Anonymity, Individuality and Commonality in Writing in British Periodicals — 1830 to 1890: A Computational Stylistics Approach.

by

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Alexis Antonia
Preface and Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude belongs to Emeritus Professor John Burrows and the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing (CLLC) which he established at the University of Newcastle. In asking me to become the Centre's research assistant, he introduced me – by a process of osmosis – to the field of computational stylistics. In working for John, I learned the value of patience, thoroughness and exactitude in undertaking projects involving computer-assisted analysis of texts.

Particular thanks are due to my two supervisors, Professor Hugh Craig and Dr. Ellen Jordan, who both helped me in a myriad of different ways. Hugh assumed the directorship of the Centre at a time when the horizons for computer technology were rapidly expanding, and, in working for him, I was introduced to the age of on-line texts, hyper-texts and an ever-increasing array of custom-built programs. When Ellen approached Hugh with an attribution problem in the Victorian periodicals, I learned of the existence of this vast body of interesting and well-written articles. As the research assistant working on this project, I became more and more fascinated with the field. It was Ellen’s suggestion that I undertake a higher research degree project involving the periodicals. Since I now had a topic I could be passionate about and two excellent supervisors at hand, I submitted my application and was accepted as a candidate.

Dr. Jordan’s expertise in the Victorian era led to two of the projects reported in the thesis. The first topic came about when Eileen Curran approached Ellen with the suggestion that the CLLC might apply its methods to suspected misattributions in the Wellesley Index. As the Centre’s research assistant, I was responsible for carrying out the work involved in this project. The second topic stemmed from Ellen’s awareness of the authorship mystery surrounding the ‘anti-women’s movement’ articles published in the Saturday Review shortly after its inception in 1855. The initial findings of this project were published in
Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies. Since some of the findings of the thesis suggested another way of investigating the topic, a second series of tests were carried out and these revised findings are presented in the thesis.

I would like to acknowledge infra-structure funding support to the CLLC from the School of Humanities and Social Science which allowed me to employ Elizabeth Lidbury and Alison Carroll to keyboard a number of periodical articles. With their help, I was able to obtain electronic versions of many unpublished articles. The text collections for this thesis represent a valuable resource. Anyone with a particular interest in the periodicals, who would like access to any of this material, is welcome to contact the CLLC. Finally, I thank those family members and friends who have provided support and encouragement and patiently endured my endless pre-occupation with the periodicals.
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IN committing this Work to the judgment of the Public, the Editors have but little to observe.

It will be easily perceived, that it forms no part of their object, to take notice of every production that issues from the Press; and that they wish their Journal to be distinguished, rather for the selection, than for the number, of its articles.

Of the books that are daily presented to the world, a very large proportion is evidently destined to obscurity, by the insignificance of their subjects, or the defects of their execution; and it seems unreasonable to expect that the Public should be interested by any account of performances, which have never attracted any share of its attention. A review of such productions, like the biography of private individuals, could afford gratification only to the partiality of friends, or the malignity of enemies.—The very lowest order of publications are rejected, accordingly, by most of the literary journals of which the Public is already in possession. But the Conductors of the Edinburgh Review propose to carry this principle of selection a good deal farther; to decline any attempt at exhibiting a complete view of modern literature; and to confine their notice, in a great degree, to works that either have attained, or deserve, a certain portion of celebrity.

As the value of a publication, conducted upon this principle, will not depend very materially upon the earliness of its intelligence, they have been induced to prefer a quarterly to a monthly period of publica-
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non, that they may always have before them a greater variety for selection, and be occasionally guided in their choice by the tendencies of public opinion.

In a Review which is published at so long intervals, it would be improper to continue any article from one Number to another; and, for this reason, as well as for the full discussion of important subjects, it may, sometimes, be found necessary to extend these articles to a greater length, than is usual in works of this nature. Even with these allowances, perhaps the reader may think, that some apology is necessary for the length of a few articles in the present Number. If he cannot find an excuse for them, in the extraordinary interests of the subjects, his candour will probably lead him to impute this defect to that inexperience, which subjects the beginning of all such undertakings to so many other disadvantages.

October 1802.

The illustrations on pages iii-v were scanned from a microfilm copy of the first edition of the Edinburgh Review published in October 1802.

M. Mounier, "a man of talents and of virtue," according to the great anti-revolutionary writer of this country, the antagonist of Mirabeau, and the popular president of the first National Assembly, is well entitled to be heard upon the causes of the French revolution. He was not only a witness, but an actor, in those scenes, of the origin of which he is treating; and must therefore have felt in himself, or observed in others, the influence of every principle that really contributed to their production. His testimony, it may also be observed, is now given, after ten years of exile may be presumed to have detached him from the factions of his country, and made him independent of the gratitude or resentment of its rulers.

