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Epigraphs

Rachel Sagner Buurma
Swarthmore College, rbuurma1@swarthmore.edu

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CHAPTER 13

Epigraphs

—Rachel Sagner Buurma

Epigraphs never have anything to do with the book.

Fran Ross, *Oreo*

The first epigraphs belong to buildings, not to books. Or at least, the first uses of the word refer to permanent inscriptions on buildings, monuments, pillars, and metal plaques rather than the quotations that appear on title pages and head book chapters. In the mid-eighteenth century, Johnson's *Dictionary* defined 'epigraph' merely as 'an inscription'; not until the nineteenth century did the word regularly refer to an excerpt or quotation printed at the beginning of a literary text as a kind of reference point, interpretive guide, example, or counterexample designed to orient the reader to the text.[1] As a word, 'epigraph' thus carries with it the sense of priority, of inscription in many media, and a sense of a being written-on, written-before, or written-above denoted by the word's Greek roots.

The origins of the modern, literary epigraph are murky; the armorial motto is one possible precursor. In early modern texts, the epigraph or motto commonly found on the title page of a volume or beneath the title of an individual poem in a collection more often referred to the author of the work than to the work itself. First found on coats of arms, the motto migrated into the book to become 'useful to a poet as a coded signature added at the end of a poem printed anonymously, where it served as an actual or pretended way of disguising his identity from the uninitiated'.[2] Milton's *Poems* (1645), for example, features a title page epigraph drawn from Virgil's seventh *Eclogue* that commands the shepherds of Arcady, as Louis Martz notes, to '[b]ring ivy-leaves to decorate your rising poet'; it both makes a claim about the author and his future and at the same time 'prepares the way for the many Vergilian characters and scenes to be encountered in the English poems here'.[3] The epigraph begins to refer more regularly to the text rather than to the author in the mid-seventeenth century, though the older usage persists through the nineteenth century.[4]

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[1] The first edition of Johnson's *Dictionary* defines 'epigraphe' as 'An inscription on a statue', which becomes merely 'An inscription' in later editions. (The *Dictionary* itself sported an epigraph from Horace's *Epistles*.)

[2] Ann Ferry, *The Title to the Poem* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 232. Gérard Genette suggests, like Ferry, that the author's coat of arms—specifically, the quotations that sometimes appear upon coats of arms—might be considered the epigraph's forerunner. See Gerard Genette, *Paratexts*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 144.

[3] Louis Lohr Martz, *Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 36.

[4] Ferry, *The Title to the Poem*, p. 233.

It is difficult to mark the moment when epigraphs become popular in European literature. Gérard Genette notes that he finds no trace of an epigraph in French literature before the seventeenth century, and in English books printed before 1700, epigraph-like texts appear primarily in sermons to introduce biblical texts for explication. What is clear is that the eighteenth century saw the wide proliferation of epigraphs drawn from all kinds of sources and introducing all kinds of texts. Periodicals, printed play-texts, travelogues, treatises, biographies, religious works, and all manner of other forms and genres drew on past texts, particularly those from the well-known classical authors, though Shakespeare and a wide array of less known and more contemporary authors rapidly gained ground over the course of the century. Fiction in English offers an especially dramatic example of this change. Early eighteenth-century works of fiction seldom have epigraphs; when they do they almost always draw on classical sources. Later in the century novels become more likely to have epigraphs, and these increasingly draw from more recent works.[5]

FUNCTIONS

The modern epigraph is most likely to comment in some way on the work it begins. It opens up questions about what meaning the reader is intended to draw from the epigraph and apply to the text. The epigraph's very existence raises questions of tradition, authority, and intentionality; we might even say that it creates a structurally literary situation. The nature of *what* an epigraph says about a text ranges from the relatively clear through the very ambiguous to the nearly opaque. Genette notes that 'one can suspect some authors of positioning some epigraphs hit-and-miss, believing—rightly—that every joining creates meaning and that even the absence of meaning is an impression of meaning'.[6] In her 1974 novel *Oreo*, Fran Ross takes an even stronger position, warning the reader with tongue in cheek after offering a series of four epigraphs of her own that 'Epigraphs never have anything to do with the book'.[7] Some epigraphs seem to seek to evade the form's playful and expansive literariness by narrowly defining their domain; epigraphs that proffer expanded versions of literary references made in titles, for example, seem to be longing for the (superficially) simpler life of the footnote (for which, see Chapter 18 of this volume).[8] In his four-category taxonomy of the epigraph's functions, Genette divides two

[5] For more detail, see the Early Novels Database project: https://github.com/earlynovels/end-dataset, for epigraph-related subsets including 18c-epigraphs.tsv.

