideas within a line or set of lines.

The book you create should not have any organizing principle beyond the following:

- your book should contain passages from every assigned play and from at least two of the assigned poems;
- your chosen passages and commentary should demonstrate that you are able to correctly identify a wide variety of literary devices and that you can recognize and “unpack” complex metaphors, conceits, and motifs, as well as the images, ideas, and meanings they construct.
- your chosen passages should show that you have thought about the assigned works independently, and that you are not relying solely on class discussions and others’ insights to develop your own set of insights.
The Process
From each text we read as a class, then, you should select passages that you find noteworthy for their formal and aesthetic features as well as their content. Write brief explanations in your margins or in a notebook that keep track what you find as you read, but continue to compile, reassemble, and review what you’ve added as you read more works. The content of your commonplace book should not simply replicate discussions from class meetings, though you may expand upon those conversations or use them as a point of departure in some cases. The best responses to the assignment, however, will attend to passages from the assigned reading that we did not discuss in class or address in exam questions or on quizzes.

Sometime around our scheduled spring break, you can begin to contemplate what you’ve got with a more specific purpose in mind, surveying your choices for patterns or remarkable distinctions in Shakespeare’s language that you believe might be worth exploring further. What do I mean by “exploring further”? For one thing, I mean that you should return to a passage’s original context and see if you read it differently or notice something new once you’ve read multiple works by Shakespeare for our class. Additionally, you might look at the works assigned towards the end of the course to find other instances of the same phenomenon. You may wish to enhance your understanding of your passages with the aid of electronic tools (such as the OED, online concordances, Wordle or Voyant, all of which we will use in class exercises and are linked to our course Blackboard site).

In the last three weeks of our course, you will finalize its contents and construction in the form that you find most useful or appropriate to its contents. You may use screen shots, pictures of handwritten notes, and images from texts, in addition to quotations you have retyped; keep in mind, however, that I can only appreciate and assess content that I am able to see clearly or read. Along the same lines, you may assemble your book by hand or in applications other than word processing programs. But please be mindful that whether you compose your chosen passages “old-school,” in a hard-copy diary of sorts, or on the web as a blog, Tumblr, or Pinterest page, you must also submit your discursive commentary (analytical paragraphs) as a carefully edited and proof-read text (.doc or .rtf) or PDF file to Turnitin, via a link on Blackboard.

Once you have decided on the specific passages you would like to appear in the final version of your commonplace book, you can begin drafting your book’s accompanying analysis. Think of this portion of the assignment as an introduction and conclusion to the book. In some ways, it is the most important part of the assignment because these 2.5–3 pages will function as a guide to your book’s and provide a sense of what the passages individually and collectively illuminate about Shakespeare’s literary style. Avoid making broad and evaluative claims and try instead to make narrow and concrete claims about how (not how well) his language works. For example, rather than claim “The complex uses of devices makes clear that Shakespeare is the best writer of his time,” try “Two of these passages demonstrate Shakespeare’s use of anaphora and antithesis to structure characters’ implicit critiques of figures in power; they allow us to see how he deploys repetition in different forms in order to underscore the worst consequences of tyranny.”

To ensure that you are working steadily on this project as you read each work, I may periodically announce upcoming dates in which I will review your progress. These reports will require that
you have a way to access to your commonplace-book-in-progress in class. I am also happy to discuss your progress on the project in more detail during office hours at any point.

Prior to the submission of the final version, you will post a short description of your book as you intend to complete it on a special discussion forum on Blackboard; in this post, you will offer in brief some of the facets of language you have discovered by way of your chosen passages, and raise any questions or concerns you have about the work that remains.

Please listen for more information about the submission deadline for this project as the semester progresses, and please note that it does not take the place of a final exam for the course.

**Once more, the Basics**

- A Commonplace book consisting of passages chosen from 11 weeks of assigned reading, with examples from all plays and at least 2 poems. The lengths of passages and the forms in which you present them will vary.
- A paragraph or two of analysis for each passage, contextualizing the passage briefly, but focused primarily on the devices, form, and/or structure. This commentary may be included within the book itself alongside or following each passage, or may be offered separately; in either case, however, the commentary should be in a form you can submit to Turnitin via Blackboard.
- A 2.5-3 page analysis to accompany the entire book that describes its contents collectively; offers observations about the passages and their insights into Shakespeare’s use of language in his early career; and reflects upon your reading practices and how they have changed as the semester progressed.