With all these claims to our attention, M. Mounier cannot, however, expect that his authority should be taken for decisive upon so vast and complicated a question. In an affair of this nature, it is not enough to have had a good opportunity for observation. Where so many interests are concerned, and so many motives put in action, a man cannot always give an account of every thing he sees, or even of every thing he has contributed to do. His associates may have acted upon principles very different from his; and he may have been the dupe of his opponents, even while he was most zealous in his resistance. It will be remembered, too, that M. Mounier, after co-operating in a revolution that was to consummate the felicity of his country, was obliged to leave it to the mercy of an unprincipled faction; and it may perhaps be conjectured, that he who was disappointed in the issue of these transactions, has also been mistaken as to their cause. M. Mounier, finally, is a man of letters, and is entitled to feel for philosophers some of the partialities of a brother. In denying that they had any share in the French revolution, he vindicates them from a charge that sounds heavy in the ears of mankind; and
## Contents

**Preface and Acknowledgements** ................................................................. i-ii

**Abstract** ........................................................................................................... xi-xii

### Part 1

**Prologue**

Linton and Green ................................................................. 1

1 Introduction and Literature Review ........................................ 11

(i) Victorian Periodicals

(ii) Computational Stylistics

2 Methodology ................................................................. 38

(i) Methods

(ii) Texts

(iii) Variables

### Part 2

3 Bird’s Eye View of Corpus Texts ........................................ 70

4 Authorship ................................................................. 93

5 House Style ................................................................. 127

### Part 3

6 Gender ................................................................. 152

7 George Eliot ................................................................. 182

8 Authorship attribution: *Wellesley Index* ........................................ 211

9 *Saturday Review*: ‘Anti-women’s Movement’ Articles ................. 236

**Conclusion** ................................................................. 258

**Bibliography** ................................................................. 263-77

**Illustrations**

1.1 Facsimile Pages of Inaugural Edition of *The Edinburgh Review* ................... iii-v

1.2 Cover Page of *Modern Women and What is Said of Them* ......................... 3

1.3 Front Page of *The Saturday Review* ........................................................ 235
Appendices

P.1 Green and Linton *Modern Women* articles ................................. 278
2.1 200 Victorian Periodical Articles ........................................... 279-87
2.2 159 *Saturday Review* Articles ............................................. 288-91
2.3 200 Function Words ............................................................. 292
7.1 40 Fictional ‘Histories’ ......................................................... 293-94
8.1 Articles used in Figure 8.4 .................................................... 295
8.2 Articles used in Burton tests .................................................. 295
8.3 Articles used in Blackie tests ................................................ 295

Tables

P.1 Results of Linton-Green Discrimination Test .............................. 6
P.2 Comparison of 2 Authors’ Preferred Usage of Pronouns ............... 7
1.1 Victorian Periodical Journals: Contributors, Professions, Topics and Fields .......................... 12
2.1 Reviews and Magazines used for Victorian Periodical Text Collection .................. 51
2.2 22 Authors of Victorian Periodical Articles ................................. 51
2.3 22 Authors of Victorian Periodical Articles, Number of Articles, Date Span ........ 52
2.4 Attributed and Unattributed *Saturday Review* Articles ................ 53
2.5 Function Word Set ................................................................... 68-69
3.1 5 Highest Ranked Articles at Each End of PC1 .............................. 79
3.2 5 Highest Ranked Articles at Each End of PC2 .............................. 79
3.3 10 Highest Ranked Articles at Each End of PC1 .............................. 85
3.4 10 Highest Ranked Articles at Each End of PC2 .............................. 85
3.5 PC1 and PC2: 10 Highest Ranking Words .................................... 87
4.1 22 Authors’ Combined Texts Word Counts ................................. 94
4.2 Interplay between Authorial Groups and Individual Texts ............... 98
4.3 Highly Ranked Texts on PC1 with Female Referents ....................... 116
5.1 16 Authors’ Texts across 8 Journals ........................................... 132
5.2 Author versus Journal: Closest Matches for 166 Texts .................... 133
5.3 Major Quarterlies Text Set ....................................................... 139
5.4 *Saturday* as Zeta Prime Base: top 100 Words ......................... 147-8
5.5 Monthlies as Zeta Prime Base: top 100 Words ............................. 148
6.1 Results of Discrimination Test between Women and Men Periodical Writers .... 159
6.2 Correlation of PC1 and PC2 texts with gender ........................................... 166
6.3 30 Highest Ranking Texts for 4 Intra-generic Foci ........................................... 170
7.1 Results of Eliot and Victorian Periodical Writers Discrimination Test ................. 185
7.2 Function Verbs and Modals Set ................................................................. 193
7.3 T-values for all Modals for 22 Authors ....................................................... 194
7.4 T-values for all Function Verbs for 22 Authors ............................................. 194
7.5 8 Victorian Novelists and their 40 'Histories' .................................................. 197
7.6 Results of Eliot and Victorian Novelists Discrimination Test .............................. 202
7.7 Occurrences of 'like' in Eliot’s Fictional ‘Histories’ and Journal Articles ............... 204
7.8 Modal and Function Verb usage of 8 Victorian Novelists ................................ 209
8.1 Tait’s Articles Firmly Attributed to Blackie and Burton .................................. 217
8.2 Results of Blackie and Burton Discrimination Test ....................................... 220
8.3 Articles for Non-Tait’s Journals written by Blackie and Burton ......................... 223
8.4 Tait’s Articles Questionably Attributed to Blackie and Burton .......................... 225
8.5 Summary of Wellesley Bases of Attribution for 16 Tait’s Articles ....................... 226
9.1 Articles Appearing in Saturday Review 1856-58 ........................................... 238
9.2 Attributed and Unattributed Saturday Review Articles .................................. 241

