Common and Uncommon Quotes

A Theory and History of Epigraphs

by

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Series in Literary Studies

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Introduction

> Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli.
> (Books share their fates with their readers.)
> – Terentianus Maurus, *De litteris, De syllabis, De metris*

> Bookes receive their Doome according to the reader's capacity.
> –William Camden, *Britannia*

> Books have their own destinies.
> —Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Between 1500 and the beginning of the twentieth century, nearly every published text in English included at least one paratextual element, such as a title, motto, dedication, or epigraph.[1] Despite their relative "commonness" (as Cervantes noted of the device and other paratexts in 1605), no comprehensive or comparative study of English epigraphs specifically—from their origins in European humanism and historical development since then, to their rhetorical and literary uses in context—has thus been engaged. As a prolegomenon, *Common and Uncommon Quotes: A Theory and History of Epigraphs* will attempt the beginning of such a study and a story.

My story with epigraphs began in graduate school, in a course on early American literature, where I read and studied prison narratives of the era. These narratives are comprised of memoirs that detail and reflect on American soldiers' experiences as British prisoners of war during the Revolutionary War. Prison narratives were especially popular among American readers during the final decades of the eighteenth century and saw a resurgence of popularity around the War of 1812 and on into the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. They were regularly invoked, up until the US Civil War, as a demonstration of the universality of the American revolutionary spirit and its relationship with historical suffering of those who oppose (the vague, politicized) tyranny. I was able to articulate this enthymeme while exploring the epigraphical connection between two American writers of prison narratives: Philip Freneau and Albert Greene.

As the American War for Independence was ramping up, Freneau was a young college graduate with hopes of living a life completely supported by his writing.

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[1] See chapter 1 for a discussion of these numbers

He quickly became noted for his anti-British satires and profiles of his time in the West Indies, but as the call for militia volunteers reached a fever pitch in 1778, he joined up with New Jersey's militia. Freneau, later recognized as the "Revolutionary Poet," described his experience as a captive of the British army as full of "various horrors. . . / Where death in tenfold vengeance holds his reign" (Canto II). His lyric poem, "The British Prison Ship," recounts the fate of his ship, *Aurora*, bound for Santa Cruz on May 26, 1780. Freneau—along with the ship's captain, crew, and other passengers—was taken captive aboard a British prison ship off the New England coast. Released later that year, the young poet published his poetic narrative of his captivity. His vivid imagery of the day-to-day "horrors" of the confines of the ship served to enrage the American rebels against the "ungenerous Britons" and their own "rage" (Canto II). Though Freneau's mini-epic poem (complete with an appeal to Clio for poetic skill) was not the first captivity narrative of an experience aboard a British prison ship, at this point, it was the longest and greatest attempt at portraying the experience aesthetically; thus, the poem was able to rise above the "sheer propaganda" of other "lesser" narratives (Bowden 61) and become his most famous war poem. In fact, it has remained above, so to speak, the prison ship narratives that proceeded it, giving writers a formal model and sympathetic pathos to emulate and revise.

Nearly fifty years after the first printing of Freneau's poem, and having already established poetic and contextual influence in the American mindset, the poem appears in a fragmented form in one of its emulators. The new narrative account, written by Albert Greene, of a British prison ship experience follows the capture and imprisonment of Captain Thomas Dring, a 25-year-old colonist whose ship, *Chance*, was seized by the British *Belisarius* in 1782. Greene's rendition of Dring's captivity during the American Revolution was published as *Recollections of the Jersey Prison Ship* in 1829. This narrative combined the prose recollection of Dring and his imprisonment with extracted epigraphs from Freneau's famous poem at the beginning of many of *Recollections* chapters. The pairing of Freneau's "British Prison Ship" with Greene's proxy account I found captivating because I saw in that epigraphical context a direct, yet also compellingly passive, attempt at the construction of an American narrative that was *dialogical*. What literary functions were at work that compelled two writers, writing more than a generation removed from each other, to somehow collaborate on contributing to a literary nationalism? What is it about that particular pairing of differentiated texts that makes Greene's depiction that much more meaningful? The relationship between the two narratives may appear obvious at first glance: they both tell of a colonist captured and held by the British army aboard a prison ship, and since Freneau's is the preeminent account of such captivity, it only seems natural that later

stories of the distresses endured by American prisoners during the war acknowledge Freneau in this paratextual fashion. However, Greene's and Freneau's narratives are not the same, possibly complicating initial assumptions of the texts' thematic and contextual relationship.

