

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Borrowed Beginnings: Epigraphs and Historical Authority in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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Abstract

An epigraph appears to lend a chapter the authority of an earlier voice, but its force depends on what the narrative subsequently does with that voice. This article compares the chapter mottos of Walter Scott's *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*, the etymology and extract archive prefacing Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and the attributed and invented epigraphs of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. It examines attribution, typography, source status, semantic fit, and retrospective reinterpretation. Scott uses borrowed verse to stage the historian-novelist's dependence on partial cultural memory; Melville overwhelms documentary confidence by arranging heterogeneous citations before Ishmael's account begins; Eliot alternates recognized authority with unattributed or fabricated lines, making source judgment part of provincial interpretation. In all four novels, the epigraph is less a key that decodes the following text than a proposition exposed to narrative testing. Mismatch is especially productive: it delays application, permits irony, and requires the reader to decide whether the borrowed language frames, distorts, or is corrected by the chapter. Nineteenth-century historical authority emerges here as a mediated achievement rather than an inherited guarantee.

Keywords: epigraph; paratext; historical fiction; attribution; nineteenth-century novel

1 Introduction

An epigraph occupies a curious temporal position. It is read first but usually interpreted later. Set apart from the narrative and attached to another name, it seems to arrive with authority already established. Yet the chapter may confirm, narrow, parody, or quietly discredit it. The borrowed beginning therefore does not stand outside interpretation. It creates an expectation that subsequent narration can revise.

This article examines how four nineteenth-century novels make such revision part of their historical imagination. Scott's *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe* place literary mottos at the thresholds of chapters; Melville precedes *Moby-Dick* with an etymology and a mass of extracts; Eliot's *Middlemarch* mixes identifiable sources with obscure and invented lines. These practices differ too much to be treated as one decorative convention. They share, however, a concern with the transmission of cultural language: who speaks for the past, how the source is named, and what happens when inherited words enter a new narrative setting.

Genette's account of paratext identifies the threshold as a zone of transaction rather than a neutral border [1]. That formulation is particularly apt for

epigraphs, whose meaning passes among quoted language, attribution, chapter title, and opening scene. Scholarship on the historical novel identifies genre as a mediated relation to historical process [2]. Work on the forms of historical fiction further clarifies how narrative conventions organize the past rather than transparently recover it [3]. Bringing these insights together allows the epigraph to be read as a miniature historiographical problem.

The article compares source status, typography, semantic fit, tonal relation, and retrospective reinterpretation across the four novels. It first establishes the corpus and procedure, then reads each epigraphic practice, and finally discusses attribution, mismatch, historical mediation, and editorial limits. Its thesis is that borrowed language becomes authoritative only through the narrative testing that follows it.

The authority of an epigraph also depends on the histories through which books and pasts become legible. Darn-ton's model of the communication circuit locates printed meaning among authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers [4]. Rigney's study of Romantic historicism clarifies how incomplete access to the past becomes a productive feature of historical

representation [5].

2 Thresholds and Retrospective Reading

The analysis uses the cited editions of *Waverley* [6], *Ivanhoe* [7], *Moby-Dick* [8], and *Middlemarch* [9]. For Scott and Eliot, the primary unit is a chapter epigraph together with its attribution and the chapter it precedes. For Melville, whose prefatory archive is structurally different, the unit is an extract or cluster of extracts considered in relation to the narrative voice that follows. This asymmetry is deliberate. It tests which claims belong to epigraphic placement generally and which depend on the repeated rhythm of chapter opening.

Five features guide the comparison. The first is source status: recognized, obscure, anonymous, misattributed, or invented. The second is framing: typography, attribution, and proximity to a title. The third is semantic fit between borrowed words and the chapter's initial situation. The fourth is tonal relation, including solemnity, irony, and disproportion. The fifth is retrospective change: whether events later make the epigraph newly legible.

This sequence guards against interpreting a motto solely through thematic re-

semblance. Almost any short quotation can be attached to a broad theme after the fact. A stronger reading identifies the verbal or situational hinge that connects quotation and chapter, then asks what remains unresolved. The most revealing examples often resist immediate paraphrase. Their delay makes the reader perform the work of historical association.