[6] Genette, *Paratexts*, pp. 157–8. For Genette's taxonomy of epigraph functions see pp. 156–60.

[7] Fran Ross, *Oreo* (New York: New Directions, 2015 [1974]), p. vi. Beginning her page of epigraphs to *Oreo* with 'Oreo defined: someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside', the next three of Ross's epigraphs are equivocally fictional utterances ascribed to the historical figures: the author ('Oreo, ce n'est pas moi'), Flaubert ('A likely story'), and Wittgenstein ('Burp!').

[8] Genette implies that the epigraph as commentary on the title is a twentieth-century phenomenon, but other scholars have found this function earlier on; see Ferry, *The Title to the Poem*.

straightforward functions of commenting on the text or the author from what he describes as two 'more oblique' uses.[9] The first of these associates the text with another author, literary tradition, or genre; in this the epigraph might join or compete with similar work done by the dedication and preface.[10] The other more oblique use is 'the epigraph-effect', the effect of signalling the 'culture' or 'intellectuality' that the mere presence of an epigraph conveys.[11]

In practice, of course, most literarily interesting epigraphs cannot be fully accounted for in any taxonomy or description of epigraphic functions. The famous double epigraphs appearing at the head of each chapter of W. E. B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) offer an especially good example; in each pair, each epigraph points the reader to some aspect of the chapter, while the contrast between each pair invokes the book's concept of double consciousness and helps uphold the book's overall double structure. In each chapter opening, Dubois pairs a piece of poetry (drawn primarily from works by white European or American writers) with excerpts of the music (but not the lyrics) of spirituals (or 'Sorrow Songs', as Dubois called them) which are drawn from collections of spirituals sung by Fisk University's Jubilee Singers and others.[12] The epigraph pairs gesture to the chapter themes. In the chapter 'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others', on debates about the social and economic future of African American people, the poetic epigraph from Canto 2 of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812) urges its reader 'Hereditary bondsmen! Know ye not / Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?', while the lyrics to the quoted spiritual 'A Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land' encourage its auditor 'O, Walk together children / Don't you get weary'.[13] Yet on the page, the musical notation of the spiritual only, not the lyrics, appear; as Brent Edwards explains, it is important to notice that Dubois 'chooses not to include the lyrics to the spirituals', possibly in order to 'mark another barrier for the [white] reader, in another form—to suggest, again, the inner life "within the Veil", a mode of knowledge and "striving" that remains difficult to reach, if not inaccessible, using the imperfect and limited means of white culture'.[14] And more broadly, Edwards shows, the epigraphs are part of the 'interwoven pattern of thesis and antithesis, "forethought" and "afterthought" that

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[9] Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 158.

[10] Genette specifies association with a relatively 'prestigious' author, literary tradition, or genre and implies that the goal is to raise the text's status, but one can easily find and imagine examples in which the connection to another author, tradition, or genre has other aims.

[11] Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 158.

[12] On the meanings and sources of the epigraphs see Brent Edwards, 'Introduction' to W. E. B Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. xxii. On Dubois' sources for the spirituals, Edwards cites Ronald M. Radano, 'Soul Texts and the Blackness of Folk', *Modernism/Modernity* 2, no. 1 (January 1995): 85–7 and Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 490–525.

[13] Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 33.

[14] Edwards, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

characterises *The Souls of Black Folk*.[15] Pointing to the chapters' themes and at the same time withholding them from some readers, connecting the work to particular poetic and musical traditions and making meaning out of the comparison between those traditions, the example of *Souls* suggests some of the complex literary possibilities of the epigraph.[16]

Epigraphs do informational as well as literary work. Just as tables of contents or indexes (Chapters 6 and 20 of this volume) point a reader to a particular page containing a certain word or treating a specific topic, epigraphs teach readers by alerting them to what kinds of overarching themes they might expect to find developed in the following pages. Especially as changes in print technology, paper making, copyright, and transportation allowed the world of print to grow and circulate along with an expanding reading audience, epigraphs came to function as another paratextual technology of information management. Epigraphs can also act as a kind of more visible and cited literary reference legible to a wider array of readers than the unmarked literary references that occur within texts. This function is consonant with the way that the use of epigraphs expands with the growth of the new middle-class reading public in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. New readers, beneficiaries of a widening education and growing paths to literacy, knew English but not necessarily the classical or modern literary traditions well enough to be able to track implicit and unmarked references embedded within texts. Epigraphs offered a clearer type of allusion; their positioning at the opening of a work or chapter, and the author attribution they usually included, clearly identified them for readers. The epigraphs characteristic of English Gothic novels of the later eighteenth century, for example, could have filled a commonplace book with selections from Shakespeare, James Thomson, James Beattie, and William Collins. And the Greek and Latin epigraphs drawn from classical sources popular earlier in the eighteenth century were increasingly translated into English for widening audiences.

