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Early on in her first book, Rescuing the Subject, Susan Miller observes that “we rarely acknowledge how writers mediate between actual and symbolic domains in ways that place them in a separate and hitherto undescribed textual world” (11). Assuming the Positions sets out to rectify this oversight. Working with a wonderful archive of writings produced by propertied Virginians from the mid-seventeenth century through the turn of the twentieth century, Miller shows how ordinary writing served as a site for the negotiation of fluid, mobile identities. Saved for the future by families with a sense of the importance of lineage and history, this ordinary writing—drafts of school essays, copies of letters, accounts of business transactions, lists of gentleman callers, records of legal transactions, and the like—carries traces of the writers’ material circumstances as well as the symbolic systems through which they ordered their lives. This is rich stuff. And, importantly, Miller knows that simply to celebrate its richness is not enough. Rather, she wants to reassemble this material in order to make an argument about the present, about present conceptions of writing, about what gets noticed and what gets ignored—and in whose interest and to what ends.

Miller is critical of the way some might reduce such archival materials to mere “documentation” to support an a priori case about schooling or gender. Historical materials might be used, for example, simply to confirm the commonplace notion that women have had limited access to adequate schooling in the past. Miller, however, does not want merely to repeat historical commonplaces about education, writing, or gender. Rather, she wants to use the materials she has discovered to critique such assumptions. And this urge to critique sets up what I read as an odd tension in the text. On the one hand, Miller contends that “an archive demands attention on its own terms,” a rather surprisingly idealist conception of the historian’s relationship to her materials given Miller’s theoretical interests. On the other hand, Miller has got to make this archive speak to the present in terms the present will understand. To do so, she deploys a battery of critical and theoretical discourses that cannot be the archive’s own terms. For all the sophistication of this book—and it can be dazzling—there is a peculiar refusal to acknowledge the extent to which Miller is also “documenting.” She inevitably has to read these texts in terms not available to their writers, and she is putting these texts to use in ways that are utterly foreign to their “origins.” Miller’s own impressive understanding of contemporary critical theory should tell her that. This is not to say that Miller’s history is thereby “flawed.” Rather, the strength of her argument does not reside in her ability to rescue the originary terms of the archive—as if that were possible. It lies, instead, in her ability to read these documents in relation to one another and in relation
Central to her reading of these documents is Miller’s use of the term “commonplace.” The trope of the commonplace is deployed in at least three overlapping ways: as location in time and space, as a kind of writing, and as *topoi* available and circulating in a given culture. The “elite practice of women and men with access to many entitlements, including elaborately schooled literacy,” that is represented in this archive arose out of and is located in what is figured as a commonplace, literally a geographical place held in common, a locality. As Miller explains, “vernacular writing has long been a primary way for people to become situated.” Quite literally, part of situatedness is region, the shared experiences of the peculiarities of place shaped by settlement patterns, agrarian culture, and the like. In Miller’s account, the sense of a shared locality, a communal space is counterpoised against a sense of the national as a kind of remote *non*place. Miller posits an historical shift from common place localities—in this case, Virginia—to national places, as the colonies are formulated into a national unit and as that unit consolidates in the wake of the Civil War. Common place thus marks space and also historical time.

Miller is also invoking and refiguring the practice of commonplace writing perhaps most familiarly associated with the Renaissance. The writings produced by this group of Virginians serve some of the same functions as the Renaissance “topic folio”—as an aid to memory, as record of one’s reading, as a storage place for bits of language that could be appropriated for other uses, such as public performance or other writing—but they do more than that. These writings represent “an entire historical spectrum of motives” from transcribing aids to memory . . . to reflecting on experience and organizing a modern version of a ‘self.’” This spectrum of motives constitutes, as Miller sees it, “a continuous process of cultural pedagogy,” an important insight that serves as a central organizing concept for the book. With her emphasis on cultural pedagogy, Miller joins other cultural historians who are interested in what could be called the pedagogy of the everyday, including such different scholars as Carmen Luke, Alan Read, and Carlo Ginzburg.

It is clear that these commonplace writings were not exclusively the product of formal, institutionalized schooling. Miller does not read these texts as revealing classroom practices in any simple way. Nor does she see them as simply marking or inhabiting a “private” domain. Rather, Miller is concerned to show how these writings—composed by young and old, female and male—produced a literate space where relationships among family, friends, school, and community articulated and extended. Even when a writer is writing “for” school, he or she also writes “for” and “with” home and community. A letter written by Burton Norvell Harrison in 1890 to his son at Yale serves to illustrate Miller’s contention that school writing was for many of these writers a “matter for family judgements.” Harrison claims some credit for having assisted his son in composing an essay—referring to the satisfaction he takes in the fact that his
directions have been followed—and he goes on to comment on the young man’s handwriting and the quality of his treatment of the essay topic. As in other examples that Miller interrogates, this student’s writing is understood to reflect not only his own abilities but also his upbringing. Indeed, the writing is not simply the student’s own but is in some sense a joint venture, a multiply-authored product.

