

## *Introduction*

This book sets out to mediate from a literary perspective between the impressive computer-based work on attribution studies which has been done over the last four decades and a much older tradition of such studies, which, considered as an organised scholarly enterprise, reaches back as far as the great library of Alexandria and embraces the formation of the Jewish and Christian biblical canons. It is not the work of a specialist in attribution but of a scholar for whom the determination of authorship has repeatedly been a crucial element in other kinds of investigation. In reviewing the existing literature I soon realised that fundamental questions concerning criteria of proof in establishing attributions remained unexamined: these are addressed in my concluding chapter. It was also a surprise to find that a discipline whose subject matter was individual authorship had given very little attention to what it meant by individualness – a matter that I also try to remedy. The book is directed equally at those who need to orientate themselves in the field in order to investigate particular cases and those whose primary interest is in wider issues of argument and methodology.

My first practical involvement with questions of attribution arose during many years of work on the thousands of political and libertine satires that circulated in early-modern and Enlightenment Britain, for the most part anonymously and in manuscript. This corpus was considered in broad outline in a chapter of my *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-century England*<sup>1</sup> and from the perspective of the best-known author of such pieces in my edition of *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*.<sup>2</sup> It will also be the subject of a further study now in preparation. These satires emerged from a culture in which personal safety demanded that authorship should be concealed, but in which speculation about it was intense. The Rochester edition raised the additional problem of presenting an author, for whom even major and long-accepted ascriptions were frequently unprovable, to present-day readers who not only desired a

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canon which would offer a secure basis for interpretation but were often drawn to Rochester by a strong interest in his personality. Neither kind can have been very pleased with the result, which left several key attributions undecided.

A second personal involvement arose from the writing of two books on the performing arts in nineteenth-century Australia whose primary materials were unsigned notices in newspapers.<sup>3</sup> From their origins in the late seventeenth century until within living memory, newspapers and magazines presented the bulk of their contents as the anonymous voice of the organ or under pen-names. Any attempt to write the life of a major author of that period is likely at some point to strike against the problem of unattributed journalism, either in defining the canon or in establishing whether the person concerned really held particular views. For minor literary authors and politicians and all professional journalists, the determination of authorship is often crucial to whether a career can be mapped out in the first place. In the case of metropolitan journals, surviving archival sources and financial records may sometimes permit attributions to be established; but the more one moves away from the metropolis towards the ever-advancing frontier of European expansion, the more likely the researcher is to be left with bare columns of newsprint without either internal documentation or much in the way of complementary book publication. Daily, weekly and monthly journalism is the largely unmapped *terra incognita* of attribution studies.

A need to move beyond traditional techniques for dealing with such cases led me to the genial door of John Burrows, who from the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales had established a position of world leadership in computational stylistics. By working with John on problems from the Rochester canon and then on a wider range of attribution questions from scribally circulated satire, which produced joint papers on Shadwell and Aphra Behn, I was able to watch his methods in action and encouraged to explore the work of a lively and disputatious group of international scholars who, over the last half-century, have applied statistical and computer-based methods (two categories which, despite overlap, are not synonymous) to the determination of authorship. My interest in computer applications in the humanities is a long-standing one, my first contribution having been published as long ago as 1969, but had been until then chiefly applied to scholarly editing. In our joint work on Rochester the new methods were applied alongside the old, sometimes producing the same identifications and sometimes differing ones which

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then had, if possible, to be reconciled. John more than anyone else provided the inspiration for this book; however, I must absolve him from any complicity in the positions it maintains, which several times depart from what I know to be his.

My movement from a practical to a theoretical study of attribution has taken place during an era of searching philosophical enquiry into the nature of authorship, a matter famously brought to the forefront of literary studies at the close of the 1960s by Barthes's 'The death of the author' and Foucault's response in 'What is an author?' and far from concluded by Seán Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author*.<sup>4</sup> It may disappoint some readers that the issues raised in this debate are not, by and large, given much consideration in what follows. This is not because of any lack of interest on my part but because a study of attribution practice had to maintain a precise focus on the question of how personal responsibility for given aspects of given texts might be distributed. My approach acknowledges from the start that there are many texts and aspects for which no sure answer can be given to this question and has no desire to reinstate what is referred to by a convenient shorthand as 'the myth of the Romantic author'. Its arguments are more often disintegrationist than integrationist, maintaining, with the tradition of editorial theory inaugurated by Jerome McGann, that most literary creation is to a greater or lesser degree co-operative, if not collaborative, in nature. Authorship so conceived is a form of intellectual work which for good practical reasons (even if they are as mundane as determining the address to which the royalty or copyright cheques should be sent) needs to be credited to those craftspersons who perform it. It is true that for many of the texts considered in this book that responsibility has been evaded, but it is equally true that this has often been done unwillingly. The great majority of writers wish passionately to assert their responsibility for their creations – whether in the form of 'an ill-favoured thing, sir, but mine own' or *quod scripsi scripsi*.

