

# **COLLISION**

Epiquotation:

Why We Sometimes  
Misquote Stubbornly  
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## ABSTRACT

Most misquotations are owing to carelessness or willful misrepresentation and perpetuated by ignorance. More interesting, however, are those that persist despite being widely recognized as erroneous. Such memes are culturally selected for, and this can be explained by what I call the SIC hypothesis: compared with their originals, such misquotations are uniquely symbolic (S), improving (I), or compressive (C). In such cases, a loss of fidelity is compensated by aesthetic enhancement. But the apparent conflict between truth and beauty here evaporates as these are not simply misquotations, paraphrases, or interpolations but a different phenomenon entirely, which prompts the coinage of “epiquotation” (*n*) or some such neologism, together with punctuational revision. As tropes, epiquotations are quotation-adjacent, true to the presumed spirit of their originals, unique mnemonic keys, and aesthetic frames; and though they are extrinsic, they become essential addenda to the originals, which prompt yet fail to realize such potential expression. So construed, the epiquote phenomenon has paradoxical implications for retroactively describing the original works whose cultural reception has deemed them epiquotable.

## KEYWORDS

Misquotation  
Truth  
Aesthetics  
Trope  
Frame



FRED MADISON: I like to remember things .... How I remember them.  
Not necessarily the way they happened.

—David Lynch and Barry Gifford, *Lost Highway* (1997)<sup>1</sup>

Beauty is truth, truth beauty....

—John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819)<sup>2</sup>

As a kind of stubborn misquotation, what I call "epiquotation" is different from typical misquotation. In typical misquotation, one is careless or malicious in misrepresenting the original text or speech, and if the incorrect version proliferates, it is from ignorance or laziness. Typical misquotations are dull and contrast sharply with the interesting examples I will discuss. "Play it again, Sam" is a paradigm case, plausibly the most memorable movie line that never was. The actual lines in *Casablanca* are "Play it, Sam. Play 'As Time Goes By,'" and "Play it. You played it for her, you can play it for me."<sup>3</sup> As with epiquotations generally, "Play it again, Sam" persists in our imagination and culture despite being widely recognized as erroneous. Here I will limit discussion chiefly to works of literature and film, though much of what I say about such cases will also apply to misquotations of political figures and other celebrities where the misquote somehow fits them better than their actual words, like an off-the-rack suit subsequently tailored.

Stressing the *misquotational* aspect of these locutions will obscure crucial differences between them and typical misquotations. Indeed, we arguably distort the phenomenon if we insist on any currently standard classification: to call them (mis)quotations fails to capture their aesthetic stubbornness; to call them paraphrases fails to acknowledge that they come close to quotations; to call them interpolations — as in "Play it [again, Sam]" — fails to render either their holistic character or their conventional status. These locutions are quotation-adjacent, true to the presumed spirit of their originals, unique mnemonic keys, and aesthetic frames, and this indicates a phenomenon whose concept is becoming clearer as our vocabulary lags behind. It is to fill this gap that I offer the neologism

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## Epiquotation

“epiquotation” (*n*) — as in “To epiquote *Casablanca*, ‘Play it again, Sam.’” Note the apt connotations: like epigraphs, epiquotations are separate from the work but help to frame it; like epiphenomena, they are byproducts; like epilogues, they come afterward; like epicondyles, they are outgrowths that anchor further attachments.

Certain cases to be discussed are described in *What They Didn't Say: A Book of Misquotations*, understandably enough as mere misquotations. The book's introductory essay characterizes these locutions as “wrongly remembered sayings” that “represent unconscious editing” and become “part of our general vocabulary,” sometimes even having “achieved iconic status.”<sup>4</sup> The essay's tone suggests that the persistence and sheer number of such misquotations indicates an amusing aspect of human fallibility. This is apt to leave a misleading impression that such locutions are merely a type of misquotation perpetuated by laziness or ignorance. But this impression obscures what is operative in and interesting about epiquotations.

