The Materiality of Reading: A Victorian Woman's Commonplace Book

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The Materiality of Reading: A Victorian Woman's Commonplace Book

Abstract
Essay on a 19th century woman's reading diary

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The Materiality of Reading: A Victorian Woman’s Commonplace Book
This little notebook, covered in marbled paper, was clearly well-used. It once belonged to a young woman named Adelaide Horatia Elizabeth Seymour and is now UPenn Ms. Codex 1757. While the notebook itself is common, its contents provide a fascinating look at Victorian reading practices, consisting of “Extracts from Novels etc.” which Adelaide read over a period of three years, between 2 September 1848 and 26 October 1851. It is a manuscript commonplace book, in which she copied out sentences, paragraphs, and extended passages from the works she was reading, extracts which clearly must have struck her as useful or important for what they had to say about good and evil, life, death, and love. Her reading material is primarily fiction, mainly contemporary novels written by women, though the notebook also contains entries from earlier novels such as Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* and Madame de Staël-Holstein’s *Corinne, ou L’Italie*, along with a handful of non-fiction works. While most of her reading material is in English, some novels, like *Corinne*, were read in French.

Adelaide Horatia Elizabeth Seymour (27 January 1825- 29 October 1877) was the daughter of Colonel Sir Horace Beauchamp Seymour (1791-1851), a member of Parliament from 1819 until his death, and his first wife Elizabeth Malet Palk. She was the second wife (married 9 August 1854) of Vice-Admiral Frederick Spencer, 4th Earl Spencer (1798–1857), making her Countess Spencer, and bore him two children, a daughter, Victoria Alexandrina, and a son. Her son, Charles Robert Spencer, 6th Earl Spencer (1857–1922), was the great-grandfather of Diana, Princess of Wales, making Adelaide Diana’s great-
grandmother. That makes her the great-great-grandmother of Prince William and the great-great-great-grandmother of William's son, Prince George.

Adelaide was twenty-three when she began this commonplace book. The last entry is from 1851, three years before her marriage. During this period she travelled regularly, and the entries often mention the locations where she is staying when she copies them out. These include Stoke, Hampton Court, Cowes, Torquay, and London. She often includes the volume for a multi-volume work and sometimes the page number as well.

Clearly this is the reading of a well-connected young lady with time on her hands. Given the amount of contemporary literature that she was reading, one wonders how she gained access to the books. Was it through book shop purchases, loans from friends she was visiting, or from one or more circulating libraries? Perhaps a mix of all three. The dated excerpts are in chronological order, except for the period between April and August 1850, when the dates of the extracts go from July to April to August to July, and then back to August. This commonplace book appears to be a fair copy, and Adelaide may well have written the excerpts on separate sheets of paper, only to copy them into her
The excerpts are from the following novels, in order of their appearance in the notebook, with the date of their first publication. Fourteen of the eighteen are by women, and nine of the novels were first published during the same three-year period that this commonplace book received its entries:

1. Emily Charlotte Mary Ponsonby (1817-1877), *The Discipline of Life: Isabel Denison* (1848)
2. Elizabeth Missing Sewell (1815-1906), *Amy Herbert* (1844)
3. Harriet Lister Cradock, Hon. (fl. 1834-1881), *Anne Grey: A Novel* (1834)
4. Elizabeth Caroline Grey (1798-1869), *The Rectory Guest* (1849)
5. Barbara Hoffland (1770-1834), *Self-Denial: A Tale* (1827)
6. William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), *The History of Pendennis: His Fortunes and Misfortunes, His Friends and His Greatest Enemy* (1848-1850)
7. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), *Shirley: A Tale* (1849)
8. Anne Louise Germaine de Staël-Holstein (1766-1817), *Corinne, ou, L’Italie* (1807) [extracts in French]
10. Gore (Catherine Grace Frances) (1799-1861), *The Débutante; Or, The London Season* (1846)
12. Elizabeth Caroline Grey (1798-1869), *Aline, An Old Friend's Story* (1848)
13. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), *Waverley* (1814)
15. Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1846) [extract in French]
17. Dinah Maria Mulock Craik (1826-1887), *The Ogilvies: A Novel* (1849)

Some continue to be read today, like Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley*, while others like *The Rectory Guest* and *The Maiden Aunt* are nowadays little known, let alone read.

