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The Original Author

How Digital Technology Reconceptualizes
the Author (and the Self)

Laura Mandell



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The Original Author

How Digital Technology Reconceptualizes the Author (and the Self)

Laura Mandell

Abstract

This essay presents a summary of the work done recently about the construction of an imaginary entity, “the Original Author.” It then discusses how that same text which appears as a Web site:

(<http://www.users.muohio.edu/mandellc/eng495/paper2.htm>) is able to enact what it describes, de- and reconstructing the author by formal means. This essay argues that hypertext can be used to stimulate critical thinking if it involves the viewer in the process of constructing thought processes, an activity that was at one time the prerogative of the author alone.

Postmodern Deconstructions of “the Author”

We are accustomed to seeing ourselves as individuals modelled in some way like an original author whose selfhood is expressed in his or her works. The notions we have of the author as a genius and a “great man” were devised, it has been argued, not by authors themselves but by publishers (“booksellers”) who wanted to make money by owning copyright. How can one claim that the ideas in a person’s mind are not shared by others who may also have thought them? As Mark Rose has shown, lawyers in Britain during eighteenth century sometimes conceptualized intellectual ideas as eminently shared in the way that we now think of technological ideas: they discussed the possibility of obtaining patents for them. But booksellers stood much to lose if Shakespeare’s ideas could not be permanently owned. Lawyers supporting their interests began to think about literary ideas as “property.” While the notion of intellectual property seems commonsensical to us now, it is really quite an achievement: how *can* one make ideas into a person’s exclusive property? Rose shows that innovative eighteenth-century lawyers and legislators seized on the notion of style: it’s not really the ideas that matter (so it is not a question of patent) but the particular manner in which they are expressed. A treatise written by someone is seen as a specific piece of property (house or land in all its particulars) because it contains ideas that can never be expressed that particular way by anyone else.

To summarize, then, publishers fought to proclaim that literary texts—not the printed texts themselves, but the words in them that can appear in any particular material instantiation—are more like private property than like any invention for which one would obtain a patent and thus can be *permanently* owned by one publishing house (Rose 1988, Woodmansee 1993). That fight produced a distinctively modern idea of what it means to be a self—not just an author, but any “self.” Transforming literary style into a permanent estate, it produced the idea that style is a person’s soul—rather than, say, an analytic tool, as Joseph Williams

insists that it is in promoting the use of good writing style to improve one's thinking (Williams 1997).

Whenever we talk about "great literature" using an author's name, we confuse people and texts, subtly reinforcing the unconscious idea that authors are literature rather than that they wrote it. The ideology of authorship fosters such a confusion, and it simultaneously imposes expectations on people as to how to behave. Mightn't consistency matter less if we didn't harbour the idea of a coherent personality, metaphorically connected to the symbolically unified literary work?

Much has been written about the unoriginality of the author, even in his or her signature, which, of course, can be forged. If someone else can forge a person's signature, is that signature really unique? Mightn't two instances of one person's signature penned ten years apart differ more than a forger's from an original? Is an iterable (that is to say, repeatable in speech or writing) mark, be it a signature or a word—can it ever really be unique? One point of Wittgenstein's private language argument (Wittgenstein 1953) is that only shared language is comprehensible: it is impossible to assign permanent meaning to a word through some private mental act—would one mean the same thing if one wrote or uttered it ten years from now? How could one be sure that it was exactly the same?

In sharing language, one necessarily "quotes" one's predecessors. All the words one uses appear in the dictionary. We don't typically think of using words as "borrowing" them, but in effect, every sentence we utter is like a chain of forged signatures: every word we utter is "borrowed" from somewhere else. A sentence one utters contains words that have been uttered by others—parts or even all of any sentence one utters now may have been uttered before. When speaking in trite phrases, one could even be said to be "plagiarizing" -- from the dictionary, if from no one else.

[**In a much more material (and materialistic) understanding of intertextuality than has been proffered by critics such as Julia Kristeva, Ted Nelson is often considered to be the visionary who foresaw development of the World Wide Web in imagining his *Xanadu* project. *Xanadu* as he imagines it is an online literary system that would allow writers of all sorts to quote each other, linking immediately to the source of the quotation, charging the quoter a fee, and electronically sending funds to the person who has been quoted. *Xanadu* has never been created: could it be? Is it feasible? If one posted the last two sentences on the Internet, would the system suddenly charge for quoting from anyone else who had previously posted on line the words "Could it be?"? from anyone who writes "it be?" From anyone who writes "could"?