## CHAPTER ONE

*Individuality and sameness*

The subject of attribution studies is the uniqueness of each human being and how this is enacted in writing. One determinant of uniqueness is biological: at the moment of conception a mingling of genetic information occurs which is unprecedented and unrepeatable. This mingling is partly a rule-governed and partly a random process. The rule-governed part ensures a degree of resemblance between siblings and close relatives and of uniformity over the race and species: individuality is never absolute. But then neither is it ever absent: in the most inbred of populations there will still be immeasurable possibilities of variation. Nature's poker machine never gives the same prize twice.

Even in the brains of identical twins, formed when the zygote divides after conception, tiny irregularities in the laying down of neural pathways become magnified into differences in the ways by which the brain, as a self-organising system, coordinates its vast assemblage of centres and individual neurones in the acts of knowing, speaking and writing. Experience stocks all brains with different knowledge, perceptions and attitudes. On the other hand, since language is also a shared possession with communal as well as self-expressive functions, what nature and experience individualise will often be overwritten by socialisation.

A fable may help to clarify the roles of the individual and the communal. A wise queen in ancient times established a college of philosophers. Because her dominions covered many lands in which many different tongues were spoken, her first instruction to this college was to devise an artificial language, free from all anomalies, which would permit all the members of her far-flung dominions to converse freely with each other, and with the tax-gatherers. There were a hundred philosophers in the college – all of them, sadly, male – and each one was told to perfect a language and devise a script in which it might be written. One year was allowed for this and a handsome prize promised to the winner. Differences both of nature and nurture combined to produce a variety of

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artificial languages which were, of course, mutually incomprehensible. The judgement of the prize was made by a senate of savants from all the lands concerned, none of whom were themselves members of the college; but the winner, who came from a distant, minority people, was so resented by his rivals that, as he made his way to the throne to receive his prize, he was seized by them and torn to pieces.

Horrified by this dreadful crime, the queen banished the entire college to an island where they were to live the remainder of their lives in isolation. Here the philosophers continued to compose and copy works of learning; but, from obstinacy, each of them did this in his individual invented language, convinced that this was the most perfect and should have been awarded the prize. Even in the daily affairs of life they would condescend to speak only in their own languages, with the result that there was no possibility of meaning being communicated. It became a matter of pride that messages were transmitted only in this self-defeating way: even the universal language of mimicry and gesture was avoided. Instead, the philosophers always held their arms absolutely rigid and never changed the expressions of their faces from an unyielding frown.

The resultant society was profoundly dysfunctional; but it would have offered no problems at all for the determination of attribution. A work encountered in this island must have been written in one of its ninety-nine different artificial languages with their characteristic scripts: it was only a matter of discovering which one. With the aid of a grammar and dictionary of that language, which the inventor was always willing to supply, it might even be read by someone who was determined enough, though it is not recorded that this ever happened.

The reverse case is shown by the subsequent history of the nation. On the death of the queen, her realm was threatened with civil war over the succession. In order to avert this it was concluded that one of the exiled philosophers should be chosen by lot and made absolute monarch. The new king commenced his reign by sentencing all his fellow philosophers to death, with the mitigating clause that they were each permitted to utter a speech of farewell in their own artificial language outlining its excellences. His second measure was to make the speaking of his own invented language compulsory for all official business throughout the realm. To this end schools were established in which the language was taught; moreover, it was taught in a particularly pure and regulated way from which no departure was permitted. Innovations were punished by death; even unintended solecisms might lead to imprisonment.

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At the end of ten years the new language was taught in every corner of the realm but in a way that left no possibility for individual difference except in vocal pitch and timbre, and even here an attempt was made to avoid this by close imitation of the speech of the inventor. It was also required that in speaking this language one should adopt the 'philosophical facial expression' as described above and refrain from movement of the limbs. Writing, similarly, became so uniform that it was a matter of the greatest difficulty to tell one person's hand from another's. In this society the determination of attribution became a matter of the most acute difficulty, with the result that when satirical poems about the monarch began to circulate it was impossible for his spies to identify their scribes or authors. Even to overhear one being recited would not necessarily allow one to identify the speaker since everyone present spoke in exactly the same way. The finest minds of the country were therefore enrolled into a corps of attributionists charged with overcoming this problem: inevitably, they found, there were always minute differences between individual performances of the common language.

