The Function of Epigraphs in *Middlemarch*

Epigraphs, otherwise known as quotations or “mottoes”, were a common literary device of George Eliot and her contemporaries. They were used, in part, to help the reader transition into the world of the novel by giving them something familiar at the start. Throughout her novel, *Middlemarch*, George Eliot uses epigraphs quite liberally. In fact, every one of her chapters is preceded by one. What are the significance of these quotations, what importance do they have, and how do they enhance the overall story of *Middlemarch*? In this essay I will be exploring why Eliot used epigraphs in this specific novel and how they fit in Victorian literature, how they add to the telling of the events in that specific chapter in which they preface, and how epigraphs overall give added credibility to Eliot’s writing.

Throughout Middlemarch George Eliot quotes from a number of sources, some of the most notable being: Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Dante. While at first some of these quotations may seem detached from the chapters in which they preface, upon further reading they give clarity, or add further commentary, to the events which take place. David Leon Higdon states in his essay “George Eliot and the Art of Epigraphs” that “The epigraphs form a continuous commentary defining and shaping the chapters. They are foreshadowing what follows, and to some degree shape, control, and condition the reader’s reaction to the chapter.” (Higdon 131). From the beginning of each chapter, the epigraphs that are used help the reader to form an opinion of the chapter before it has been read. There are many examples which could be considered serious and many others that are possible meant to be read satirically, ironically, or even as a form of social commentary.
Regarding the nature of epigraphs in Victorian literature as a whole, and more specifically, Eliot’s use of them, Michael Ginsburg states in his essay, “Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: Middlemarch and the Problem of Authorship”, that epigraphs can be used as a sort of extra facet of identity. He states that Eliot had three different identities: her pen name, her “real” identity, and the identity that she took on as the narrator of her novels. These identities, with which epigraphs add mainly towards the identity as the narrator, contribute to the sense of literary community and connect Eliot’s writing to her contemporaries and to the past. In this functional use of epigraphs Ginsburg states, “The use of epigraphs establishes a relation between the text and a past tradition. The relation can be one of illustration…or it can be an ironic relation.” (547). Although many of her epigraphs are used to illustrate a point in the novel and add to the overall narrative, at times she used epigraphs in the opposite way. As Eliot was a realist author, many of the epigraph that she uses are usedironically or even at times satirically. Eliot uses her role as a scholar in these instances to, in a way, create a commentary against what could be considered a romantic or unrealistic ideal that was portrayed in earlier literature. In many instances, she seems to try and prove that an earlier author’s assertion is as unrealistic as it is improbable. One example of this is the epigraph that precedes chapter fifty-eight.

The epigraph that Eliot chose to use at the beginning of chapter fifty-eight is very fitting, but only in an ironic sense. This epigraph taken from Shakespeare’s sonnet 93 speaks of how a woman should be, even in adverse circumstances. It states, “But Heaven in thy creation did decree/ That in they face sweet love should ever dwell; / Whate’er they thoughts or thy heart’s workings be, / Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell.” (359). Chapter fifty-eight deals in Rosamond and Lydgate’s marital problems. The first problem being that they have
Rosamond’s cousin visiting them whom Lydgate hates and Rosamond love to tease him about. Rosamond even goes as far as taking pleasure in his obvious discomfort. Its states, “Rosamond thought she knew perfectly well why Mr. Ladislaw disliked the Captain: he was jealous, and she liked his being jealous.” (360). Rather than having her “looks…nothing but sweetness dwell” she relishes causing her husband, who she professes to love, discomfort and jealousy. Earlier in the book, Rosamond did seem to fit the qualities that the epigraphs states. She had gone to a finishing school and so her manners were refined. She knew exactly how to act to make people like her and to fit into society. Lydgate fell into this trap and now he is suffering the consequences. That is not saying that Rosamond is a bad person, just that she hid her true character from all around her and when it came out, no one knew how to deal with it.

Another part of this chapter that is particularly telling how Eliot clearly found Shakespeare’s ideal woman unrealistic, was when Lydgate finally divulged to Rosamond how much debt he was in. If Lydgate expected his wife to deal with the news with “sweet love” he was very obviously deluding himself. When Lydgate married Rosamond, he expected a wife that would be a sort of trophy wife who was supportive and beautiful, but not overly intelligent. He wanted someone who would assure him of his brilliance while never questioning him or his motives. When Lydgate told her of the debt, she reacted in a realistic fashion, with incredulousness. Rather than hiding her feelings and betraying nothing but sweetness, she becomes angry and tries to find a solution. The beginning of the epigraph states, “For there can live no hatred in thine eye, / Therefore in that I cannot know thy change” (359). Although Rosamond’s emotions may not have been quite as strong a hatred, Lydgate clearly saw the change in her eyes when he told her. As a result he could never look at her the same way and
their relationship of unrealistic expectations of the other changed dramatically and was never able to recover.