EPIGRAPHS IN NOVELS (AND CHARACTERS)

The novel was a latecomer to the eighteenth century's enthusiasm for epigraphs, but, as the proliferation of epigraphs in Gothic novels suggested, it eventually embraced them wholeheartedly. As Janine Barchas argues, Genette's claim that the use of epigraphs in the eighteenth century was a widespread practice is an understatement, since the print matter of the century is awash in epigraphic text—from 'the panoply

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[15] Edwards, 'Introduction', p. xxii.

[16] For readings of the meaning of the epigraphs, see (among many others) Sundquist, as well as Ross Posnock, *Culture and Color: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 263–4. For a detailed sense of the epigraphs' particular meanings, especially the ways in which some of the poems relate to histories of abolition and anti-slavery, see Daniel Hack, *Reaping Something New: African American Transformations of Victorian Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 176–206.

of epigraphs printed at the tops of periodicals' to apposite epigraphs to the century's major poems, essays, and even reference works (such as Johnson's *Dictionary*). Barchas argues that fiction's abstinence from this eighteenth-century trend is noteworthy; the exception for novels was in the 1750s, when writers like Fielding and Smollett briefly experimented with title page epigraphs from classical writers in untranslated Greek and Latin in order, she argues, to signal 'the *gravitas* of the novel's heritage' by connecting it with the classical tradition of the satire and epic.[17] By the last third of the eighteenth century, epigraphs had become widespread; Leah Price notes that '[b] y the turn of the century, chapter mottos were already ubiquitous enough to lend a polemical edge' to novels, like Austen's, that did not contain them.[18] Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's were especially known for the many epigraphs that appeared not just on their prefatory pages, but at the head of each chapter. The works of Shakespeare, Virgil, Horace, Pope, and Dryden were especially popular sources, but the literary well from which eighteenth-century novels drew epigraphs was surprisingly wide and deep. Some even turned to slightly earlier writers of prose fiction— Elizabeth Boyd's *The Happy-Unfortunate, or, the Female-Page: A Novel* draws its epigraph from Delarivier Manley's *The New Atlantis*, while Herbert Croft's *Love and Madness* opens with a passage from Aphra Behn's *Oronooko*.

Epigraphs in the novel raise all of the familiar questions about the paratext's function, but also introduce a new one: its fictionalization. For when epigraphs begin to appear in fiction, they quickly become a part of the novel's signature function of representing the imaginings of other minds. Though Austen's novels were epigraphless themselves, they offer an important clue to how this worked. As readers have noticed, the poetry read by Austen's middle-class heroines like Catherine Morland and Fanny Price is familiar not just from anthologies and single-author collections of poems, but also from the epigraphic world of the Gothic novel.[19] In the beginning of the self-reflexive, Gothic-satirizing *Northanger Abbey*, we learn that Catherine reads poetry by Pope, Thomson, Gray, and Shakespeare as part of, as the narrator puts it, her 'training' to become the heroine of a novel. Finished in 1803 (though not published until 1817), *Northanger Abbey* collects the kinds of poetic epigraphs found heading the chapters of contemporary Gothic (and other) novels and introduces them to Catherine *before* the point in the plot when she travels to Bath and first encounters the Gothic novels—including Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*—whose influence colours her experience for the middle section of the novel.

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[17] Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture, and the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 88.

[18] Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel from Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 91.

[19] Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*, p. 91. Price points out that it is 'the presence of quotation— rather than the context of the narrative—[that] gives us the earliest clue to the gothic intertext of *Northanger Abbey*', p. 92.

Northanger Abbey makes of Catherine, that is, the kind of Gothic heroine out of whose mouth the epigraphs found in Ann Radcliffe novels might appear. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, after its autographic general epigraph, begins its first chapter with a quotation from 'Autumn' in James Thomson's 'The Seasons': 'home is the resort / Of love, of joy, of peace and plenty, where, / Supporting and supported, polish'd friends / And dear relations mingle into bliss.'[20] Catherine Morland, long before reading *Udolpho*, learns from Thomson's 'Spring' section of 'The Seasons' that 'It is a delightful task / To teach the young idea how to shoot.'

