

Jared A. Griffin

Common and Uncommon Quotes

A Theory and History of Epigraphs

SERIES IN LITERARY STUDIES

Summary

'Common and Uncommon Quotes: A Theory and History of Epigraphs' is a prolegomenon to the study of epigraphic paratextuality. Building on the work of Gerard Genette's paratextual studies, this volume contextualizes and traces the practice of epigraphy in Anglophone literary history, from the fifteenth to the early twentieth century. This study explores how epigraphs are used by author-functions as a hermeneutic for their text and to establish ethos with their audience, and how that paratextual relationship changed as publishing opportunities and literacy rates grew over four centuries. The first broad-reaching study of this kind, 'Common and Uncommon Quotes' seeks to understand how epigraphs work: through their privilege on the page, their appeal to conjured ideas of the past, and their calls to citizenship.

About the author

Jared A. Griffin is Associate Professor of English at the University of Alaska Anchorage. He earned his Ph.D. in English, with distinction, from Texas Christian University in 2009. He also holds an M.Ed. in English Education and a B.A. in English. Dr Griffin is the Language Editor for the Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies, and he writes a syndicated weekly newspaper column about English etymology and current events. Dr Griffin first studied epigraphy in graduate school, where he worked on theorizing the function of epigraphs in pre-19th century American texts, especially during the American Revolution. He is currently working on a database to archive epigraphs and epigraphed texts, and he has presented on biblical epigraphy at conferences.

Jared Griffin's "Common and Uncommon Quotes" is exactly the sort of scholarship I enjoy. It's thoughtful, engaging, and relevant across a broad range of fields and disciplines. As I read "Common and Uncommon Quotes", I continually returned to my research, re-considering the significance of the epigraphs in the texts that figure most prominently in my own work. Griffin's greatest strength might be his ability to cast the epigraph – almost universally overlooked and ignored – as a broadly significant critical concept that has application for literary historians, genre critics, and rhetoric scholars. I appreciated the genuine sense of curiosity that animates his research, and Griffin achieves that rare balance between rigor and approachability that is so difficult to find in much scholarship. For my own research, I appreciated Griffin's rhetorical analysis of the role of epigraphs: the discussions of the impact of epigraph on the writer's authority, their assumed relation to the canon, the position of the audience, and the expectations of the individual reader sparked a thoughtful consideration of the role of epigraphs in my own research into the role of rhetorical theory in the development of the novel in English. I suspect other scholars will have the same response: epigraphs and their impact are so universal that it's remarkable such scholarship hasn't been considered and pursued more broadly.

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