Finding Aid for the Sydney Morgan Commonplace Books, [between 1800 and 1810]

Processed by Manushag Powell, with assistance from Jain Fletcher and Laurel McPhee, July 2004; machine-readable finding aid created by Caroline Cubé.

UCLA Library Special Collections
UCLA Library Special Collections staff
Room A1713, Charles E. Young Research Library
Box 951575
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1575
Email: spec-coll@library.ucla.edu
URL: http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/special/scweb/
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Descriptive Summary

Title: Sydney Morgan Commonplace Books

Date (inclusive): [between 1800 and 1810]

Collection number: 170/198

Creator: Morgan, Lady (Sydney), 1783-1859

Extent: 3 v. (132, 73 with 5 loose papers enclosed, 50 leaves) : paper ; 195 x 170 mm.

Abstract: Three volumes of commonplace books by Sidney Owenson (aka Sydney Owenson, later known as Lady Morgan). The volumes were filled during the prolific first decade of her writing career.

Language: Finding aid is written in English.

Repository: University of California, Los Angeles. Library Special Collections.

Los Angeles, California 90095-1575

Physical location: Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact the UCLA Library Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.

Restrictions on Access

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Processing Note

Cataloged by Manushag Powell, with assistance from Jain Fletcher and Laurel McPhee in the Center For Primary Research and Training (CFPRT), July 2004.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Sydney Morgan Commonplace Books (Collection 170/198). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

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Biography

Lady Morgan, born Sydney Owenson (ca. December 25, 1776-April 16, 1859) was a highly successful though somewhat controversial Anglo-Irish Romantic writer, whose works include historical romances, drama, poetry, travel narrative, history, biography and critical essays. Owenson was distinguished by her ability to use historical romances to critique Anglo-Irish relations and the perils of careless and avaricious imperialism while reviving ethnic pride in Irish culture. The daughter of celebrated Irish actor and nationalist, Robert Owenson, and a Shropshire woman named Jane Hill, Owenson was raised in Dublin. She received a gentlewoman's education and was an avid autodidact as well. After her mother died and her father suffered a series of financial difficulties, Owenson went to work as a governess, and later as a writer, to help support herself and her family.

These volumes of extracts span roughly the first decade of her writing career. Her first work, Poems, Dedicated by Permission to the Countess of Moira, was published in 1801 and her first novel, St. Clair, or, the Heiress of Desmond (ca. 1803) came shortly thereafter: from then on she ceased governessing altogether in favor of writing. Owenson became one of the early creators of the carefully-researched historical fiction / historical romance genre which made Walter Scott famous. Her work, however, is more nationalistic than Scott's. Although some of her novels, such as The Novice of Saint Dominick (1807) and The Missionary (1811) do not address Ireland directly, she worked throughout her career to correct English prejudices about the history, behavior, and character of the Irish. She accomplished this most successfully in her third novel, The Wild Irish Girl (1806). The heroine, Glorvina, was so wildly popular as to make Celtic accessories fashionable in women's dress. In addition to nine novels, Owenson published essays, drama, a collection of Irish songs, a biography of the painter Salvatore Rosa, historical works (most notably Woman and Her Master [1840], a feminist approach to history), and the well-received travel narratives France (1817) and Italy (1821). Owenson became Lady Morgan in 1812 when she married Sir Thomas Charles Morgan, who had been knighted in 1811. Though the match seems to have been successful, a condition of their marriage, an unusual one for the time, was the keeping of separate finances. This measure was due in part to Owenson's life-long preference for independence, and her continued success as a professional writer.
Scope and Content
This set of commonplace books consists of three independent volumes given separate titles by the author. Each volume contains an index or table of contents. Based on the dates found in the text, they would have been compiled largely while the author was living in Ireland, though Volume II seems to have accompanied the author to London. Collectively, the volumes include quotations, biographical notes, literary extracts, letters, and original commentary and narrative works.

