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978-0-521-12872-8 - Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and  
Literary Practice in the Augustan Age

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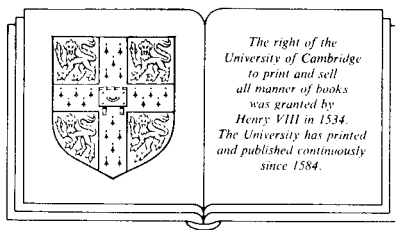
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# Probability and literary form

*Philosophic theory and literary practice in  
the Augustan age*

DOUGLAS LANE PATEY



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TIMOTHY KEEGAN

*Hic mens subsedit, cum fecerit undique gyrum,  
Inque suis dandis te praetulit omnibus unum:  
Totum posse suum tibi destinat.*

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## Preface

It is no accident that conventional divisions by period in the histories of philosophy and of literature overlap. Writers of the past have often aligned literary innovation with philosophic change, while modern scholars explain the prevalence in any given period of specific literary practices by reference to a climate of thought hospitable to such practices. It is easy to forget that the historiography of philosophy which shadows that of literature, a pattern of development mapped by Hegel in his lectures of the 1820s, arose at a time when *bonnes lettres* had only just been exchanged for *belles lettres* – that is, when literature had only just been made to suffer its modern separation from the rest of thought.<sup>1</sup> (We are still surprised how often Hegel’s history of philosophy calls upon “literary” evidence.) Now that the movement to isolate literature from history and from the history of thought is dead – a movement which began with the birth of “aesthetics” in the eighteenth century, and reached its self-conscious apogee in modern formalist criticism – we hear once again what the author of the *Essay on Criticism* knew well, that “the historical study of literature is a necessary condition for any literary analysis,”<sup>2</sup> and study of the historical relations of literature and philosophy prospers.

This book is an attempt to make available to the student of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature a largely neglected body of thought which was crucially important to Augustan literary theory and practice. In three parts, it treats: the historical development and affiliations of the concept of probability until the eighteenth century; the role of the concept in Augustan literary theory, in its general accounts of the nature and structure of literary works; and the more specific ways in which literary and philosophic concepts of probability affected literary practice in giving shape to particular works. Although my focus is the period 1660–1800, this is also a book about change: about the shift from Renaissance to Augustan notions of the probable; about the ways in which a theoretical term changes its meaning as it migrates from one conceptual context to another; and, within the Augustan period, when the kinds of interrelations enjoyed by literature and philosophy

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remained fairly stable, about the ways shifts in philosophic theory alter literary practice.<sup>3</sup>

As might be expected of any such foundational category of thought, concepts of probability shape endeavors in many disciplines. Yet despite its pervasive importance in the Augustan conceptual framework – or perhaps because of it – only a handful of literary scholars have treated the subject. Before about 1975, only Hoyt Trowbridge could be heard to argue that “probable reasoning . . . was not nearly so characteristic of the preceding and following periods,” and to suggest “that an understanding of this way of reasoning might illuminate the actual processes of thought in many fields during the eighteenth century.”<sup>4</sup> Rarer still are diachronic studies: since the time of Aristotle’s *Poetics* it has been understood that “probability” (or “verisimilitude”) may be a test of literary works, but the notion has seemed transparently commonsensical, so much so as to have no history, but only periods of greater or less ascendance. But by treating probability as a stable category native wholly to literary criticism, as one that does not change and that can be understood without reference to larger contexts, literary studies cannot grasp or explain the phenomena they discuss. The term *probability* conceals varied and shifting commitments, both critical and philosophic; we must examine its meaning and use in the centuries before 1660 if we are to understand its Augustan manifestations. Nor can we restrict our attention to materials solely “literary”; medicine, law, and theology (as well as rhetoric and philosophy) all contribute in the genesis of Augustan probability, its characteristic uses, and the language in which it typically is dressed.