Another epigraph that is meant to be satirical, but to also foreshadow is the one found in chapter two taken from Cervantes famous novel, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. It states,

“Seest thou not yon cavalier who cometh toward us on a dapple-grey steed, and weareth a golden helmet?” “What I see,” answered Sancho, “is nothing but a man on a grey ass like my own, who carries something shiny on his head” “Just so,” answered Don Quixote: “and that resplendent object is the helmet of Mambrino.” (10).

In the satirical sense, this quote could mention Mr. Brooke. Mr. Brooke and Don Quixote have a lot in common, they are both senseless and a bit ignorant of everything around them. Mr. Brooke likes to seem wise to those around him, and sees himself as such. However, most people just ignore him or simply tolerate his presence. Like Quixote, he is at least slightly influential because of his wealth, but that is really all that he has going for him in the community of Middlemarch. He sees himself as a great person who has the potential to do great things, but in reality, his incompetence would keep him from being able to accomplish anything worth any great renown. However, this quote could also be a foreshadowing of Dorothea’s decisions a few chapters later.

Dorothea could easily represent Don Quixote after meeting Mr. Casaubon. Dorothea is eager to learn and yearns to have a brilliant teacher that can help her to progress and become a scholar of sorts. When she meets Casaubon and realizes that he not only is a scholar, but that he is also single, she jumps at the chance to learn from who she perceives to be a great man. She is so focus on herself and what she can gain from the knowledge that he could possibly teach her
that she becomes completely blind to his obvious faults and short-comings that most everyone around her is already aware of. While everyone around her warns her and tries to talk her out of marrying him, she insists because in her mind she is seeing a “cavalier” on a great steed. What she cannot see is that he has almost given up on scholarship and he has nothing that he wishes to offer her and instead expects her to be a common, quiet, proper Victorian wife. Gradually, she begins to realize that rather than a “cavalier” on a great steed, Casaubon instead is “nothing but a man on a grey ass…who carries something shiny on his head.” (10). And like Don Quixote who was devastated when he realized the giants were in fact windmills, in the end she is left with nothing but shattered dreams and disappointment after her marriage.

While some of Eliot’s epigraphs are serious and others are clearly ironic, others are meant to help the reader feel the depth of a character’s despair and add to the drama of the story. One such epigraph precedes chapter eight-two. Taken from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 50 it states, “My grief lies onward and my joy behind.” (493). In this chapter Will is still under the impression that Dorothea will never forgive him for the misunderstanding between him and Rosamond. As he wallows in his own self-pity he wonders if Dorothea had returned to Rosamond and had heard the true story of what had taken place. Even after finding out that Rosamond had cleared everything up, he feels that Dorothea’s dignity will be forever wounded and she will never forgive him. In his grief over the though the narrator states, “Until that wretched yesterday—except the moment of vexation long ago in the very same room and in the very same presence—all their vision, all their though of each other, had been as in a world apart, where the sunshine fell on tall white lilies, where no evil
lurked, and no other soul entered. But now—would Dorothea meet him in that world again?” (495).

Will truly seemed to think that all hope was lost and that his joy was truly behind him never to reemerge. The function of this quote was used to almost ready the reader for the feelings of despair that were to come. Will is an artistic and dramatic soul, it only makes sense that his despair would be introduced by one of Shakespeare’s love sonnets.

Some of the epigraphs that Eliot used were used to illustrate and give depth to her characters and story. One example of this is the epigraph taken from Wordsworth’s *Ode to Duty* that precedes chapter eighty. It states,

Stern lawgiver! yet thou dost wear/ The Godhead’s most benignant grace; /Nor know we anything so fair/ As is the smile upon thy face; / Flowers laugh before thee on their beds, / And fragrance in thy footing treads; / Thou dost preserve the Stars from wrong; / And the Most ancient Heavens, through thee, are fresh and strong. (483).

In this epigraph, Dorothea takes the place as the “stern lawgiver” towards Rosamond and Will after she sees them together and feels immense jealousy towards them. It states, “She had enveloped both Will and Rosamond in her burning scorn, and it seemed to her as if Rosamond were burned out of her sight forever.” (485). What she had thought was righteous indignation at first made her feel vast guilt for her misconceptions. And although she was not successful in her initial turn as the “lawgiver” as it did not result in her having “benignant grace” she tries her hardest to make amends after a bit of an inner struggle “having made up her mind that she would make as quietly and unnoticeably as possible her second attempt to see and save Rosamond.”
Although at the beginning of the chapter Dorothea did not fit the exact definition of the “lawgiver” that Wordsworth describes, she becomes the ideal when she makes the resolution to save Rosamond. In this case, Rosamond becomes one of the “Stars” that needs preservation from wrong. This epigraph described more of what Dorothea could become rather than what she already was and was in a way a foreshadowing of events.