Consider Woody Allen's play and the subsequent movie *Play It Again, Sam*. Allen's choice of this title might be interpreted as echoing *What They Didn't Say* in lampooning our tendency to misremember quotations and remember misquotations. Indeed, the film's tagline is “Here's laughing at you, kid.” However, despite the humor, it is clear that for Allen's character and Allen himself the misquotation conjures a poignant nostalgia for *Casablanca* that echoes that in the film. In other words, Allen's use of “Play it again, Sam” is decidedly *not* a product of his ignorance or his derision of other people's. There is something else going on.

To be clear, although I am more interested in the aesthetic aspects of epiquotations, the imperfections of human memory are often also involved. “Play it again, Sam” persists in many people's minds because they mistakenly think the line occurs in the film. But it also much more tellingly sticks in the minds of people who know better, and this is because though it is wrong as a quotation, it gets something *right* about the film. It is the stubborn appeal of epiquotations to those who know that they are *not* quotations that is especially intriguing. Still, it seems highly likely that most epiquotations originate in faulty memories, that their origin is not deliberate. Their aesthetic appeal, however, is not only a significant factor in their cultural persistence, but it is also no doubt unconsciously at work in helping to motivate and shape the original mismemories on which epiquotations often depend. We can speculate about what psychological mechanisms may underlie such aesthetic distortion.

Setting aside more psychoanalytically oriented approaches, which nonetheless may be worth exploring, one way in is through meme theory. Memes are units of cultural selection, including “tunes, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches .... [M]emes propagate themselves in the

meme pool by leaping from brain to brain.”<sup>5</sup> As memes, epiquotations are both mutations of their originals and culturally selected for: successful replication errors. Generally speaking, a meme will tend to proliferate because it has value. For instance, a recipe will become more popular the tastier the dish. Likewise, a more efficient technique for performing some necessary task will tend to catch on. Consider this not the survival of the fittest but “the virality of the catchiest.” Although I find this meme-theoretic perspective helpful, nothing in what follows necessarily hinges on it.

As memes, tunes and catch-phrases — including epiquotations — often catch on not because of their immediate utility but because of their aesthetic value. I propose that epiquotations are stubborn because — and to the extent that — they aesthetically enhance their sources in a way that the original quotations do not. This intuition underlies the SIC hypothesis: epiquotations are aesthetically enhancing because they are uniquely symbolic (S), improving (I), or compressive (C). This hypothesis is meant to be doubly inclusive in that these are held to be the principal but not necessarily the only properties that feed into the aesthetic appeal of epiquotations and also in that a single epiquotation may exhibit more than one of them. Thus the SIC hypothesis concerns properties of epiquotations that we tend to respond to aesthetically. If an epiquotational meme goes viral, this will largely be the result of its aesthetic appeal, and such appeal, according to the SIC hypothesis, will often be due to at least one of the three hypothesized functions: symbolic, improving, or compressive.

Let us start with the symbolic function. Consider “Elementary, my dear Watson,” which is nowhere to be found in the Sherlock Holmes novels and stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, though it is a staple of pop-cultural references to the great detective. The aesthetic appeal of this misquotation lies in its serving as an elegant symbol, evoking immediately Holmes and Watson, the manner of their relationship, Holmes’ intelligence and detective work, and typical turns in conversation and plot. Having a similar function is the infamous “Beam me up, Scotty” not from *Star Trek*, which as a symbol helps define the television series. Such a line would be inferior as part of the show’s dialogue since for one reason formal communication protocol — in *Star Trek* as in real life typically — begins with first contact and identification (e.g., “Kirk to Scotty”) and is only then followed by orders (e.g., “Beam me up”), not the reverse.

Somewhat differently, the phrase “the road less traveled,” which is neither in nor the title of Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” uniquely represents the poem’s key image as perhaps *the* metaphor for finding one’s own path. Similarly, the altered “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” epitomizes its general point better than Shakespeare’s original “*That which we call a rose by any other word would smell*

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as sweet.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, both the Frost and the Shakespeare misquotations along with “Beam me up, Scotty” are arguably acontextual improvements on their originals; although the originals are not inferior in their original contexts, they do prove inferior for use in other contexts, that is, as symbols of the relevant works or their key ideas. An epiquotation that serves as a better symbol apart from the work often would have been an aesthetically poorer choice in the original work than the actual quote.