The exiles' island and the philosopher's kingdom represent on the one hand a total individualisation and on the other a close-to-total uniformity in language behaviour. Fortunately in real life these two tendencies are never so extreme. For communal, civic and national tasks to be performed efficiently requires enforcement of common linguistic rules and meanings at every level; yet in everyday speech there will always be countervailing processes of adaptivity and invention, as a result of which the speech of the young may cease to be intelligible to the elderly, even when familiar words are being employed.

Those who came of age in the 1960s think of those who came of age in the 1990s as 'Generation X', as being characterized by an unknown factor. Although they both use the same language in everyday speech, these generations supposedly talk past each other because their words refer to different things, different experiences, different texts.<sup>1</sup>

One would expect a greater stability of the formal 'grapholects', specialised forms of language, such as that in which this book is written, whose *raison d'être* is to be read rather than spoken. These are conservative, highly artificial forms of a language that require many years of training if they are to be written with assurance. A newspaper editorial from any part of the world in which English is spoken or read is likely to be written in a common style whose historical origins lie in the prose of the eighteenth-century periodical essay and the early nineteenth-century

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review. (It is only half a century ago that aspiring leader writers were instructed to model themselves on the prose of Lord Macaulay.) Since such leaders are always by convention anonymous and cultivate a studied impersonality (the voice of the paper rather than any individual) they are a fruitful field for attribution studies. A leader writer once confided to me that he could always pick his own work because he was the only one of three regular editorialists to make generous use of the semi-colon; but, apart from that, even he could not readily recognise his own writing once memory of the subject matter had faded. But this is a practical difficulty rather than a theoretical one: leader-writers' English is simply another version of the idea of the invariant philosophical language, and, however determined the attempt to repress individuality, will always betray its authorship to a skilled enough investigator with sufficient data to work from. Dr Johnson may be allowed the final word on this topic: 'Why, Sir, I think every man whatever has a peculiar style, which may be discovered by nice examination and comparison with others: but a man must write a great deal to make his style obviously discernible.'<sup>2</sup>

The individualist position has not been a popular one in the humanities in recent years. In its reaction against the nineteenth-century and modernist cult of the author as cultural hero, the 1960s turned to ways of defining the workings of language that disregarded the agency of the author in order to present a purely linguistic model of text creation: language giving rise to language. As a heuristic device this proved productive in the same way as non-Euclidean geometries have proved productive, that is by bringing processes to our attention that were not otherwise visible and allowing us to articulate these both practically and theoretically. Yet this erasure of the author has remained paradoxical, not least because it was powered by the creativity of a number of profoundly individualistic thinkers and writers. There was never any doubt as to where royalty cheques for Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Kristeva and Derrida ought to be sent: they reasserted heroic authorship even in their questioning of it. Attribution studies demands that we attend to the notion of individual agency in a way that cannot be fully satisfied by structuralist and poststructuralist epistemologies because it raises questions which they have no capacity to address. Even to think from within poststructuralist discourse about 'the individual' as a reality rather than a concept can only be done through the most tortuous of theoretical convolutions, a predicament which is an unavoidable consequence of the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

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Saussure's distinction has recently been revisited by sociolinguists interested in individual performances of language. The earlier tendency was to categorise *parole*, which would include the variants of a language spoken, or written, by individuals, as somehow inferior to or derived from the generalised *langue*. Barbara Johnstone argues that if *langue* is identified as 'true' language, then *parole* which departs from it (as most do) comes to be seen as either deviance or immaturity.<sup>3</sup> But this *langue* is at best an uneasy back-formation from the innumerable varieties of *parole*, which in themselves can never claim more than a temporary stability because of the continual pressure to innovation in the language behaviour of individuals as they respond to changes in their immediate environments or simply assert their uniqueness through linguistic play. The moment linguistics admits a model of language as a mode of individual self-expression, the received view immediately starts to crumble. A Saussurean explanation of the phonetic changes that turned Latin into French would be that they were deterministic products of a synchronic system which could not have adjusted itself in any other way. This is a very hard proposition to swallow and would probably not have been swallowed if it had not appealed to the prejudices of educational bureaucracies wedded to the promulgation of a particular standardised version of the national language.

