

COMMONPLACE BOOKS  
AND READING IN  
GEORGIAN ENGLAND

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CHAPTER 2

*‘Many Sketches & scraps of Sentiments’: what  
is a commonplace book?*

I am now in the Country, and employ most of my Time in reading,  
or thinking upon what I have read. Your Paper comes constantly  
down to me, and it affects me so much, that I find my Thoughts run  
into your Way ...

*The Spectator*, 2 September 1712

It is easy enough to see why the task of repeatedly ‘thinking upon what I have read’ – as one of *The Spectator*’s contributors excitedly described his own bookish meditations – appeared quite so necessary and so beneficial to early eighteenth-century people.<sup>1</sup> For it seemed merely a natural corollary of the far-reaching consequences of reading that close attention should indeed be given to each and every aspect of their own experiences with texts. This unwavering conviction, however, never led to what often resulted, usually but not always described by English contemporaries as ‘commonplace books’, taking a consistent physical form. Nor for that matter did near-universal acceptance of reading’s transformational role inspire a broad consensus among either theorists or ordinary readers as to the precise purposes for which structured note-taking might be undertaken. Most intriguingly, continuing disagreement about what a commonplace book was *for*, and so necessarily about how it ought actually to look, seems to have arisen because, with critical consequences for how it eventually came to be approached in the Georgian period, commonplacing, as we shall find in succeeding chapters, had already enjoyed a history almost as long as it was convoluted.

It is important to appreciate in the first instance that the formal English designation ‘commonplace book’, as familiar to Addison as it was to his innumerable readers, was itself far from straightforward. Indeed, it was frequently employed with gratuitous imprecision – something to be freely

<sup>1</sup> *The Spectator*, 2 September 1712.

appropriated, it seems, by ambitious readers bent on ennobling their own private note-taking by associating it with a well-established and much-respected tradition of formally introspective composition. As we shall see, moreover, commonplacing's prestigious ancient roots only made it even more likely that Georgian men and women would want to hitch themselves to its familiar coat tails, thereby making themselves appear – something that in polite English society was an obsessive pursuit for many – as refined and as cultivated as possible. After all, the label 'commonplace book' was no original coinage, newly minted in Augustan civilisation. And even before 1700, the same name had increasingly been assigned to a bewildering variety of different handwritten productions. Accordingly, as Cameron Louis has argued, it had long served as little more than a 'catch-all for any MS of a miscellaneous nature', invoked by default to describe variegated compositions for which 'there appears to be no satisfactory alternative term'.<sup>2</sup>

Modern archivists have, however, been equally guilty of inaccuracy – and probably also of some wishful thinking. For all too frequently they have allowed manuscript notes to be catalogued as 'commonplace books', regardless of their connection with the serious business of reading. As a result, promising titles like the 'commonplace book of Abraham Balme', for an artefact from the West Riding of Yorkshire which amounts only to a record of duties performed and monies handled by an estate steward, or the 'commonplace book' of Samuel Stonham of Beckley in Sussex, again dominated by the severely pragmatic concerns of land management, often in practice tell us nothing useful about their authors as consumers of literature, much less as thoughtful analysts of what they had read.<sup>3</sup> Even a more plausible candidate like the document belonging to Sir Edward Bayntun, which certainly does include some reading-related content, can raise similar classificatory issues. This fascinating manuscript, reports its modern editor, is actually 'not a commonplace book in the accepted sense; few of the entries are extracts from works of literature or scholarship'. Rather it comprises a generic mish-mash, a 'mixture of *aide-mémoire*, precedent book, and record of events of personal significance ...'.<sup>4</sup>

A further definitional problem, effectively the inverse of the first, also needs to be borne in mind. For if not every document so described by its creator, or which has since been catalogued in this way, is really a 'commonplace book' in the orthodox sense, then not every composition that reflects directly upon a person's relationship with other texts was, or has

subsequently been, given this particular designation. Needless to say, this too is a significant hindrance to the prospective historian of commonplacing. In particular, it complicates the task of identifying relevant materials in the first place, using the customary methods of the archival researcher, like the trawling of online library catalogues and the surveying of collection-level hand lists and document inventories.<sup>5</sup> This in turn, of course, makes it hopelessly unrealistic for us to expect to piece together a comprehensive body of evidence for the history of the English commonplace book during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries simply by working systematically through the standard finding aids and other familiar bibliographical tools.