This, however, suggests the second way epiquotations can be aesthetically enhancing: by constituting genuine improvements of their originals. For a literary example, take “Ask not for whom the bell tolls” or “Do not ask for whom the bell tolls,” both of which seem to improve on the original from Donne: “[N]ever send to know for whom the bell tolls.”<sup>7</sup> It might seem hubris to think our misquotation poetically superior to the original line from the great metaphysical poet. However, although “No Man Is an Island” is often presented as a poem, it is a prose passage from one of Donne’s *Devotions*.<sup>8</sup> We cannot fault Donne for prose that rings of imperfect poetics to the modern ear. Indeed, the “Ask not” and “Do not ask” misquotations are part of how we appreciate Donne’s passage as if it *were* a poem.

Other, less controversial examples of epiquotational improvement suggest themselves. *Alice in Wonderland* would have been a better title than *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The unqualified “Greed is good” would have suited *Wall Street’s* ruthless Gordon Gekko better than “[G]reed, for lack of a better word, is good.”<sup>9</sup> Or consider, frequently misremembered from *Sunset Boulevard*, “I’m ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille.” We prefer this mismemory because the original is aesthetically inferior: “All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my closeup.”<sup>10</sup> This may seem an unjustified preference, yet recall the principle of composition that recommends leaving new information till the end of a sentence.<sup>11</sup> As Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) emerges to face a wall of news cameras, “I’m ready for my closeup” should prime us for the delusional revelation — “Mr. DeMille.”

Last, some epiquotations prove stubborn because they compress a lot of information. Take “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him well,” a misrendering of Hamlet’s “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio.” Here the misquotational “well” elegantly condenses Hamlet’s subsequent description: “a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times.... Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. — Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, “Slipped the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God” takes elements from the first and last lines of the poem “High Flight,” in effect compressing the entire poem between its evocative, well-matched bookends. Consider “nasty, brutish, and short” from Hobbes, though not a true misquotation,

as compressing the more complete “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>13</sup> Further, the quintessential “Play it again, Sam” compresses various elements of *Casablanca*: the song “As Time Goes By,” its emotional significance, the nightclub setting, the Rick and Sam relationship, the romance and nostalgia of the subsequent flashback — indeed, the whole of *Casablanca* itself.

Epiquotations reflect the well-worn tension between truth and beauty, “true” indicating that a claim “corresponds to reality” (as in the schema “*P* is true if and only if *P*”), a reality often plain and ugly and thus in those cases neither naturally nor aesthetically beautiful. These locutions as misquotations are not true to their originals; they get the words wrong. Since they are not strictly part of those works, it is false to claim that they are. However, as stubborn, they do get something right. They aesthetically enhance their sources from without, and so they need not be seen as competing with or an affront to the original lines or works or our memories of them. Their aesthetic appeal does come at the price of lost fidelity, and they thus run afoul of Keats’ paradoxical truth–beauty equation. However, in a way epiquotations actually exemplify the Keats equation. In step with the *Lost Highway* epigraph, they inform how we like to remember the works they get wrong even where we correctly remember the actual words. They frame their sources for our aesthetic pleasure in ways that no actual quotation could do nearly as well. Despite the hazard of distortion then, they express for those sources both our appreciation and our respect. Thus epiquotations, though not true to the *letter* of their originals, are true to the *spirit* or presumed spirit of their originals, fitting if unfit.