3 *Waverley*: quotation and the belated historian

The chapter mottoes of *Waverley* announce a novel conscious of arriving after the events it narrates. Borrowed verse offers compressed authority, but the variety of sources prevents a single tradition from mastering the Jacobite past. Literary memory supplies analogies, tones, and recognizable postures; it cannot restore an uncontested historical world.

Scott often places a generalizing or elevated motto before scenes governed by limited perception. The difference in scale is important. A quotation may seem to name the historical significance of an event, while *Waverley* encounters it through partial information, social attraction, and error. The epigraph therefore produces dramatic inequality between inherited language and lived uncertainty. It does not simply educate the protagonist or reader. It makes visible the ease with which later cultural forms can impose coherence on confused action.

Retrospective reading complicates that inequality. After a chapter, the motto may appear less like an authoritative summary than a comment on the desire for summary. Historical distance is thereby acknowledged within the novel's form. Scott's narrator can use literary precedent while also exposing the belatedness and selectivity of that use. The epigraph becomes a signature of mediation: the past is encountered through words that have already travelled.

4 *Ivanhoe*: antiquarian display and mixed inheritance

Ivanhoe intensifies the visibility of borrowed cultural material. Its medieval setting invites antiquarian authentication, yet its epigraphs draw on later literature as well as supposedly historical voices. The result is not a sealed medieval archive. It is a layered reception history in which the past reaches the reader through early modern drama, balladry, editorial convention, and the nineteenth-century novel.

Attribution plays a double role. A famous name can stabilize tone before the chapter begins, while an obscure or gen-

eralized source shifts attention from verification to atmosphere. Both strategies create authority, but they create different kinds. Named authorship offers cultural recognition; vague provenance produces the aura of tradition. Scott's alternation between them prevents documentary status from remaining clear.

This ambiguity suits a novel concerned with competing inheritances. Norman, Saxon, Jewish, chivalric, legal, and popular claims confront one another, and no single archive speaks neutrally for the whole. When an epigraph fits a scene too neatly, the fit may itself be suspect, since the narrative soon discloses interests omitted by the borrowed formulation. The threshold promises historical placement, while the chapter reveals the politics of placement.

5 *Moby-Dick*: the archive before experience

Melville's prefatory "Etymology" and "Extracts" transform citation into excess. Instead of one motto calibrating one chapter, the reader encounters a heterogeneous archive before Ishmael begins his account. The culture of reprinting supplies a relevant context for this movement of textual materials across new settings [10]. Biblical, literary, scientific, commercial, and lexical materials accumulate around the whale. Their number suggests comprehensive preparation; their incompleteness makes completion impossible.

The extracts do not converge on a stable object. They display the historical production of the whale as sacred figure, commodity, linguistic problem, natural specimen, and imaginative magnitude. Arrangement rather than argument holds them together. In this respect, the apparatus mimics the novel's later effort to classify an object that exceeds each discipline brought to it.

The comic attribution of compilation to a "sub-sub-librarian" further unsettles authority. Documentary labour is acknowledged and diminished at once. The archive appears learned, but its status is theatrical; it establishes the conditions of Ishmael's inquiry without guaranteeing his conclusions. Unlike a conventional epigraph, the prefatory mass cannot be applied to a single opening scene. It trains the reader to expect partial systems and to notice how citation can magnify uncertainty as readily as knowledge.

6 *Middlemarch*: invented authority and provincial correction

Eliot's chapter epigraphs range across recognized literature, altered fragments,

unattributed statements, and lines of her own invention. Their selective recombination is illuminated by the history of anthropological practice in the rise and development of the novel [11]. This mixed source economy fits a novel in which people continually classify one another through incomplete cultural scripts. The reader cannot always rely on recognition. Some epigraphs must be judged by their relation to the chapter rather than by the prestige of a name.