Johnstone, the most outspoken advocate of the new individualism in linguistics, cites one of the great pioneers of the modern discipline, Edward Sapir, in support of her claim for the necessary uniqueness of the idiolect. In his paper 'Speech as a personality trait', Sapir wrote: 'There is always an individual method, however poorly developed, of arranging words into groups and of working these up into larger units. It would be a very complicated problem to disentangle the social and individual determinants of style, but it is a theoretically possible one.'<sup>4</sup> In *The Linguistic Individual* Johnstone takes up exactly this problem of disentangling the social from the individual in ways that are of great interest to attribution studies. 'Linguistic behaviour', as she sees it,

varies statistically with social factors – sociolinguistic research has made this abundantly clear – and with psychological factors, as well as with changes in rhetorical situation. But none of these factors *causes* people to talk one way or another. (p. 55)

To the structuralist, language is a rule-generated system; but in Johnstone's and Sapir's linguistics the 'rules' are nothing more than an oversimplified *post hoc* record of the innumerable things individual people



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actually do with language in order to represent themselves to each other and communicate meaning. Elsewhere Johnstone summarises Sapir:

If one looks at culture from the perspective of a child acquiring it . . . one sees that culture is not a unitary whole. Each individual's culture is different . . . In his writings he points out again and again that the abstractions studied by anthropologists and linguists – cultures and languages, in other words – should not be taken as real. (p. 20)

Against 'laws of syntax' Sapir set 'the stammerer who is trying to "get himself across"', denying that the former had any 'higher reality' and calling for 'a minute and sympathetic study of individual behavior . . . in a state of society' (p. 21).

A second critique of Saussurean linguistics, this time of its insistence on the arbitrariness of the sign and the generation of meaning through differentiation, is offered by the work of cognitive linguists, for whom language is an embodied function of the individual human brain. In *Shakespeare's Brain*, Mary Crane explains:

From a cognitive perspective, language is shaped, or 'motivated', by its origins in the neural systems of a human body as they interact with other human bodies and an environment. This theoretical position has profound implications for postmodern concepts of subjectivity and cultural construction. In the first place, although the relationship between a particular phoneme *tree* and the concept that it represents is arbitrary, the meaning of the concept itself is grounded in the cognition and experience of human speakers and is structured by them. Cognitive subjects are not simply determined by the symbolic order in which they exist; instead, they shape (and are also shaped by) meanings that are determined by an interaction of the physical world, culture, and human cognitive systems. In Terence Deacon's formulation, the human brain and symbolic and linguistic systems have coevolved, and each has exercised a formative influence on the other.<sup>5</sup>

The brain and its functioning are exactly what was banished from Saussure's immaterialist model of linguistic process, as it was from those of Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, but, like Banquo's ghost, it refuses to stay away from the party. To reinstate it and its operations at the centre of linguistics is also to reinstate the reality of human agency as, in Crane's words, 'a constitutive feature of the human experience of embodied selfhood and a basic building block of thought and language' (p. 20). This realisation is likely to be of great practical as well as theoretical importance for attribution studies.

To reject certain reigning epistemologies as irrelevant to the tasks of attribution studies is not, however, to step back into a positivist golden

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age. Because these epistemologies have come into existence, and have enlarged our sense of the complexity of any socially situated act of writing, it is impossible simply to revert to older, naive conceptualisations of authorial agency. It is misleading, therefore, to salute the rebirth of the author: the author as conceived by positivism remains dead. What is happening is closer to ‘The author is dead: long live the author’ with the nature and lineaments of the new successor still fully to reveal themselves. What attribution studies, cognitive science and the new sociolinguistics maintain is that language is also languages and that there are as many of these as there are individuals. We should add to this the self-evident rider that the search for aspects of language behaviour that are unique to specific individuals cannot be undertaken without a belief in the reality of individuality. Those who do not believe in the individual and the individual’s power to originate language will, presumably, reject the project, and deny its results, even when these are addressed to their own texts.

This distinction in viewpoints is further illuminated by Don Giovanni from Mozart’s opera. That the Don is driven by an insatiable hunger for sexual conquests is obvious enough; but the reasons for this have been much debated. The central issue is again one between sameness and uniqueness. Giovanni may want endless women because he does not really notice their individual differences. In Congreve’s words from *The Old Batchelour*:

Men will admire, adore and die,  
While wishing at your Feet they lie:  
But admitting their Embraces,  
Wakes ’em from the golden Dream;  
Nothing’s new besides our Faces,  
Every Woman is the same.<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, he may want endless women because he is acutely aware of their individuality and variety – sexual and spiritual – and the ways in which every one is distinct and different from every other one, instilling each fresh experience with the promise of new knowledge. A way of resolving the matter is suggested by Leporello’s catalogue aria in Act 1 of *Don Giovanni*. The effect of the words is to emphasise the sameness of women. They might differ in nationality, age, hair-colour, temperament and a few other characteristics, but the ground is unvarying: the same woman distributed under a number of classifications but otherwise a constant. This was very probably the view of the matter held by the librettist, Da Ponte, an Enlightenment maintainer of the