

Editor's Note

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Stylometry is the application of quantitative methods to the differentiation of literary language. It owes its potential for insight, as well as its tendency to attract controversy, to its combination of two fundamentally contrasting disciplines, the statistical and the literary.

Stylometry is by no means a recent invention – the Polish philosopher Wincenty Lutosławski first proposed the term “stylométrie” in the 1890s – but it is still not accepted as well-founded and useful in all quarters of literary studies. It is now hard to be ignorant of its existence, however, given the volume of published stylometric studies, these days exclusively done with a computer.

Shakespeare has been a particular focus for stylometry, principally, but not only, in questions of attribution. To cite just one example, *The New Oxford Shakespeare*, which started appearing in

2016, offers a root-and-branch reassessment of the canon based on stylometry. The accumulation of published stylometric findings on Shakespeare, in the Oxford volumes and elsewhere, has in its turn called forth a considerable amount of critique, theoretical, methodological, and practical.

This all suggests that now is a good moment to collect some stylometric essays for readers of *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies*, and I congratulate the editors of the journal for their decision to commission this special issue on the topic. I hope readers will agree that the collection that has resulted helpfully reflects the current situation, where stylometry can point to achievements, and is no longer a novelty, but has not escaped trenchant criticism either. The essays cover critique in which the critic engages closely with the practices under investigation; practice, in a full awareness of the penumbra of negative commentary that now surrounds stylometry, with an understanding of what it can do well and what falls outside its remit; well-informed and duly sceptical application of the findings of stylometry to literary history; theorisation balancing deep familiarity with the discipline of literary study and with the contours of the new practice; and exposition of a method with due attention to the technically straightforward but theoretically contested intersection of language and computation.

We start with Giuliano Pascucci's account of building phylogenetic trees with Shakespeare fragments using a compression algorithm – a careful exposition which shows the workings of a stylometric method step by step. We go on to Jonathan P. Lamb's framing of stylometry in terms of a much older term, "philology", the two approaches linked by the idea of looking at language 'prior to meaning', with a demonstration of practice. Then Jakob Ladegaard and Ross Deans Kristensen-McLachlan present some more stylometric findings, on the peculiarities of the spoken dialogue of bastards. Edward Pechter discusses a key question about the capabilities of stylometry, and examines the limitations of the "style" that it can claim to measure. Finally, authorship attribution meets theatre history in Roslyn L. Knutson's consideration of how theater historians might deal with the implications of some of the recent findings about authorship.

At its best, stylometry offers genuine innovation: propositions that are surprising and (strictly in their own terms) true. It can usefully be understood in terms of challenges to interpretation. Here is a claim, here are its intellectual and methodological underpinnings. Now let it prosper or wither in the court of scholarly opinion – gain or lose plausibility and importance, through parallel work in related areas, or further thought about how the numbers relate to meaning. This in its turn raises wider questions about technology and human values which have become urgent in the digital age. I think the essays that follow are valuable contributions to this discussion, which I feel is one of the most important of our time, in Shakespeare studies and beyond.