Regarding how George Eliot gains added credibility through her use of epigraphs, Higdon states, “With them, she establishes a context and a sense of literary community. With them, she asserts another narrative voice complexly related to her own chapter.” (Higdon 131). This literary community that Higdon describes gives Eliot credibility because it adds a voice from that past that is able to agree with the point she is trying to make in her novel. It gives her arguments depth and a purpose that they might not otherwise be able to convey as certainly. Through her use of epigraphs by various well known authors and poets, Eliot proves that she is very well educated and that her arguments mean something.

One example of this is brought to the forefront by Marianne Novy in her essay, "Middlemarch" and George Eliot's Female (Re) Vision of Shakespeare", in which she compares Eliot’s writing in Middlemarch to Shakespeare. Novy states, “As George Eliot weaves her multiple plots, verbal echoes or epigraphs from Shakespeare’s comedies and sonnets frequently point up resemblances in character or situation.” (62). She relates different characters in Middlemarch to different character types in Shakespeare. She specifically relates Middlemarch to As You Like It and relates Lydgate and Rosamond’s marriage to the romantic comedy that takes place in As You Like It. This helps to highlight the literary community that Eliot creates throughout her novel. This sense of community is one of the reasons to include epigraphs in her
novel as it also relates to the community of Middlemarch were all of the characters live out their
daily lives and dramas. The epigraphs, in essence, relate Eliot to those of the past and create a
community of scholars that gives credibility, not only to Eliot through her use of them, but to
every author that she cites. These citations prove her knowledge as a scholar and help to give her
own writing more meaning. By seeing the allusions to Shakespeare throughout the novel, it gives
the reader a greater sense of community and harmony among scholars.

Among this literary community, Eliot would have wanted to distinguish herself from the
other authors and assert her authority as an author and a scholar. As epigraphs that Eliot uses are
a form of her identity, in a way, the epigraph function in the same way as her pen name. As a
woman during the Victorian Era, Eliot would not have been taken as seriously as she was if she
has used her given name. In this same way, with the epigraphs proving to the world that she is
educated, she was able to give her writing a bit more clout. What makes this especially
interesting is that many of the epigraphs were written by Eliot herself.

Writing her own epigraphs gave Eliot a bit more flexibility in her writing, although
Higdon notes that, “chapters entailing recognitions, confrontations, and reversals almost without
exception bear epigraphs from authors other than George Eliot.” (Higdon 128). It can be inferred
that even though writing her own epigraphs gave her more flexibility in her writing, using ones
by other authors for important scenes gave her writing its own seal of approval. It helped her to
be able to prove that her plot devices were good by showing that another, more prominent author
did a similar thing. This gave her books credibility and depth and helped her to become one of
the greatest authors of the nineteenth century. However, one thing that writing her own epigraphs
did for her was put her on the same level as the authors and scholars that had come before her.
This asserted her credibility into her text by, in essence, making herself equal with the greats that had already made their place in history.

Besides Eliot, there were other Victorian authors who used epigraphs. One of these was Elizabeth Gaskell. In Jeffrey E. Jackson’s essay "Elizabeth Gaskell and the Dangerous Edge of Things: Epigraphs in North and South and Victorian Publishing Practices", he talks extensively about how Gaskell used epigraphs. Much like Eliot, Gaskell used her epigraphs to allude to something, ironically or illustratively, that would happen within her novel. Jackson also argues that the epigraphs that Gaskell used were not only to further and deepen her plot, but to make political and social commentary about the world around her. As Middlemarch is already a novel that offers political and social commentary in the Victorian era, it stands to reason that the epigraphs that Eliot uses could also have something to with it as well. Jackson states, “epigraphs here enact the novels questioning and investigation of textual authority and representation. And in the degree to which the epigraphs speak of ‘the dangerous edge of things,’ they comment on the shortcomings and limits of pre-existent, textual forms.” (58). As stated previously in this essay, Eliot, though her scholarship, was trying to assert her right to be listed among the greats. She did this in part by representing the shortcomings of other novels and works that had come before. In a way, she was trying to do away with all of the romantic notions that previous works had portrayed and instead she tried to portray life as it really is: sometimes messy and complicated.

Through the examples of epigraphs from Middlemarch, the reader can see the worth of epigraphs in George Eliot’s writings. Through her education and use of quotations from the works of well-known authors Eliot was able to prove her skill as an author and give further
complexity to her characters and plot as well as establish her place among the great writers who preceded her and who followed after.
Works Cited