Adelaide is clearly reading novels not just for plot, but more importantly for the insights they provide into the human condition. Novels were a place in which religious, philosophical, and moral conundrums could be explored by female authors as well as male and the thoughts generated by their exploration made available to readers of both genders in an acceptable vehicle. The following are some short examples of what she was extracting from these novels:
From Amy Herbert: "Feelings are like the horses which carry us quickly & easily along the road, only sometimes they stumble, & Sometimes they go wrong, & now & then they will not move at all: but duty is like the coachman who guides them, & spurs them up when they are too slow, & brings them back when they go out of the way."

From the second volume of *Shirley* (noted as being on page 208 in the edition she was reading): "Most people have had a period or periods in their lives when they have felt thus forsaken; when having long hoped against hope, and still seen the day of fruition deferred."

From *Agnes Grey* (volume 3): "There are moments when we feel the want of a comforter, of some one to whom we can confide, our feelings, our sorrows, our hopes. Yes, our hopes!"

Many of the non-fiction entries in this volume are similar in nature to her entries from novels, dealing with religious and moral issues, while the others, like the list of Saxon words and the endings for French letters, were clearly noted for other reasons:

Extract from Hannah Mary Rathbone (1798-1878), *Some Further Portions of the Diary of Lady Willoughby: Which Do Relate to her Domestic History and to the Events of the latter Years of the Reign of King Charles the First, the Protectorate and the Restoration* (1848)

“Epitaph in Harrow Church Yard,” which Seymour writes was "sent to me by Althorp after seeing it at Harrow, October 1849” [Note: Althorp is the name of a home and estate held by the Spencer family for over 500 years. Moreover, John Poyntz Spencer (1835-1910), the 5th Earl Spencer, was known as Viscount Althorp from 1845 to 1857, when his father died. He was educated at Harrow and would have been there in 1849 (age 14 when he sent her a copy of this epitaph for a slightly older student), which explains this entry in the commonplace book. Clearly Seymour would have known the family, including the children of her husband’s first wife, Georgiana Poyntz, who died in 1851.]

A list of “Saxon words and their English significations”

“Prologue spoke by Mr. Frederic, and written by the Lady Rachel Russell before the Play of “Who Speaks First” acted at Braddon’s Tor, March 5th, 1850” [Note: Lady Rachel Evelyn Russell (1826-1898), third daughter of John Russell, sixth Duke of Bedford, married James Wandesford Butler in 1856. She was likely a friend of Seymour’s, as they were close in age and both readers, as this portrait of Russell clearly demonstrates.]
A passage "from Julia Ponsonby" which shows up in Etienne de Jouy, L’Hermite La Guiane (1816) and is reprinted later on in Lady Sarah Davison Nicolas, The Cairn: A Gathering of Precious Stones from Many Hands (1849), probably the source for it here.

Six extracts supplied by Louisa Hardy [a friend?] in 1851

1. These words appears to be from Sarah Lewis, Woman’s Mission (1st 1839), which went through numerous editions into the 1850s. Parts of it were often reprinted in the newspapers and magazines of the day.

2. The second is attributed to “Rev’d R Cecil’s letters”—it is from a letter by the Rev. Richard Cecil to his wife, printed in The Works of the Rev. Richard Cecil (1st, 1811).


4. This is attributed to Massillon, “On the small number who will be saved” and appears to be from an English translation of a sermon by the French Catholic bishop Jean-Baptiste Massillon (1663-1742).

5. "Fragment de letter du Pere Lacordaire” is presumably from a work by the Dominican Jean-Baptiste-Henri Lacordaire (1802 – 1861). [extract in French]

6. She here quotes four lines, beginning with “L’avenir, c’est le but! l’avenir, c’est la vie!”, are from the poem "Une course au Champs de Mars” by Sophie d’Arbouville (1810-1850) [extract in French]

A list of “Endings for French Letters”

This little notebook will surely be of interest to those studying women’s reading practices of the nineteenth century. In the future, we will contribute information about Adelaide and her commonplace book to the Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945 (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/).
Brontë, Scott, Thackeray – this thing is gold! I want to see it. I’ll be in touch!
Thanks, interesting summary and great insight into the excerpts.

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