Through imagining such quotations as part of the furniture of a novel heroine's mind, Austen makes a retrospective claim about the status of the epigraph in Radcliffe's novels. Austen reminds us that in Radcliffe's novels, the epigraph is not limited to being an authorial gesture towards a thematic element or a signal of literary or generic affiliation, but may be something quite different: evidence of the possible expression of a heroine's thoughts.[21] By populating novel heroine Catherine Morland's mind with just the range of reference Radcliffe's epigraphs manifest, Austen suggests that the epigraphs of *Udolpho* and *The Italian* are manifestations of those novels' characters' minds. This suggestion of Austen's gives more point to the famous wish expressed in *Northanger* for the heroines of novels to be in solidarity with one another.[22] And in this way, Austen assists in the retrospection fictionalization of the epigraph even as she avoided epigraphs herself.

The novel therefore initiated a transformation of the epigraph's function from a text deployed by an author, editor, or publisher to comment on the title or work, or to make a claim about the work's literary tradition or prestige, into a text that might rather be an expression of a character's mind. And the late eighteenth-century proliferation of epigraphs in novels developed concurrently with the increasing use of free indirect discourse, the technique through which (usually third-person) narration preserves its tense and person while taking on the language and perspective of a particular character. Together, these two formal innovations raised the possibility that epigraphs might belong to or be the thoughts of characters, and allowed the epigraph to join the novel's existing well-developed affordances for imagining other paratextual elements like prefaces and introductions as part of fiction rather than belonging to a firmly separate ontological realm. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871)—a novel

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[20] I use Genette's term 'autographic epigraph', as he does, to mean 'an epigraph written by the author' themselves (p. 145).

[21] Kate Rumbold suggests this fictionalization of the Gothic epigraphs when she notes that Shakespearean epigraphs in Radcliffe 'might appear to be the province of the detached, authoritative narrator, but they often articulate the way that characters see the world, and themselves'. *Shakespeare and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Cultures of Quotation from Samuel Richardson to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 134.

[22] In *Paratexts* Genette speculates generally on the possibility that the 'epigrapher' (epigraph selector) may be in some cases a character, and cites Rousseau's *Julie* as one work that raises the question of whether the epigraph is selected by the author or part of the 'found manuscript' and therefore part of the fiction (p. 154).

whose epigraphs have been much discussed—exercises this new power when it opens with an epigraph from Beaumont and Fletcher's early modern play *The Maid's Tragedy*: 'Since I can do no good because a woman, / Reach constantly at something that is near it.' The epigraph's place at the beginning of the first chapter raises the possibility that it might belong to either the chapter, to the paperbound Book I (as the unit of this chapter's first publication), or to the novel to come as a whole. And its placement—both initially after the prelude's ironic reference to the 'blundering lives' of women and the diffusiveness of their effect on the world—also opens the possibility of ascribing the epigraph's first-person sentiment to Dorothea herself or (more ironically, given Eliot's achievements by that time) to 'George Eliot'. Further evidence that at least some of *Middlemarch*'s epigraphs belong to characters rather than narrator or author comes in those uncanny 'moments in Middlemarch when characters seem to quote from a chapter's epigraph, an unsettling trick'.[23]

Middlemarch's first epigraph seems to fit nearly all of the possibilities of how an epigraph might have functioned over time, from its possible origins as an authorial motto migrating onto the first pages of the book to represent the author to commenting on the work's text to hooking the work into a literary—or other—tradition. And *Middlemarch*'s epigraphs also seem to encompass almost the entire world of where an epigraph might come from: classical sources and modern sources; self-authored 'excerpts'; poetry, drama, and fiction. Earlier in her career, however, Eliot offers an example of an epigraph whose genre works to narrow rather than proliferate meanings. First published anonymously in *Blackwood's Magazine* in July 1859, *The Lifted Veil* is a long first-person short story in which Latimer, a sensitive soul who can both see into the future and into the minds of others, narrates the story of his life in the moments before he knows he is going to die. Epigraphless in its original magazine publication, when *The Lifted Veil* was republished as part of the Cabinet Edition of Eliot's collected works it appeared with an allographic poetic epigraph: 'Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns / To energy of human fellowship; / No powers beyond the growing heritage / That makes completer manhood.' Looking back on her career in her complete works, Eliot reclaims for her oeuvre an originally uncollected and anonymous text, giving it an epigraph that explicitly could not be assigned to the poetry-challenged first-person narrator: a poem that begs for only that illumination that—unlike Latimer's sympathy-destroying clairvoyance—aids 'fellowship'. Yet in composing for that purpose a first-person poem that asks for 'powers' that will make 'completer manhood', Eliot also continues to insist that this author-claimed epigraphic space identifies her creative power as masculine. If in the early nineteenth century Austen claimed the epigraphs of Ann Radcliffe for the minds of characters, by the late nineteenth century Eliot drew on the novel's by then entrenched tradition