Invented quotation is especially significant. Typographic separation creates the appearance of prior authority even when the words originate with the novelist. The device does not merely deceive. It asks why quotation marks, spacing, and attribution make a sentence feel inherited. Cultural authority is shown to have a form that can be reproduced independently of verifiable origin.

The chapters then test that form through provincial life. A concise epigraph may propose an analogy that the narrative complicates through Dorothea's aspiration, Lydgate's professional confidence, Casaubon's scholarship, or the town's changing judgments. Semantic mismatch creates productive delay: the reader must hold the motto open while several characters offer competing applications. When the connection becomes clearer, it often does so by exposing the limits of a character's explanatory language.

7 Attribution as an interpretive instruction

Attribution does more than identify ownership. It tells readers how much contextual knowledge to activate. A familiar name invites a network of genre, period, and prestige; anonymity narrows attention to the words while producing an aura of proverbial circulation; false or fictional attribution creates a test of credulity. These instructions operate before the quoted sentence has been related to the chapter.

The four novels exploit all three conditions. Scott's range of sources turns historical fiction into an encounter among cultural periods. Melville makes attribution part of an unruly knowledge archive. Eliot uses uncertain provenance to place the reader in a position analogous to characters who must evaluate circulating claims. In each case, source status is inseparable from narrative design.

The implication is not that readers must solve every citation before interpretation can begin. Obscurity is sometimes the intended condition. A reference

that cannot be immediately verified may make dependence on editorial apparatus visible or shift authority from recognition to contextual fit. Scholarly editions help recover sources, but they should not erase the first-reading experience of uncertainty that the novels carefully construct.

8 Mismatch, irony, and delayed application

An epigraph that perfectly summarizes a chapter risks becoming redundant. These novels more often generate force through partial fit. A motto may match the opening tone but not the outcome, describe one character while appearing to name another, or elevate conduct that the scene renders comic. Mismatch creates an interval in which interpretation remains unsettled.

That interval allows irony without reducing the epigraph to a joke. The quoted authority may retain some truth even when its application fails. Scott's mottos can dignify historical action and expose later romanticization; Melville's extracts can convey genuine learning and the insufficiency of learned categories; Eliot's epigraphs can clarify a moral relation while resisting a single character-level equivalent. The borrowed words become dialogic because the narrative answers them rather than obeying them [12].

Retrospection completes the process. After reading the chapter, the reader returns mentally to the epigraph and revises its function. The relation between sequence and retrospective understanding gives this return its temporal force [13]. This small circular movement resembles the larger work of historical fiction: a present narrative selects material from the past, tests it through imagined experience, and sends the reader back to inherited language with altered judgment.

9 Discussion

The comparison reveals three distinct ways of producing authority. Scott displays cultural transmission by placing later literary voices at entrances to histor-

ical scenes. Melville gathers documentary fragments until abundance exposes the limits of classification. Eliot reproduces the form of citation while making provenance variable. None presents authority as immediate access to origins.

This does not make the novels indifferent to factual history. Rather, they distinguish evidence from the rhetoric that makes evidence persuasive. Typography, attribution, sequence, and repetition can confer credibility before a source has been evaluated. By staging those operations, the novels turn paratext into critical education. The reader learns to ask not only whether a statement is old, learned, or quotable, but what narrative work its borrowed status performs.

10 Conclusion

The nineteenth-century epigraph is not a detachable ornament placed above the real work of narration. In Scott, it registers the layered afterlife through which historical events become literary memory. In Melville, epigraphic accumulation builds an archive whose magnitude defeats the promise of exhaustive knowledge. In Eliot, variable attribution exposes the forms by which authority is recognized and manufactured.

Across these different practices, borrowed language behaves as a proposition under pressure. The chapter may support it, redistribute it, or reveal the violence of its simplification. Meaning is therefore completed retrospectively. By making readers return to the words that preceded the narrative, these novels present historical authority as a relation among source, framing, and later judgment—a relation that must be interpreted rather than merely inherited. The selected novels and editions cannot establish how every reader recognized their sources; future work should compare paratextual variants and documented reception.

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