From letters, school essays, and memoirs, Miller finds that education for this group of writers was always local but never confined to a single setting. Learning might occur away from home—as in Anna McClure’s experience at the Misses Carrington’s Select School for Young Ladies in the late 1880s—or it might occur under the tutelage of a sibling, as in the fascinating case of Rachel Mordecai’s rearing of her sister Eliza in the early part of the nineteenth century; but, Miller contends, “in any setting, education clearly implies an extension of relationships.” It is, she says, “a cultural property on a sliding compass of social bonds, not a specific curriculum or vocational preparation.” Commonplace writing thus is seen to draw from multiple pedagogical sites and at the same time is itself such a site. Through writing, these Virginians educate themselves (education in this sense as crafting a literate, socialized, cultured self), and with varying degrees of textual self-consciousness they also project their writing pedagogically toward a future to educate in memoriam their descendants.

Miller makes clear that the sort of self that emerges from writing pedagogically is not a unitary, essentialized being. Rather, one can read these various writings as serving to negotiate, construct and reconstruct fluid, mobile, rhetorical identities out of available cultural possibilities, available cultural topoi. Thus, any one writer moves among gender, class, family, and status “positions” textually. As Miller’s title suggests, identity positions are assumed, in all senses of that word: accepted, adopted, taken on, taken for granted, chosen, put on, arrogated, pretended, claimed, and forced to submit to a police frisking. In all these senses, there is nothing permanent about assuming identity: as Miller suggests in the subtitle of one of the chapters, we should consider “Gender as Assumable Loan.” These everyday writings thus do not give voice to an “inner, privatized self”; instead, apparently stable gender identities are on loan, to be borrowed and deployed to “achieve rhetorical authority”—and such authority is always situational, impermanent.

Perhaps the most startling instance comes in Miller’s Coda: a remarkable divorce petition from 1824. Rarely were such petitions granted, but Evelina Roane was successful—in part, as Miller tells it, because she was able to make the case that she ought to be free of her abusive husband in order to sustain and support a higher claim to patriarchal order. With “rhetorical virtuosity,” Evelina is able to pose the legitimate rule of her father against the illegitimate rule of her husband. She does not challenge patriarchal rule directly; rather, she uses it against itself. The petition asserts on Evelina’s behalf: “The situation of your Petitioner ... was not that of a wife who could leave her Father and Mother and cling unto her husband, on the contrary the conduct of that husband had made it a duty
of self preservation, that his wife should seek the aid and protection of her relatives & particularly her father." Roane exercises her gendered rhetorical authority to assert property and propriety rights. As Miller rightly observes, "when class issues are introduced into analyses of gender, we learn more about how texts by women participate in civic consensus—not about sexuality but about domination." That domination is itself subject to rhetorical and material manipulation.

If Miller were only concerned with demonstrating how commonplace writing can be read as cultural pedagogy, and with showing that part of what is learned through such teaching is "proper" deployment of identity categories, then Assuming the Positions would make an important contribution to cultural histories of literacy and pedagogy. But the book is expected to carry a heavier argumentative burden, a burden that has to do with the third use of "commonplace." Ordinary writing is produced out of common places or locales to serve commonplace writerly functions, and it traffics in cultural commonplaces, topoi available and circulating in the culture, or—more strongly accented—"doxa, the doctrinaire content of common sense." While she foregrounds the cultural commonplaces available to the writers of the texts she is studying—examining, for example, conduct literature as one source for notions of gendering—Miller also depends on readers to recognize their own cultural commonplaces that prepare them to read these texts in certain ways. Sometimes these apparent commonplaces are located in current or not so current texts, but more often they are simply alluded to as "current educational ideology" or "traditional histories of schooling," or "a prevalent assumption in most branches of textual studies," or "standard history." In order to argue against what Miller sees as a tendency to read twentieth-century conceptions of schooled writing back onto these nineteenth-century artifacts—in order to read them, that is, as multi-rather than uni-vocalic—she assumes (ironically, I think) far greater uniformity in current scholarly and pedagogical practice than can be supported by the facts.

I would have preferred some greater specificity of reference so that I could better understand where "current educational ideology" is made visible or what texts count as "standard" or "traditional" history. Indeed, the frequent absence of reference leads me to multiply counter-examples. If I were to scan some recent editions of History of Education Quarterly, for example, I would be hard pressed to find a "standard" history of the sort Miller presumes for women's education. If I think of thirty-some years of feminist histories that have reconceptualized the public/private divide—Nancy Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock's Visible Women is one relatively recent example—I would be hard pressed to find the monochromatic historical practice that Miller's text seems to depend on.

I assume that part of the purpose in reading ordinary writings is to show how these writers manipulated the commonplaces available to them. These citizens of Virginia were, in other words, not simply mouthing cultural commonplaces but appropriating them, recombining them, altering them. While they were not simply "free" to create themselves out of nothing, they were also not simply
cultural pawns—at least as I read Miller's argument. If this was true for this set of writings, might we imagine that something like that is possible for the present? The important questions that are raised by and through these materials (especially in the way in which they are deployed by Miller) might well be posed for the present as well. As David Tyack has observed, "any historical writing perforce does violence to the kaleidoscopic surface and hidden dynamics of everyday life" (4). While there may be analytical utility in recognizing degrees of uniformity in any discursive arena (discovering the common in a given place), there is also a loss: one can find uniformity if one abstracts far enough, and such abstracting can take us further and further from the material, the situated particularity of the everyday. The power and force of *Assuming the Positions* comes from the analysis of a very specific, situated set of texts. When these particularized documents are held up against the abstractions that are used to characterize the present, these particularities could be (but are not yet) used to call the abstractions into question. A critical reading of everyday writing in the present is needed to resist the image, invoked at the close of Miller's book, of the modern commonplace emptied of history and cultural power.

**Works Cited**