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[23] John Plotz, *Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Virtual Experience since Dickens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 410.

of thinking about epigraphs as potentially belonging to characters when she wrote an epigraph designed specifically to put some distance between narrator and author.

THE FATE OF THE EPIGRAPH
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

What is happening to the epigraph in the digital age? Low-quality mass digitization has been unkind to the epigraph, as it has been unkind to many other paratextual forms—prefaces, indexes, footnotes—designed for the printing press, the paper page, and the bound book rather than the scrolling screen and the distributed, platform-bound e-book. Such paratexts often fare badly when originally printed books are digitized and served up on screens and e-readers. Their unfamiliar layout and placement, separate from the main blocks of text, often confuse the optical character recognition software that works to translate photographs of printed books into machine-readable text, rendering them illegible. And epigraphs containing elements that don't easily translate into alpha-numeric text often disappear entirely. The sorrow songs in *The Souls of Black Folk*, for example, vanish completely in the (widely used) Project Gutenberg edition because they are represented by images of musical notation; their omission erases the epigraphs' core meanings, leaving the impression that this ground-breaking book on African American life and culture relies entirely on single epigraphs drawn from works primarily by white Anglo American authors.

But even when an epigraph survives a text's digital reproduction, it is more likely than ever to remain unread. Some readers have, of course, always skipped or skimmed epigraphs; as Peter Stallybrass points out, the history of discontinuous reading is long, and Ann Blair and Leah Price note that skipping and skimming are perhaps more time-honoured than cover-to-cover reading.[24] We can see epigraphs themselves as related to the long history of excerpting and commonplacing original texts so that readers can peruse only the best bits, so it seems only fair that, in turn, epigraphs themselves sometimes stood out as a part of the book that readers may easily skate over. But while epigraphs might have been something that *some* readers *might* skip, more recently epigraph-skipping has been hard-coded into some e-book devices, which often vault over paratexts to open directly to the first page of the main text. As Ellen McCracken notes in 2016,

> [u]pon opening an Amazon digital book on a portable device, readers immediately see the first page of the main text, because the device is programmed to

skip the cover and copyright page, and other important material the author has included as front matter such as the table of contents, dedication and epigraph.[25]

It is almost as though new digitization protocols and text-serving platforms sense that in these earlier paratexts they have competitors whom they must vanquish; optical character recognition mangles the index and the footnote with the goal of holding out the search of a newly machine-readable text as a replacement; epigraphs are rendered illegible but suggestion engines, Amazon reviews, and GoodReads offer alternative opportunities for intertext as education.

Yet in many forms and genres of born-digital texts, the epigraph persists, with new mark-up standards and other forms of encoding that enable both machine and human reading. TEI has a form for encoding epigraphs, as does Wikibooks; the APA Style includes standards for formatting epigraphs in publications, and the LaTeX digital typesetting program includes more than one package designed to render epigraphs in different styles.[26] And new forms remediate the functions of the print epigraph into digital media and platforms. Websites—particularly those that hosted the early blogosphere—often have epigraphs; email signature quotations reconfigure the history through which mottos associated with authors became epigraphs associated with texts, since they are quotations attributed to others but which stand in some relation to the author of the email. While the digital representation of the printed text seems to deform the epigraph, then, the epigraph appears to have made the transition to born-digital formats surprisingly smoothly; given the internet's emphasis on intertextuality, excerpting, and textual recirculation, perhaps this should not be a surprise.

[25] Ellen McCracken, *Paratexts and Performance in the Novels of Junot Díaz and Sandra Cisneros* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 40. It is worth noting that many e-readers have a tab that can take the reader back to these other elements, though they are sometimes deformed by the translation into digital forms.

[26] LaTeX package: https://ctan.org/pkg/epigraph?lang=en; APA Style blog: http://blog.apastyle.org/apastyle/2013/10/how-to-format-an-epigraph.html; Wikibooks: http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Template:Epigraph; TEI epigraph markup standard: http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/ref-epigraph.html.