Thinking that the relationship between a primary text, such as Greene's *Recollections*, and its epigraphs, the utterances that lie above the primary text, is always symbiotic would be a mistake. I found that the intersection of epigraphs and primary texts, the assumed complementariness of the themes that Greene and Freneau explicate, and even the difference in historical contingency all affect how both texts are received separately and together. In a paratext-text situation, Greene's text and Freneau's epigraphs create, instead, a unique meaning-making function that highlights the historical and rhetorical conditions and perceptions of Greene's time. For instance, Dring's, Greene's (as Recollections' author-function), and Freneaus's exigencies, related to that of "the call" for American colonists to rise to action, are different; plus, the appeal to urgency related to the significance of their suffering: Freneau's presentation of his suffering to inspire his contemporaries served a different political purpose than Greene's presentation of Dring's suffering, as the historical realities of the texts were fifty years apart. Freneau's is urgent; Greene's is nostalgic—the tension of borrowing between the "old" and the "new" fuel epigraphic energy. I asked myself, what is it that allows the past and the present to talk to each other, and what kind of power is it that an author can wield in order to bring two variant texts together in a way that makes sense in context? So I began to wonder about the rhetorical implications of this, even the ethical and hermeneutical problems in the adaptation of texts as epigraphs, divorced from their original contexts, yet double-voiced, as the situation relies on the credibility of the context and rhetor to be successful. In other words, in what way did Greene view the rhetorical authority of Freneau to adapt his work as a form of endorsement for his own text? How do epigraphs determine a book's "Doome"? After all, if Freneau had turned out to be a traitor to the British, not only would his poem lose credibility to his American audience, but so would Greene's, but perhaps of a different kind.

I came to an understanding that an epigraph is not merely a (sometimes) fancy or (sometimes) pithy prologue to the text that follows it; an epigraph can be a poetic reminder of the wisdom of the past and simultaneously a draconian set of hermeneutical blinders that an author places on its readers. Epigraphs can invite us to remember the past and also hide the fact that that past is terribly contrived; the past becomes a literary and rhetorical tool to shape the political present. Since that spark way back in grad school, and in the (many) years that followed, the story of epigraphs that has taken shape in my studies is a confluence of dichotomies and their wresting and wrestling: old/new,

classical/popular, control/dialogue, author/reader. The story I intend to shape in *Common and Uncommon Quotes* centers on these tensions, but most notably between epigraphs' potential for "dialogue, dialectic, and conversation" (Clark xvi), with the anxiety of authorial control, and how the nature of literary and rhetorical authority employed to shape dialogue and control between authors and their readers has developed over the 400-year history of epigraphs from classical and biblical authority to contemporary and individual (i.e., democratic) authority.

Why a book on epigraphs now? After all, there are numerous studies of individual epigraphic contexts, studies that theorize in part epigraphs and paratextuality, and at least half a dozen print compendiums of epigraphs, plus articles such as "The Best Epigraphs of 2020" (Holstrom) that serve as modern manifestations of nineteenth-century commonplace books. As I explain further in chapter 1, there is yet to be a comprehensive analysis (i.e., reading) of epigraphs in their literary and rhetorical contexts, which I hope this study fulfills, or at least gestures toward looking at epigraphs in a new, and much more complicated, way. But, in all honesty, my exigence for this prolegomenon is much more urgent. Epigraphs and rhetorical authority have recently resurfaced in my academic interests because of the current political climate in the United States, namely in the ongoing crisis of credibility, of which "fake news" is the "most strident symptom" (Ferreira and Borges 108). Noah Hawley, in his recent novel *Anthem*[2], calls this time "the Age of Inverted Reality" (219), an era characterized by "undermining the idea of certainty, by rejecting objective reality and traditional morality. By demonizing 'experts' who would dare to tell you what is right and what is wrong" (224) and driven by "[t]hat all-consuming industry of denying science, denying experts, denying truth itself" (225). With the rise of "fake news" on social media platforms in recent years, plus the unrelenting gaslighting of the American public by its elected leaders and right-wing media and the disproportionate distrust in scientific and medical authority in the face of climate change and a current global pandemic, perhaps all authority as Hawley suggests, my personal and professional concern for what people find credible, how texts are massaged and adapted to meet political and rhetorical objectives, have reminded me of the role that epigraphs play in that discourse with the public. Some epigraphs could be regarded as "faithful" to the original author's purpose, but most are not, a

[2] Hawley epigraphs *Anthem* with two quotes, representing both classical epigraphy and modern epigraphy: "Anyone who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities" by Voltaire, and a quote from a *New York Times* story: "'I had my hand on a metal baseball bat, just in case,' said Nate, twelve. 'Cause I was going to go down fighting if I was going to go down.'" (May 9, 2019)

stance that challenges our thinking about authority, intertextuality, and, from what I believe we see in the Freneau and Greene context, *citizenship*.