It might seem, however, that endorsing epiquotations imperils our epistemic duties, that we do wrong by truth by doing right by beauty. “Elementary, my dear Watson” is in the spirit of Sherlock Holmes, but it can mislead people into falsely believing that such a line occurs in the Conan Doyle corpus. So it might seem that by their beauty epiquotations seduce us into perpetuating ignorance. But even though strict quotation is often important (in scholarship, journalism, etc.), we often overemphasize the need for it in other contexts. For example, for most conversational purposes in making such reference, “Luke, I am your father” will suffice though the actual, far less recognizable line is “No, I am your father.”<sup>14</sup> One can appreciate an “Elementary, my dear Watson” or a “Play it again, Sam” without being deceived or misleading others about the source. Indeed, “Play it again, Sam” — as apropos of but not in *Casablanca* — is part of the film lore that true fans make it their business to know. Thus as distinct from but associated with their originals, epiquotations serve as metonyms without threat of distortion, without necessarily imperiling our epistemic duties. Where epistemic duty is done, we cannot reject epiquotations on epistemic grounds.

## Epiquotation

Although the proposed neologism “epiquotation” has some justification, more than terminological revision seems warranted. To further disambiguate epiquotations, I propose a new punctuation mark. This mark will not be as widely useful as quotation marks of course though it may serve as a convenience on par with shorthand, copyediting marks, or logical symbols as I will illustrate below. Many fonts have quotation marks that look something like this:

||

Rotating the quotation marks ninety degrees yields an equals sign:

||      =  
    ↪

In mathematics, the equals sign is straightforwardly distinct from the approximately equals sign:

=      vs.      ≈

Rotating the approximately equals sign ninety degrees parallels the initial move from quotation marks to equals sign:

≈      ≈  
    ↪

Call the result *epiquotation marks*. Such marks are fitting because they connote that enclosed expressions are not exactly but *approximately* the same as the originals. They also recall the potentially illusory effect of heat waves. Hence, to quote from *Casablanca*, ||Play it|| — but to epiquote, ≈Play it again, Sam.≈

Whether or not these proposals are adopted, it seems appropriate to conclude with the following paradoxical slant. Epiquotations are extrinsic to the works that inspire them as they are not — unlike quotations — contained by those

works. Nonetheless, as memes they take on a life of their own and seem to become after the fact essential addenda, in a sense perhaps becoming modest artworks in their own right. Note how “Play it again, Sam” has become such an important frame for *Casablanca*, enhancing and encapsulating its aesthetic appeal, that it is now all but indispensable to our concept of the film. The frame has become part of the work. Although *Casablanca* was complete, was *replete*, before epiquotation, it has become more than it was. It has achieved self-transcendence. Despite its erstwhile completeness then, we may rightly if oddly view the unepiquoted predecessor as retroactively incomplete, lacking the meme that was to become its unforeseen descendant. In contrast to the ossified eulogy that mere quotation often seems, epiquotation reflects an ongoing, living engagement with organic, vital works.<sup>15</sup> 

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## Notes

- 1 "Watched," *Lost Highway*, DVD, directed by David Lynch (Universal City, CA: Universal, 2008).
- 2 John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *The Pocket Book of Verse*, ed. M. Edmund Spenser (New York: Pocket Books, 1940), 133.
- 3 "Play it, Sam," "Of all the gin joints," *Casablanca*, DVD, directed by Michael Curtiz (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2003).
- 4 Elizabeth Knowles, "Introduction," in *What They Didn't Say: A Book of Misquotations*, ed. Elizabeth Knowles (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), v–vi.
- 5 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192.
- 6 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 189 (2.2.43–44). Emphasis added.
- 7 John Donne, "Meditation 17," in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 1975), 87. Emphasis added and removed.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 86–87.
- 9 "Greed Is Good," *Wall Street*, DVD, directed by Oliver Stone (Beverly Hills: Fox, 2000).
- 10 "All right, Mr. DeMille, I'm ready for my closeup," *Sunset Boulevard*, DVD, directed by Billy Wilder (Hollywood: Paramount, 2002).
- 11 See for example William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 32.
- 12 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Francis Fergusson (New York: Dell, 1958), 196 (5.5.202–211).
- 13 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Revised Student Edition, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 89.
- 14 "Vader's Revelation," *The Empire Strikes Back*, DVD, directed by Irvin Kershner (Beverly Hills: Fox, 2008).
- 15 Thanks to the editors and two anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback. An early version of this article was presented at the 2015 Atlantic Region Philosophers' Association conference at St. Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick.

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