Figures

P.1 Cluster Analysis Test of Linton and Green Articles ........................................... 5
3.1 PCA Text Plot: 200 Victorian Periodical Texts: 100 function words ................. 71
3.2 PCA Word Plot: 200 Victorian Periodical Texts: 100 function words ............... 72
3.3 PCA Text Plot: 200 Victorian Periodical Texts: 100 function words ............... 86
4.1 PCA Text Plot: 22 Victorian Periodical Authors: 100 function words ............... 94
4.2 PCA Word Plot: 22 Victorian Periodical Authors: 100 function words .......... 96
4.3 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 11 Froude Texts: 99 function words ...... 100
4.4 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 9 Carlyle Texts: 99 function words .... 101
4.5 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 13 Burton Texts: 99 function words .... 102
4.6 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 7 Hayward Texts: 99 function words .... 103
4.7 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 6 Cecil Texts: 99 function words ....... 105
4.8 PCA Text Plot: 200 Vic. Per. Texts with 7 Bagehot Texts Highlighted: 100 f.w. .... 108
4.9 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 9 Stephen Texts: 99 function words .... 109
4.10 PCA Text Plot: 200 Vic.Per. Texts with 7 Macaulay Texts Highlighted: 100 f.w. .. 111
4.11 PCA Text Plot: 21 Vic. Per. Authors with 11 Rigby Texts: 99 function words ...... 112
4.12 PCA Text Plot: 11 Rigby Texts with Other Victorian Authors’ Texts: 80 Rigby
date-modified marker words .................................................................................. 114
8.8 Cluster Analysis Test: *Tait’s* Blackie and Burton Texts with some Attributed Texts: 49 marker words ................................................................. 229

8.9 Cluster Analysis Test: Burton, 3 Authors and *Tait’s* Attributed Burton Texts:
150 function words ..................................................................... 231

8.10 Cluster Analysis Test: Attributed Blackie *Tait’s* Texts with Blackie Carlyle Hayward Macaulay and Rigby: 56 Blackie markers ................................. 232

9.1 PCA Text Plot: 159 *Saturday Review* Articles: 100 function words ............... 243

9.2 PCA Word Plot: 159 *Saturday Review* Articles: 100 function words ............. 244

9.3 PCA Text Plot: 159 *Saturday Review* Articles with Cecil Articles Highlighted:
100 function words .................................................................. 252

9.4 PCA Text Plot: 70 *Saturday Review* Articles: 72 Cecil markers ................. 253

9.5 PCA Text Plot: 13 Women’s Movement Articles with 59 other *Saturday Review* articles:
72 Cecil markers ...................................................................... 254
Abstract

The aim of the thesis is to use computational stylistics, and in particular the methods pioneered by John Burrows, to explore aspects of the nineteenth-century periodical genre. Published for the most part anonymously, periodical articles were written by an extraordinary range of authors on an incredible variety of topics. The standard of writing in the thousands of articles appearing in the ‘higher’ or ‘literary’ journals has generally been agreed by scholars to be ‘remarkably good’. Beginning in 1802 and flourishing for most of the century, this outstanding genre of writing had all but disappeared by the beginning of the twentieth century. The text collection for the thesis consists of almost two million words by twenty-two authors. My study employs a variety of statistical tests on these texts to examine the effect of such factors as anonymity, commonality, authorial individuality, gender, house-style, text-type and chronology on the periodicals.

I begin by taking a broad view of the field: first allowing the articles to ‘speak for themselves’ and to exhibit their commonalities and individual differences; then exploring the significance of both the intra-generic focus of the article – the stance taken in a particular article – and the author’s own idiosyncratic preferences in determining the incidence of function words in these articles. The interplay between these two factors provided an explanation as to why the articles of some authors invariably grouped together while those of other authors displayed marked variability. The use of lists of authorial ‘marker words’ – those words used relatively more or relatively less frequently by individual authors – showed that one can think of this large group of mostly anonymous periodical articles as a set of authorial oeuvres.
I also look at the frequently made assertion that authors adapted their writing to the ‘house style’ of particular journals, and come to the conclusion that it does not significantly affect the deeper level of style revealed by function word usage. I then examine the question of whether or not there are differences between men’s and women’s usages of function words, coming to the conclusion that, although differences can be seen to exist, it is not at present possible to come up with sets of ‘marker words’ that reveal gender in the way that is possible with authorship. I use ‘marker words’ to identify the characteristics of one major author, George Eliot, and to show how she modified her stylistic practices when she moved from the periodical essay to fiction. I demonstrate how the techniques of computational stylistics can be used to check the legitimacy of some of the attributions made in the Wellesley Index, and I attribute one much-discussed anonymous group of articles on ‘the woman question’ to Robert Cecil 3rd Marquess of Salisbury and Prime Minister of England.