The sheer elusiveness of the Georgian commonplace book is seen most clearly if we look at how manuscript notebooks that were obviously indebted to earlier traditions of commonplacing, and which certainly do relate directly to their owners' reading, were actually labelled by contemporaries. One strategy, not surprisingly, was to circumvent this problem entirely by saddling the finished article with an equivalent or near equivalent Latin name – an understandable reflex among individuals closely acquainted with ancient literature. This impulse explains the anonymous 'Adversaria' (another somewhat imprecise term, originally connoting a diary, or day-book, but also a record and analysis of a text) that on closer inspection turns out to be a late eighteenth-century commonplace book now constituting Osborn Shelves c.390 at Yale.<sup>6</sup> 'Liber selectorum' betrays similar naming preferences, this time the invention of Benjamin Rush, future American revolutionary but at this time a school pupil in that outpost of anglophone literary culture, Nottingham, Maryland: meaning 'book of selections', Rush's title clearly emphasises content over function.<sup>7</sup> Comparable assumptions were presumably what led the Wiltshire parson Revd John Bowle – 'a clergyman down in the country', gossiped Boswell, who has probably more Spanish learning than any Spaniard – to dignify his own textual gleanings with the alternative (and again, strictly speaking, not inexact) classical title 'Liber memorandum et referentiarum'.<sup>8</sup> The direct English equivalent, although much is certainly lost in translation, would be something like 'book of notes and references'.

Latin, however, was not the only source of synonyms or near synonyms, employed with varying degrees of exactitude, which individual

<sup>2</sup> Reynes, *Commonplace Book*, pp. 100–1.

<sup>3</sup> Bradford: West Yorkshire AS: DBI/C6; Lewes: East Sussex RO: AMS 6333.

<sup>4</sup> Bayntun, *Commonplace Book*, pp. xi, xv.

<sup>5</sup> On the ambiguities of nomenclature, see Beal, 'Notions', esp. pp. 132–3.

<sup>6</sup> Beinecke: Osborn Shelves c.390, pp. 1, 21, 43–4.

<sup>7</sup> Rush, *Autobiography*, p. 36. The commonplace book is at pp. 171–360.

<sup>8</sup> BL: Add. MS. 21667; Boswell, *Defence*, p. 61.

readers alighted upon to describe what they were creating. Many, indeed, moved in the opposite direction to Bowle and Rush, disdaining to embrace remote antiquity and opting instead for solidly descriptive titles drawn from everyday vocabulary. Around 1830 Charles Curwen, a young Cumberland gentleman (into whose family Wordsworth's son John married), compiled two volumes called simply 'copy books of poetry and verse in French and English', undoubtedly commonplace books in everything but name.<sup>9</sup> Sixty years earlier an anonymous reader created another commonplace book, now Huntington Library BR 704, which bears the equally straightforward title 'Notes and references to Books', almost matching the more sophisticated-sounding Latin label fashioned by Revd Bowle.<sup>10</sup> Equivalent documents, all recording reading experiences, were manufactured by the Throckmortons in Warwickshire, where an 'Extract of Writings', specifically including 'Bons Mots', was compiled by at least one family member, as well as by the Husseys of Scotney in Kent, one of whose notebooks was accorded the supremely functional title 'Extracts from Various Authors'.<sup>11</sup>

Vernacular strategies for defining and describing commonplace books in other terms, however, were not necessarily without complication. Revd James Ashton of Great Tew in Oxfordshire, for example, manufactured a substantial record of his own reading, which, somewhat grandiloquently, he elected to call 'Mentor, or The True Guide to Wisdom'.<sup>12</sup> The slightly more exuberant 'Effusions of Fancy and Fun' was the appellation favoured by Joseph Gulston, wit, connoisseur, bibliophile and MP: again, there can be little doubt that it was in practice simply a commonplace book.<sup>13</sup> For his part William Congreve, a Staffordshire squire, conjured up the attractively self-deprecating words 'private rubbish of sorts' to encapsulate the emerging record of his own experiences with books.<sup>14</sup> Stephen Simpson, a Coventry weaver in the 1770s, also seems to have had a well-developed sense of humour, coining the marvellously self-effacing title 'a choice Farrago of new Poems'.<sup>15</sup> Hester Thrale, meanwhile, later Mrs Piozzi, added to the cover of one of her own commonplace books the thoroughly cryptic label 'Minced Meat for Pyes', implying, perhaps, that it contained nutritious material taken down from her reading in order to fill

<sup>9</sup> Whitehaven: Cumbria RO: D/CU/1/18; Moorman, *Wordsworth*, vol. 11, p. 346; Curwen, *History*, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> Huntington: BR 704.