Along that line, epigraphs have been employed during other tumultuous times in Anglophone textual culture, notably during the English Civil War and Restoration's diverse application of classical epigraphs, and even during the American abolitionist movement's creative adaptation of biblical epigraphs. Hence, the Christian Bible takes center stage during the epigraph story as a script upon which the rhetorical authority of many texts is set, an authority that even today is invoked to support legislation and policies that broach all along the political spectrum." Perhaps it is the thrust of change itself in English and Western European cultures—through the zeitgeist-shifting revolutions of art, science, religion, economics, and politics between 1500 and 1900—that demanded, or rather fully expected, a biblical fulcrum, a central authority upon which literary and rhetorical authority pivots, and it is in the shape of the epigraph that I argue that authority is equally summoned, either to be conserved or, as the story moves into the nineteenth century, to be criticized, too. Hence, while it's no discipline-shattering claim to argue that the Christian Bible influenced English literature during this time period, it is important to understand how and why the Christian Bible features large in the history and rhetorical vision of epigraphs, specifically in its implications on authorial credibility, as I explore in the following chapters. This exploration is necessary as the importance of biblical epigraphs is notably absent in Gerard Genette's *Paratexts*, the oft-referenced resource for epigraph theory and general history. It is a gap that I intend to rectify in this volume.

A subsumed thesis of this study is that epigraphs, more potently than other elements of paratextuality and intertextuality, prepare and shape readers, like a sermon before a sacrament, like the orator before the ballot box, like the revolutionary before the revolution. Indeed, as I tell in part II of this book, epigraphs were borne out of the European humanist movement, a revolutionary era for the recovery of classical texts, publishing culture, and ecclesiastical and dissenter conflict. Surely, in its intertextual function, epigraphs can communicate a reconciliation of diverse textualized voices, but they can also indicate the tension of an older authority dwindling before a popular one. And what is at stake in many of these contexts is citizenship, that is simply, what it means to be a member of a community, especially in a community anticipating great change. Epigraphs, in their implied dialogue of the past and present, invite citizenship, but also dictate its ideological parameters and obligations. That assumed authority is a great responsibility and is a way in which I believe we have never thought about epigraphs.

My study, then, is centered around these core assumptions:

The first, most basic assumption: epigraphs are read, and their meanings are products of readers' meaning-making functions. Hence, I approach epigraphs from a reader-centered approach "in terms of (the) concrete textual features" of epigraphic texts, "but also in terms of the shared interpretive strategies by which readers make sense of them" (Rabinowitz 1). Readers may make use of several strategies and indicators to read texts, so I also approach epigraphs in this context as "imagistic in character" (Iser 8), calling to their readers images of morality, authority, and theme. I am interested in how "text and reader thus merge into a single situation" (Iser 9), in trying to understand how an epigrapher attempts to build sympathy, or a discourse community, with an audience via an epigraph and its assumed interpretation. The situation is thus hermeneutical in which the interpretation of the text is in relation to, and as a result of, the visual and literal phenomena of the epigraph. That is, what text, broadly speaking, is a reader reading when they read (into) an epigraph?

My next assumption is that epigraphs have rhetorical functions. The epigraphic situation that complicates the "distance" between text and reader also engages issues of authorial control, as Wayne C. Booth argues of narrative in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (38). The authorial agency of choosing to epigraph, which epigraphs, and how they are aesthetically experienced by the reader is an important determining factor in how an epigraph's meaning is communicated, in a way that, according to the epigraphs of this Introduction, determines the fate of the book with the reader. The rhetoric of epigraphy also implies readerly choice: a reader can choose to ignore the epigraph, but to what extent would this decision limit their hermeneutical buy-in? Further, the rhetoric of epigraphy also implies authorial exigence: did the epigraph inspire the genesis of the text, or is the epigraph added inductively and post-writing, and if so, what rhetorical purpose does that serve?

My final main assumptions are that epigraphs are expressions of an aesthetic experience: epigraphy is, indeed, an art. By virtue of their privileged position on the page (Rabinowitz), on the title page that is, they demand a special attention from the reader. The white space that surrounds an epigraph, the juxtapositioning with other epigraphs, its central location on a page, its typical difference in font and size, its punctuation related to attribution, that there is attribution—all these elements point to a complex interpretative structure that requires further understanding of how the aesthetic of a text, of a paratext, communicates the heart of a text and the authority of an author. As Peter Rabinowitz notes, "Epigraphs are useful devices for guiding readers' expectations" (114), and one cannot ignore the visual aesthetic elements that contribute to that usefulness; in fact, I may argue that it is precisely the visual aesthetic of epigraphs that provides the foundation for that usefulness.

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