

The Shakespeare Algorithm

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The New Yorker:

In 1727, a writer and editor named Lewis Theobald was preparing to unveil “Double Falsehood,” a tragicomedy that he said was based on manuscripts of a lost play by Shakespeare. “The good old Master of the English Drama is by a kind of Miracle recall’d from his Grave, and given to us once again,” the *London Journal* reported, when news of Theobald’s project emerged. Ever since then, however, the work has presented difficulties to the gatekeepers of the canon. For one, the manuscripts have vanished. For another, Theobald has a checkered reputation; he was accused of plagiarizing his play “The Perfidious Brother,” and his starring role in Alexander Pope’s satirical poem “The Dunciad” doesn’t help matters. Then there is the text itself, which isn’t especially good. Certainly “Double Falsehood” contains echoes of Shakespeare (“A gleam of day breaks sudden from her window”), but for the most part the language sags or is ungainly. Would the Bard have called a woman so fair that her face could make “a frozen hermit leap from his cell” to kiss it? (Well, perhaps not, but he did write that “A withered hermit, five-score winters torn, / Might shake off fifty, looking in her eye.”)

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The study focussed in part on function words, the heavy-lifting but unglamorous class that includes pronouns, articles, and prepositions—“I,” “you,” “the,” “a,” “an,” “on,” “in,” “under.” As Pennebaker has written, there are only about four hundred and fifty of them in English, but they account for fifty-five per cent of the words that we use, the linguistic glue that holds everything together but goes mostly unnoticed. “We can’t hear them,” Pennebaker told me recently. “You and I have now been talking for ten minutes, and you have no idea if I’ve used articles at a high rate or a low rate. *I* have no idea.” Everyone has a pattern, though, and this is what he and Boyd sought in an array of works by Shakespeare, Theobald, and Fletcher. They also took other habits into account, such as three-word phrases typical to each author; for Shakespeare, these included “my lord your,” “what says thou,” and “as it were.” (“Quality work there, Shakey,” Boyd said.)

Read the whole story: [The New Yorker](#)