<sup>11</sup> Warwick: Warwickshire County RO: CR1998/LV/Ba; Maidstone: U1776 Z16.

<sup>12</sup> Beinecke: Osborn Shelves c.131.

<sup>13</sup> Walpole: 'The Effusions of Fancy and Fun Compiled by Joseph Gulston, 1784'.

<sup>14</sup> Stafford: D1057/014. <sup>15</sup> Beinecke: Osborn Shelves c.561.

out – might one even say stuff? – her own subsequent writing and literary conversation.<sup>16</sup>

Naming protocols for commonplace books, then, were delightfully inconsistent and not always particularly illuminating. Yet their visual appearance was, if anything, less uniform still. At one extreme lay so-called 'commonplace books' that were actually printed texts in their own right, a piratical usage hinting at a published work that sought to arrogate unto itself some of the essential practical functions ordinarily reserved for manuscript commonplacing. A good example was *The Lounger's Common-Place Book* (1792) by the medical writer Jeremiah Whitaker Newman, a compendium of literary and topical anecdotes whose label also deliberately echoed *The Lounger* (1785–7), Henry Mackenzie's popular vehicle for miscellaneous essays. As Newman explained, candidly acknowledging the derivative nature of the commonplac'er's art – which, reduced to a gathering of excerpts, published or not, was always necessarily parasitic upon other people's creativity – 'This work, though not entirely a compilation, has very few pretensions to originality, yet it is a help for an idle or a forgetful man, who lolls his mornings on sofas, in Hyde Park, the Coffee House, the Fruit Shop, or St James's Street ...'.<sup>17</sup>

Even where it was indeed a manuscript composition, however, the Georgian commonplace book was not in practice restricted to copying out evidence of reading. In fact, particularly after around 1800, constant exposure to cheap newsprint was encouraging some readers to rethink commonplacing entirely, and to see it as the process of compiling not a collection of handwritten transcriptions but a scrapbook of original cuttings from printed sources. Anne Wickham, for example, a Hampshire lady, accumulated a commonplace book that contained many clippings from the newspapers.<sup>18</sup> Mary Madan, too, wife of a Bishop of Peterborough, actually formed a collection of printed cuttings, now in the Bodleian Library, in which all of the reading-related interests that had come to characterise her commonplacing could be pursued using a needle, a pair of scissors and some glue, without her even needing to raise her own pen in anger.<sup>19</sup>

Houghton: MS Eng 23 (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library); Piozzi, *Marginalia*, pp. 75–140. The inspiration for this title is characteristically literary, for it was Pope who, in Book IV of *The Dunciad*, poked fun at Johannes Stobaeus, the Macedonian scholar and anthologist, for giving 'his Common-Place Book to the public, where we happen to find much Minced-meat of old books'; Pope, *Poems*, p. 778. [Whitaker], *Lounger's*, vol. 1, p. iii. <sup>18</sup> Winchester: Hampshire RO: 18M49/A4/17. Oxford: Bodleian Library: MS Eng. poet. 51.

Creative dexterity with graphic implements in hand nevertheless remained the practical cornerstone of virtually all commonplacing. It was this that led to a significant number of Georgian commonplace books in which textual extracts, the genre's traditional staple, were supplemented or even partially supplanted by sketches, illustrations and caricatures – like the striking ones produced by John Eagles, the Bristol artist, and by the Norfolk squire Robert Rising, both of them in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> Such confections, displaying a different but complementary set of compositional skills, also occupied readers who were mainly still interested in transcribing texts. Anthony Bertolacci, for instance, a colonial administrator of Corsican birth, included in his commonplace book a beautiful watercolour of a woman clad in blue.<sup>21</sup> A relation of the hydrographer Sir Francis Beaufort also preserved several careful watercolour sketches of his or her own. Dating from the early nineteenth century, these included such fetching efforts as 'A Greenlander catching scald', depicting a black boat with a blue-coated rower using red oars and wielding a pencil-grey fishing spear, and 'A Negro Lady', a sketch drawn in pencil only, the figure clad in a check shawl, a voluminous skirt and eccentric headwear.<sup>22</sup>

