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ANALYSIS OF EPIGRAPH AS A PECULIAR TONGUE IN GEORGE ELIOT'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

While it may be the modern reader's habit to skip or skim the epigraphs, their use in George Eliot's novels generated a substantial amount of notice. By the time, Eliot published Daniel Deronda, her epigraphs had grown substantially in number and length, and most readers found them tiresome. Critics cited the novel's first epigraph, which relates to the arbitrary nature of all beginnings, as a prime example of Eliot's sententiousness. Formally, epigraphs illuminate the difficulty of deciding where a narrative actually begins. They raise questions about the extent to which beginnings establish the parameters of what will follow, and whether endings determine how we understand beginnings. This article contests the assertion that Eliot's epigraphs are inordinately long, or long-winded, Eliot's use of maxims, quoted as epigraphs, and her mimesis of them, in order to demonstrate the moral implications of the form.

KEYWORDS

George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, concision, digression, maxims, epigraph.

INTRODUCTION

The mysterious sentences, snatched from an unknown context, like strange horns of beasts, and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region gave boundless scope to her imagination, and were all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret. It was really very interesting.

In George Eloit's novels, epigraphs are 'a peculiar tongue' the reader must learn to interpret, rather than

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a tool for the efficient communication of information. The author becomes a travelling naturalist, who has brought back fragments from foreign lands to intrigue, amuse, and educate the reader. Reading epigraphs is figured both as an experience, the reader travels beyond the boundaries of the narrative and as an experiment, the reader must speculate on the meaning of an epigraph and must readjust her expectations once she has read the chapter. In Daniel Deronda, Gwendolen claims that "women can't go in search of adventures to find out the North-West Passage or the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow". Perhaps Eliot sought to bring a sense of adventure to the page, refusing to institutionalize cultural exclusion based on sexual difference. The phrases 'strange horns of beasts' and 'leaves of unknown plants' evoke different textures, from smooth bone to rough leaf. This suggests that linguistic problems should be solved through intuition, even haptic perception: the reader is invited to feel her way among the mysterious sentences in order to decipher them.

Inspired by Walter Scott's use of chapter epigraphs in his Waverley novels, Eliot first intended to use epigraphs in her own historical romance, Romola. Beginnings are always trouble. The difficulty of beginning is given lengthy and serious treatment in Daniel Deronda's epigraphs, but Eliot first experienced this challenge when writing Romola.

While it may be the modern reader's habit to skip, or skim over epigraphs, their use in Eliot's novels generated a substantial amount of notice. Not all of it was positive. By the time Eliot published Daniel Deronda, her epigraphs had grown substantially, both in number and in length, and most readers found them tiresome. Anyone who doubts that the long-winded reflections taken from the commonplace book or the unpublished works of George Eliot afford examples of the way in which a statement that has meaning may be overloaded by the conceits in which it is expressed, should examine carefully the motto to the first chapter, and consider honestly whether a rather commonplace sentiment is not beaten out into an inordinate number of words.

Epigraphs illuminate the difficulty of deciding where a narrative actually 'begins'. They raise questions about the extent to which beginnings establish the parameters of what will follow, and whether endings determine how we understand beginnings. The epigraph to Chapter 1 enacts its own assertion: the generalization that 'Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning' becomes true of the novel's readers. The reader must start with this make-believe beginning, which gives the novel's first paragraph, and its famous opening line, 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' its full significance. The epigraph calls attention to itself as 'a make-believe of a beginning' through its marginal placement - paratext

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and text both have their own beginnings and through its own fictional construct. The epigraph subsumes its scientific and literary references, which include Hamlet and Goethe's Faust. Thus, the epigraph makes an implicit comment about the derivative nature of literature, and the inescapability of literary precedence.

On the opening page of Daniel Deronda, the precise two o'clock 'On the first of September, in the memorable year 1832' of Felix Holt has given way to a vague 'near four o'clock on a September day'. While, in Middlemarch, Eliot expected her reader to know what 'kind of beauty' Dorothea possesses. She now required the reader to make aesthetic judgements: 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' is, arguably, Daniel Deronda's first sentence. As we have already seen, her use of a prose epigraph as the opening to the first chapter leaves this open to debate. But what is clear from Daniel Deronda's inception is that its epigraphic project exceeded anything that had come before it. This is manifested in the sheer number of epigraphs, their length, and their multilingualism. While Shakespeare is still quoted in an important number of epigraphs, as he was in those for Felix Holt and Middlemarch, a larger proportion of the epigraphs are autographic and, for the first time, written in prose. Eliot also continued to compose epigraphs in verse and in dialogue form. With her dialogue, she became more playful, using both her traditional characters that appear in her previous two novels' epigraphs and the more unusual. Sources for her allographic epigraphs spanned several languages and genres. Eliot quoted poets, novelists, historians, philosophers, and religious texts, making of her novel a true cabinet of curiosities. Daniel Deronda's epigraphs illustrate the wonderful range and extent of Eliot's reading and the full force of her imagination. Eliot was in some ways more playful with epigraphs, her use of maxims underlines the grief and violence at the heart of this novel.

Daniel Deronda's epigraphs are often puzzling, and readers of Eliot's late novels are trained to be eloquent interpreters of fragments. But Eliot, too, becomes an eloquent interpreter. The deliberate reproduction of maxims through their quotation and mimesis allows Eliot to better know, and therefore to expose, what she mimics.

Eliot's mimesis is not a complete undoing of the ideas that pass for the truth of human experience, but a nuancing of this truth. In the novel's longest epigraph, Eliot imagines an alternative to the maxim 'Knowledge is power'.

It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance? Knowledge slowly builds up what Ignorance in an hour pulls down. Knowledge, through patient and frugal centuries, enlarges discovery and makes record of it; Ignorance, wanting its day's dinner,

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lights a fire with the record, and gives a flavour to its one roast with the burned souls of many generations. Knowledge, instructing the sense, refining and multiplying needs, transforms itself into skill and makes life various with a new six days' work; comes Ignorance drunk on the seventh, with a firkin of oil and a match and an easy 'Let there not be,' and the many-coloured creation is shrivelled up in blackness. Of a truth, Knowledge is power, but it is a power reined by scruple, having a conscience of what must be and what may be; whereas Ignorance is a blind giant who, let him but wax unbound, would make it a sport to seize the pillars that hold up the long-wrought fabric of human good and turn all the places of joy dark as a buried Babylon. And looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is a far off as if it were within a step or a grasp-precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction?

This epigraph demonstrates the competing impulses of concision and dispersal that are contained within the maxim. By keeping in mind Eliot's interest in the study of classical epigraphy, the field through which the epigraph migrated to literature, her epigraphs gain important intellectual contexts: the materiality of texts, the archiving and transmission of knowledge, monumentalization, and dedication. In Daniel Deronda, we see a conflict between Eliot's desire to transmit knowledge and her reservations about what might be lost in the petrification of experience into maxims and other forms of quotation.

Indeed, Daniel Deronda's epigraphs are less prescriptive than those in Felix Holt or Middlemarch, allowing the reader greater freedom amid Eliot's own sententiousness. Because epigraphs operate at the margins of what can be known, readers must use intuition and experiential knowledge, as opposed to intellectualism, in order to decipher their meaning. This form is at once transgressive and liberating, since it brings to light masculine artifice and recovers the feminine.

But as the epigraphs in Daniel Deronda demonstrate, Eliot had already been searching for a form that could instruct and seduce in equal measure. What she achieved is specificity without specifics. By reinscribing and rewriting the maxim, she made it possible to generally love the particular, and to universally admire the individual instance.

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