Our task is complicated by recent developments in the history of philosophy itself. It has long been known that the mathematical theory of probability, with which this book is only very little concerned, came to flower with surprising suddenness during a few years in the mid-seventeenth century; in his massive *History of the Mathematical Theory of Probability*, Isaac Todhunter devotes only a few pages to the precursors of Pascal and Fermat. Might our idea of the probable itself, contrary to all expectation, be no older? Michel Foucault advances such a radical thesis in *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), and Ian Hacking has made Foucault’s case much more persuasively in his exciting study of *The Emergence of Probability* (1975). Foucault and Hacking argue not merely that in only about 1660 did the term “probability” take on its modern meanings, but that previously our very concept of probability did not exist; its coming at once marked the end of the Renaissance and made possible the mathematical doctrine of chances. Literary critics have



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been quick to adopt such views.<sup>5</sup> If correct, the Foucault–Hacking hypothesis must in altering the historical process by which probability evolved alter also its Augustan product; by positing radical intellectual discontinuity, the hypothesis would render unintelligible much of what the Augustans themselves understood as the continuity of their own literary theory with that of the past. Chapter I presents an alternative to Foucault and Hacking’s account, while in appendix A, I criticize the hypothesis itself.

Chapter II develops, by examining arguments made in a number of disciplines, the theoretical vocabulary in which Augustan thinking about probability was conducted. Only by understanding the doctrines of “probable signs” and “probable circumstances,” elements in a schematization of inference from effect to cause, can we come to see how notions of probability function in Augustan literary thought. Assisted by such knowledge, part II, on literary theory, attempts to clarify old issues and raise new ones. Chapter III sorts out differing connotations of literary “probability” and “verisimilitude,” while chapter V addresses the explicit use of “probability” in the Augustan critical lexicon (as a term used in the effort to mediate competing critical demands placed on the literary work). Beyond these explicit uses of the term, however, notions of probability constitute the age’s very understanding of literary structure itself. It is well known that Restoration and eighteenth-century critics typically discuss works by applying, in order, the familiar Aristotelian categories of moral, fable, character, sentiments, language, and spectacle; chapter IV explains this seemingly hidebound and arbitrary critical procedure as the embodiment of a special view of literary structure. The categories refer to what the Augustans understood to be the “parts” of literary works, the parts of which literary wholes are constructed. Within a literary whole, these parts are organized hierarchically: the old categories refer to levels within a hierarchy, and their ordering becomes intelligible once we recognize that these levels are related one to another as are signs and effects in contemporary models of probable inference.

If notions of probability lie at the heart of the Augustans’ theoretical understanding of the nature and structure of literature, how do those ideas affect the ways in which particular works in fact were written? To the extent that literary meaning depends on (is generated from) works’ structure, how do these ideas affect our readings of particular works? Part III shows how concepts of probability are embodied in and help us to understand narrative fiction from Fielding to Sterne. In such works most of all does philosophy illuminate literary practice. Where literary works are understood to

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be structures of probable signs, there will be a fundamental similarity between the philosopher's account of probable inference and literary accounts of the ways "parts" of works unite into "wholes." Moreover, because the Augustans understood the process of interpretation to be, in large measure, the mental process of joining such parts into wholes in the process of reading, Augustan theories of reading and interpretation also share important similarities with contemporary accounts of probable inference. Chapter VII lays the groundwork of this isomorphism in Augustan accounts of inference, structure, and interpretation, and explores the ways it is enacted in narrative. Here we are assisted by the didactic intentions of most Augustan fiction: in these works, authors quite consciously demand of their readers certain procedures of probable inference; these procedures not only reflect contemporary thinking about the probable, but are embodied and dramatized in literary form; and the procedures of interpretation required, if these works are to be understood, are precisely the habits of thought which their authors mean explicitly to teach. For the Augustans, it is in its probability that the intelligibility of a literary work resides – the intelligibility of each part of the work, and of joinings of parts into wholes; didactic function resides in the same probability, as readers make their way through the hierarchic structures presented to them, learning certain habits of inference in the very act of exercising such inference.

The historical roots and affiliations of Augustan notions of probability are so varied and encompass so many disciplines not usually the concern of the literary critic that I cannot hope in this book to have done more than open ground on which others, more skilled in special fields than I, may build more securely. But while the necessity of treating, in addition to literary texts, contemporary systems of medicine or epistemology increases the possibility of error, it also adds to the happy burden of acknowledgements I gratefully make for the assistance of other scholars.

But for the continuing generosity and humbling intelligence of Irvin Ehrenpreis, who supervised my initial treatment of this subject in a doctoral dissertation, this book would scarcely exist. Ralph Cohen introduced me to the problems of Augustan literary history and change; to him and to my other teachers, Martin Battestin, Peter Heath, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., I owe a debt that all who know their works will understand. Gordon Braden, Leo Damrosch, Nora Jaffe, William Little, Eric Reeves, John Richetti, Harold Skulsky, and John P. Wright read various stages of the manuscript and made a number of helpful suggestions. For answers to specific questions, I am happy

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