In the reassuring privacy of one's own commonplace book, ribald humour also sometimes seemed permissible – not least where pictorial material could again play a part. Samuel Shaen, for example, an Essex lawyer, drew a whole series of pencil and ink caricatures around 1815, mainly of contemporary legal and military personnel, clearly for his own amusement.<sup>23</sup> Antiquarianism, an even more popular focus for Georgian readers, could also trigger an urge to sketch. This was certainly true of the Shropshire antiquary David Parkes, who after 1800 drew many scenes from the neighbouring Welsh Marches – Rodney's Pillar, Buildwas Abbey and the Pillar of Eliseg among them.<sup>24</sup> Botany and natural history, another traditional interest for more scholarly readers, likewise stimulated artistic endeavour, as with John Covell, Master of Christ's College, Cambridge from 1688, who filled his commonplace book with splendid ink-line sketches of flowers and other plants whose distinguishing characteristics he carefully noted in Latin or in English.<sup>25</sup>

Such preoccupations could easily be pursued by intelligent application of visual devices to complement the orthodox effects of copied-out text.

<sup>20</sup> Bristol RO: 41213/L/2/1; Norwich: Norfolk RO: COL/2/84.

<sup>21</sup> BL: Add. MS. 58083, fo. 40<sup>v</sup>. <sup>22</sup> Huntington: FB 1730, pp. 4, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Chelmsford: Essex RO: D/DU 139/1/7.

<sup>24</sup> Houghton: MS Eng 1168 (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library), pp. 1–11, 12–19, 53–6.

<sup>25</sup> BL: Add. MS. 57495.

John Ayers, a customs official at Stockton upon Tees, included in his late eighteenth-century commonplace book a drawing of a newly excavated Roman altar at Doncaster.<sup>26</sup> Robert Chaplin, who lived at Hapton in Norfolk in mid-century, shared interests with both Covell and Ayers. A keen naturalist, he recorded what he had observed on his travels across England as well as what he saw on his own property: his commonplace book soon acquired descriptions of apple and peach trees, an account of petrified stones (he found one 'on the Shore of the Humber beyond Hull in Yorkshire, AD 1742', and made several drawings), and a rare East Anglian sighting of the aurora borealis on 23 January 1750 ('stared at & admird here at Hapton, on account of the fix'd position, vivacity of the colour, uniformity & largeness of the Rays...').<sup>27</sup> Like David Parkes, he was also fascinated by antiquities, copying out technical descriptions of local sites and accompanying them with hand-drawn diagrams: Spelman, for example, 'in his Icenia has a very concise & pretty account ...', he added, when transcribing a plan and description of Buckenham castle.<sup>28</sup>

Commonplace books also differed markedly in the purposes for which they were created. Certainly they were not always meant for the exclusive use of those who made them. Some were clearly manufactured as gifts – usually for inexperienced juveniles and other potentially vulnerable dependants. Anne Burlingham, for example, a Warwickshire lady, gave her cousin Lucy Westcombe a commonplace book in 1827, whilst Robert Beere, a mid-eighteenth-century Northamptonshire gentleman, presented one to his wife, even adding the inscription 'Ann Beere Her Book' inside the front cover, just to make the point explicit.<sup>29</sup> More intriguing is a commonplace book compiled around 1749–50 by Melisinda Munbee. By her own reckoning, this two-volume collection of elegant poetic transcriptions was the work of someone just 'y<sup>e</sup> age of 5 y<sup>rs</sup> & 5 mo<sup>o</sup>' when she dedicated it lovingly 'to my Honoured Father Valentine Munbee Esq'.<sup>30</sup> This particular document was probably meant to demonstrate to a Suffolk gentleman that his daughter's education was proceeding apace. We might suspect the heavy hand of her mother or a tutor, however, in this otherwise implausibly precocious display of readerly discrimination.

BL: Add. MS. 46466, fos. 34<sup>v</sup>. Ayers was also a supporter of local subscription publication: see Pearson, *Miscellanies*.

<sup>27</sup> BL: MS. 678, pp. 6, 9, 22, 3, 18, 34. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41–2.

Birmingham: City Archives: MS. 1809/5/41; Huntington: HM 106.

Houghton: MS Eng. 268 (1) (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library), title page. I am grateful for discussion of this material with Susan Halpert.