The difficulties in distinguishing between quoting and simply speaking, plagiarizing and simply writing, are legion, and they appeared on the legal scene at the very moment that plagiarism came into existence as a modern concept. Early eighteenth century poets practiced the art of "imitation," but Thomas Gray, a mid-century poet, was perhaps the first to be accused of plagiarism, and the accusation may have stunted his productivity (Lonsdale 1979). While Alexander Pope in the early eighteenth century regularly incorporates translated bits from Virgil and others into his poetry, Gray's fault, it seems, was that he imitated the moderns rather than the ancients. But Gray doesn't simply quote them: he uses the same three words used by a previous poet, and in the same context, about the same topic, but he reorders the words significantly, as is visible from the notes to Lonsdale's edition of "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," for instance. Gray was a prolific reader: do these words simply come into his mind as he writes, or does he actually

look at a poem by another poet and deliberately “steal” the words he wants? But perhaps Gray wants to know how to best use the word “toll,” and so he looks it up in the dictionary. The 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language* that he would consult would be, of course, Samuel Johnson’s, and Johnson “teaches” correct usage by providing sentences—in fact, often, lines from poems. Is Gray plagiarizing the dictionary? When “originality” first appeared on the scene as a concept related to authors, it was connected not to selecting striking words but to reordering words in a striking way. Postmodern literary theory offers ways of understanding why the concept of authorial originality has been so compelling to us, and so difficult to sustain.**]

Roland Barthes’ essay “The Death of the Author” describes our desire to create an author’s personality as a way of completely interpreting a text, and the necessity of resisting that desire. Michel Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?” points out that, before the Enlightenment, truth and value depended upon a scientific author’s name while the author of a literary text was irrelevant. Now, however, it is the opposite: the scientist’s name is irrelevant, truth in science depending upon the reproducibility of scientific data, while a literary author’s name absolutely determines the value of a text.

The literary author, one might say, is not one who draws ideas from within but from without, from other literary texts. The personality of the “great author” is created out of words drawn together from innumerable sources into a new, or another, text, just as our personalities are cobbled together out of the various possibilities of being offered to us by our culture (Goffman 1959). That is, instead of imagining individual authors single-handedly constructing great works, we might see literature as does Ted Nelson: “Literature is an ongoing system of interconnected documents” (Nelson, “What is Literature?”). The cumulative effect of postmodern literary theory by Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault is a decentered author.

Maybe the self is really defined by its interaction with media, which are not merely extensions of ourselves, as McLuhan long argued persuasively long ago in “The Medium is the Message.” Media reorder our understanding of what it means to be a self at all. Web poet Talan Memmott describes the sense of self generated by writing on a computer that presents us with images which refer to something other than themselves, something “elsewhere”: “The hum. and I-terminal constructs any/every attachment eye-to-I, while simultaneously attached elsewhere” (Memmott).

Critical Thinking

Except for the paragraphs enclosed in brackets and asterisks, the preceding text appears on a Web site:

<http://www.users.muohio.edu/mandellc/eng495/paper2.htm>

But this hypertext does more than simply present the written text given above: it includes links, images, and sounds not available here which perform in a different sensory register the deconstruction of a coherent author—and a coherent reader (or selfhood)—that they describe. In addition, by providing viewers with access to primary materials it renders critical thinking more likely. How? By making the reader more active and opening the author’s ideas up to allow for multiple interpretations. The text that appears in this paper, above, in brackets is an

argument not made through direct statement on the Web site, but rather by linking to poems by Gray and Pope, as will be seen below. Instead of interpreting the data, then, the Web site enacts practices from which the ideas arose, presenting not only the fruits of disciplinary work but also its process.

Analysis of the Web Site

In the first sentence of this essay, the phrase “the original author” links to a page that says the following:

Writers are Copyists

-- A person worked in a small publishing house. S/he selected stories that would be bestsellers for publication, corrected things written by others, and then typed the best passages from manuscripts into a database of great literature. One day, s/he woke up and wrote * / &.

The asterisk and ampersand in this passage provide links to Tony Morrison’s *Beloved* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* at Amazon.com, emphasizing the book as commodity. Both Morrison and Richardson worked as editors before writing their own great novels. I’m hoping that that information leads viewers of the site to question whether style comes from within, whether it is the original mark of a person’s soul, or from learning—editing, that is, is like enacting stylistic exercises. This Web page, linked to “the original author”(first sentence here, above), continues:

Writers are Plagiarists

-- A person worked for a theater that served to entertain the British monarchy. He was trying to make lots of money, so he found stories already written, copied the characters and events, and plagiarized passages from them, altering the style just enough so that the people who came to see his plays would like them better, and so that he would make more money and become more famous.