Organization and Arrangement
The volumes are as follows:
- Volume I: Extracts from Various Works (circa 1800-1801?)
- Volume II: Extracts and Reflections from 1800 (1800-?)
- Volume III: Extraits Francoises Compilès par Sidney Owenson (circa 1800?).

Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library’s online public access catalog.

Genres and Forms of Material
Manuscripts.

Related Material
Bound Manuscripts Collection (Collection 170). Available at UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Volume I

Volume I: Extracts from various works circa 1800-1801?

Scope and Content Note
Volume I is dated 1810, but it contains manuscript versions of works published in 1801 and earlier material. Volume I begins with an index of sixty-four authors, in no obvious order, whose works are represented in the volume. They range from classical to contemporary writers. Owenson includes several quotations from Confucius (credited as such in the copy), although she does not list him in her table of authors.

The volume is divided by four subheadings: Poetic Extracts, Prosaic Extracts, Miscelanies [sic], and Original Poetry by Sidney Owenson, although it is important to note that these categories do not accurately describe all of the content within the sections (i.e., prose appears in the poetic extracts and vice-versa).

Of particular interest are two elements found near the end of the volume. The first is the section titled "Original Poetry by Sidney Owenson" (though it contains misc. matter besides her poetry), which includes manuscript versions of poems such as "Will 'o the Wisp," "Sonnet to Hope," "To Myself," "Chloe and Cupid" (in pencil, and barely legible), "Stanzas" ("When shall I be at rest"), and "The Post Boy (waiting for a letter from my father)." which were published in her first work, the 1801 Poems. The manuscript versions differ substantially from their finished incarnations, and many show evidence of composition: strike-throughs, words replaced, etc. The poems are preceded by a list of 42 "Poems by Sydney Owenson," somewhat re-ordered and with many strike-throughs. Many of the titles here are recognizable as versions of the poems included in her 1801 volume.

The other matter of interest is her self-explanatory "List of books I’m anxious to procure," which includes, among others, Johnson’s Lives of the Poets, "Petrarch - Tasso - Metastasio," Lorenzo de Medici, Burke’s Sublime and Beautiful, "Lives of Peter the Great, Frederic the Great," and James Harris’s Hermes.
Volume II

**Extracts and reflections 1800, 1800-?**

**Scope and Content Note**

Volume II is dated 1805 in two places, but the dates seem to have been partially erased. This imprecision as to dates may be related to Owenson's well-known efforts to obscure her real age. If Owenson was in London when she commenced filling this volume, which the contents support, that would confirm a real date of 1805 (when she traveled to England to publish her second novel, The Novice of Saint Dominick).

Volume II begins with a short list of authors that seems to be a continuation of the list in Volume I. Volume II contains occasional comments from the author on her reading, initialed S:O. It also holds copies of a few letters, such as one sent to London on the twelfth of September documenting her sister Olivia's health. There is also a rough pencil sketch of an angelic nun menaced by some sort of devil, with the note, "the Castle Spectre humbly dedicated to wise Olivia who sat for the picture of that and the witch of Endor," and the postscript, "I am a spectre."

There is a second "List of books I'm anxious to procure," this one including, among others, Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, William Smellie's Philosophy of Natural History, Thomas Leland's History of Ireland, and Petrarch's Life. There is also a manuscript version of Owenson's poem, "To Fancy," which was published in her Lay of an Irish Harp (1807). As with the manuscript versions of her 1801 poems, there are substantial differences between this and its final version. There are five loose pages of notes and partial correspondence tucked into the volume.

Volume III

**Extraits Francoises compilés par Sidney Owenson circa 1800?**

**Scope and Content Note**

Volume III is dated 1800, although the dates 1829-30 can be read on the following page. The text is in French. Volume II has a table of contents in Owenson's hand listing authors' names (2r), beginning with Mademoiselle de Scuderie [sic], and including Scudery, Racine, Boileau-Despréaux, Phillipe Quinault, La Fontaine, Molière, and Voltaire. The entries themselves are generally short biographies for each author, although there are occasional literary extracts as well.