James Dallaway, a Gloucestershire banker in the second half of the eighteenth century, was responsible for a broadly similar offering that travelled in the opposite direction, to his son and namesake, with educational purposes clearly very much in mind. Indeed, we can say this with some confidence because Dallaway went further than either Beere or Munbee and offered an explicit explanation. This confirms the donation's intended role in providing *post mortem* advice, at the same time revealing Dallaway's understanding that commonplacing was an altruistic enterprise precisely because it had such powerful instructive potential:

My Dear Boy, Within these Covers (which will most probably fall into your hands) you will find many Sketches & scraps of Sentiments promiscuously inserted without order or Method, occasionally pen'd down to help a bad Memory. The several subjects are not sufficiently arraigned [sic] to be called a Common-Place-Book, but more properly (to Use a modern word) Fugitive Pieces ...<sup>31</sup>

That Dallaway knew exactly what a commonplace book was for – and, as importantly, intended his son to know it too – is therefore abundantly clear, even as he also highlighted the troubling ambiguity of the customary terminology.

Even more confident about the enduring second-hand value of commonplacing was the redoubtable Hester Thrale, by now Mrs Piozzi. Between 1810 and 1814 she compiled five manuscript volumes called 'Poems on Several Occasions' – a bland moniker that undersold what was actually a rich and diverse collection of reflections, transcriptions and critical evaluations. This, as she explained in the first volume, had been composed with her much-loved adoptive nephew in mind:

Accept Dear Salusbury these collected Trifles, put together to pass Time which glides too slowly in your Absence; & to convince you of my fond Esteem by throwing into your Hands the favour'd Follies of my Youth, join'd here to those you have so often witness'd – as kind Companions to my declining Years. The Book will at least excite one useful Reflexion: that since our Original taste in Amusement never quits us, 'Tis happy when safe and honourable ones are chosen; for if I feel ashamed even of this empty Employment – and at 70 Years of Age confess an Apology necessary for copying out Nonsense never worth much regard; What must become of those who pass in Vicious Pleasures their Sunshine Day, when lengthening Shadows shew it near a Close? That the Friend of my Choice, & the Child of my Soul may by the Providence of God 'scape such Calamity, will be the parting Prayer, and firm Persuasion of

His truly Affectionate Aunt  
Hester Lynch Piozzi<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Chichester: West Sussex RO: Add. MSS 20,187, fo. 2r.

<sup>32</sup> Houghton: MS Eng 1280 (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library), vol. 1, fo. 1r.

Anxiety about how this excess of zeal might appear evidently did not prevent her believing that her labours might yet bring her difficult relationship with her nephew to a somewhat more satisfactory conclusion.

Some commonplace books fell into other people's hands in far less predictable circumstances. One who certainly did foresee this happening was William Babb, who left London for Canada in the early nineteenth century: a remark, written in New Brunswick, suggested simply that 'The whole of these Books with whatever others are in my possession should any thing befall me suddenly are the Property of Isaac Haviland Esquire, Greenwich, King's County.'<sup>33</sup> Other readers, though, had no inkling of what would eventually transpire. Felicia Hemans' commonplace book, for example, later passed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, accompanied by a warm dedication from Hemans' son: 'Mrs Browning, in token of admiration and respect from Charles Hemans, Rome, May 25th 1854.'<sup>34</sup> The actor Henry Edwin Caulfeild, too, cannot have anticipated that his notes would subsequently be used – indeed doted over – by someone else. Transcribed, affectionately and painstakingly, following Caulfeild's untimely death, they consoled his great friend (and, the overwrought tone hints, inconsolable admirer) the novelist Jane Porter: the latter even reminded herself on the fly-leaf of her own copy that the precious original had been 'lent to me by his dear sister, Jessie Aspasia Campbell, in March 1810, at Titnes Cottage, Berks.'<sup>35</sup>

Comparable thoughts also comforted Thomas Brocas junior, son and namesake of a deceased Shropshire Methodist merchant and lay preacher. Brocas added the following words to one of his late father's commonplace books:

This is the Journal or Diary of my late rever'd Father, who departed from us for a better country. 29 Aug<sup>r</sup> 1818 aged 62

I hope the contents will be read and studied by my Children & by my Childrens Children unto remote generations – the Observations are such as will enlighten the understanding & mend the breast tho as my Children will not know the Characters of whom my Father speaks some parts of it will not be so interesting to them as it is to me, as I was personally acquainted with most of the names introduced thro the Book. Tho' Brocas.<sup>36</sup>

Houghton: MS Eng 648F (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library), vol. 1, p. 1. A fly-leaf annotation in the first volume ascribes it to 'Miss Sarah Skellington, 70 So. Markets Court, London', then adjacent to Oxford Street.