Throughout this paragraph as it appears on the Web, there are links to pages on Shakespeare and his use of Thomas North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*. Paradoxically, Shakespeare is the most paradigmatic “original author” and the most happy, unselfconscious “plagiarizer.” He wrote, of course, before the concept of plagiarism came into existence in its modern form, as Roger Lonsdale makes clear (1979). It continues:

Allusion, Imitation, Plagiarism

-- Allusion is pointing to it by using words from it that are not in quotation marks, but that everyone will recognize, a device used to establish oneself as “in the know” about high literature. But when are you alluding to another text, and when are you in fact plagiarizing from it? Early eighteenth-century writers had an alternative name for “plagiarism”: “imitation.” Did Alexander Pope plagiarize Virgil’s *Aeneid* in *The Dunciad*, or was he simply imitating it?

Here “The Dunicad” links to an online version of an original eighteenth-century edition that lists, in its notes, all Pope’s “imitations” of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. It continues:

-- Thomas Gray’s poem, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” is so “allusive” that it might be considered the first “hypertext” if hyper text is a text that obsessively alludes to or quotes others, leading out away from itself via “links” to other texts.

This paragraph links to a hypertext edition of Gray’s poem, using Roger Lonsdale’s notes to the text but layering them, so that you can click on one of Gray’s phrases to get to a line by Dryden, and then on that line to get to a line by Shakespeare. The allusions are so sparse (two words, used in similar context), that the reader of either Lonsdale’s notes or the hypertext should get the experience of suddenly being baffled: are these writers actually quoting each other or simply all using the same poetic language?

All of the items above, appearing on a Web page and pages linked to it, could, of course, be included in the site in the form of direct argumentation, as they are in this paper (in the bracketed portion of the text above). What is the difference between offering a direct argument and offering links to ideas that provide evidence for such an argument? The latter leaves the argumentative work to be performed by the reader who may or may not draw the conclusions I wish to draw as this essay’s author. It’s always possible, of course, that someone might read an essay that makes an argument and not get it, or that someone might disagree. But making an argument as links cultivates that possibility.

Moreover, instead of presenting a thought-out idea, the Web site presents bits of information that I was looking at in thinking about my thesis. Usually, the way those appear in a written, printed text is by incorporating them into the argument (directly quoting, and the commenting on the quotation), or in some way discussing them. Even if they appear in notes, commentary always accompanies, matches, or even supersedes the original documents themselves, the documents which the essay-writer was looking at while thinking. That is, this essay in print form would not actually reproduce Pope’s *Poems* edited by Warburton in a note, with the editorial interpolations about imitated passages; rather, a comment would appear, in a note or in the body of the essay: “William Warburton, Pope’s

eighteenth-century editor, continuously points out in editorial notes the passages imitated from Virgil.” Or it might even list the passages from Virgil imitated by Pope, and then cite Warburton as the source for that information. But the printed essay would not, as does the Web site, reproduce a page of Warburton’s text. The only way we see the original artifacts present to a writer as he or she thinks, in print, is as appendices. On the Web, links to original documents become easier and easier to make (see “Essays on History and New Media”).

This difference stimulates critical thinking in two ways: first, it opens up the space for interpretation in that the reader might not see the same things in the original documents as does the essay writer, and in fact could even find contradictory information. In other words, by illustrating the process of idea-making as the movement from a thing (document) to a thought about that thing, it opens up the possibility that the process will go a different way. This is not new: that process has always been available, of course, for scholars who work with the same documents (historians, literary critics), but it is less visible to those readers who do not pay much attention to footnotes and in those texts where much intellectual summary is not footnoted at all. In a sense, the way scholars handle texts, what they do with them, is an “oral” part of academic culture, the part we teach in classrooms, though of course some of that has been codified in printed texts. For some reason, the Web seems especially conducive to making disciplinary thinking practices visible (“Making Sense of Evidence”). Thus, oralysis makes ordinary readers into literary critics, which is to say that, at its best, it stimulates critical thinking.

Second, the links to pages of other texts by other hands, pages sometimes made specifically for this Web site and sometimes not (sometimes the links are “outlinks,” links to other sites), demonstrate that authorship of this text is not, or not only, a matter of plumbing the depths of one’s soul, but rather that it is fundamentally intertextual: it makes tangible in the reading process the fact that authors gaze not off into space but into open books scattered around their work space, or appearing on multiple windows or screens. The Web site I have developed on the original author in fact works toward decentering the author of it as it engages in describing the decentered author.

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