<sup>33</sup> Houghton: MS Eng 767 (courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard College Library), fly-leaf. Huntington: POR 1.

<sup>34</sup> Newbury: 549/17, paste-down, Jaggard. 'Thomas Brocas'.

Clearly even the risk of obsolescence could not deter some from regarding a deceased person's commonplace book as an unusually valuable and also sometimes unintended last bequest.

At the other end of the spectrum, far away from those much-lauded artefacts that stimulated pious reflections and expressions of undying gratitude, many ordinary commonplace books continued to be seen in rather more prosaic terms. Some, indeed, were viewed by their owners as little more than convenient *aides-mémoire* – handy receptacles for storing basic information culled either from printed texts or from their creators' own experience. John Blagden Hale of Gloucestershire, and the Lovell family of Cole Park near Malmesbury in Wiltshire, both commonplaced in just this undramatic manner, contriving to establish safe havens in which favourite recipes, which might otherwise have slipped from the memory over time, could be reliably preserved.<sup>37</sup> In this regard it is also highly appropriate that the entirely functional-sounding 'kitchen commonplace book' is the name, clearly connoting the same highly instrumental conception of what commonplacing might be for, that has been used to describe the manuscript notebook of recipes and remedies kept by Elizabeth Serrell of Wells, a practical-minded mid-eighteenth-century Somerset housewife.<sup>38</sup>

Flexibility, then, was exhibited not merely in christening and conceiving of commonplace books but also in the basic purposes to which their owners imagined that they might properly be put. Nevertheless, true commonplace books, for all their endlessly differentiated forms and functions, did have at least one defining feature in almost all cases. This was a discernible relationship with a very much older set of ideas and assumptions about note-taking that revolved specifically around what had come to be known as 'commonplaces'. These pivotal notions in turn had been associated over many centuries, indeed over millennia, with the pre-eminent importance of highly structured and analytical approaches to the consumption of texts. Partly in order to help explain the rich diversity that so obviously characterised commonplacing in its final Georgian manifestation, but also to bring us closer to explaining the protean significance that English contemporaries still accorded to this activity, we need next to turn our attention to these deep-lying historical roots.

<sup>37</sup> Gloucester: Gloucestershire RO: D1086/F112; Trowbridge: Wiltshire and Swindon RO: 161/180.

<sup>38</sup> Serrell, *Recipes*.

### CHAPTER 3

## *A very short history of commonplacing*

Do not commonplaces belong at the very heart of lawsuits?

Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* (c. AD 95)

Despite the inconsistencies and ambiguities that would eventually characterise so much of Georgian practice, it remains beyond dispute that the intellectual origins of commonplacing can be identified with a high degree of precision in Aristotle's groundbreaking works, the source of so much else of lasting significance in Western thought and culture.<sup>1</sup> It was, after all, in his *Topics*, evidently written down around 350 BC, that something called the 'commonplaces' first received serious and sustained consideration. Yet the Greek words that Aristotle chose to employ – *κοινὰ τόποι*, the plural form here being crucial – did not in fact connote a series of copied-out quotations or pieces of one's own favourite reading.<sup>2</sup> Instead they signified a set of logical arguments that the philosopher believed to be vital in the philosophical enterprise of distinguishing truth from falsehood. This basic account of the nature and purpose of 'commonplaces', half-echoed even today in the pejorative English term for the needless repetition of a hackneyed observation, was further refined in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle laid out the various forms of discourse potentially available to those seeking to move an audience.<sup>3</sup> As this particular context implies, such an analysis naturally directed attention away from narrow forms of technical philosophical disputation and towards other, rather less abstruse forms of dialogue: an appreciation of the *τοποί*, or 'places', thereafter came to seem necessary not only for those interested in the absolute science of truth but also for those engaged in the much more conditional arts of persuasion. As Aristotle summed up their essential

Havens, *Commonplace*, esp. pp. 13–31; Moss, *Printed*, pp. 1–134; Colclough, *Consuming*, pp. 31–48;

Miller, *Assessing*, cap. 1.

Aristotle, *Topics*, VII, 2–5.

Commonplace ... 4. A statement generally accepted; a stock theme; a platitude ... (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*).