INTRODUCTION: AUTHOR, AUTHORSHIP, AUTHORITY, AND OTHER MATTERS

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What is an author? In its broadest sense, as various dictionaries clarify, the word “author” denotes anyone who produces, creates, or brings into being. This most inclusive definition seems today to be secondary to a much narrower understanding of “author” as “someone who writes books”.¹ In particular, in contemporary usage an “author” is an individual who is exclusively responsible for the production of a unique, original work. It is this “literary” concept of the author that has been the subject of intense critical scrutiny over the last forty years, much of which has been conducted in the shadow of the poststructuralist pronouncement of the “death of the author.”

But what authorship is, how it should be determined, and why it is important have actually been the subjects of contentious cultural debates for centuries. Identification of the authors of the Gospels, authorship attribution in the case of Shakespeare, Marlowe, and others, collaborative authorship, the scope and degree of an author's authority, the role of authorial intention and biographical and autobiographical information in interpretation – these are all issues that have been discussed with a vigour that testifies to the high stakes of the authorship question.

The stakes involved in authorship issues overlap with related issues of authority. The content of each concept shows immense historical and cultural variation, with the idea of “author” designating through the ages multifarious activities and the idea of “authority” being “remarkably protean” and possessing “chameleonic qualities”.² To

complicate things further, the authority of the author has been multiform and multiphase. Given the vast conceptual variations yet continued significance of “author” and “authority” an Introduction like ours can only hope to sketch the origins of the terms and to point out the theoretical complexities and consequences of the two concepts and their interrelationship.

Today it is clear that “auctor”, the Latin origin of “author”, is derived from the verb *augere*, which means “to increase, augment, strengthen that which is already in existence”; in addition, it means “to exalt, embellish, enrich”. In this day and age, the overwhelming evidence points to *augere* as the correct source word. All twentieth-century etymological dictionaries of the English language agree that “author” comes from *augere*. All modern dictionaries of Latin, whether in English, German, French, or Swedish editions, hold that *auctor* originates in *augere*.

In Roman times the word *auctor* had multiple meanings, few of which relate to the common present-day meaning of “writer”. The general meaning then was “one who gives meaning” or “he that brings about the existence of any object, or promotes the increase or prosperity of it, whether he first originates it, or by his efforts gives

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3 For this and information below, see *A Latin Dictionary*, eds Charlton Lewis and Charles Short, Oxford, 1989.


5 *Avieo* cannot be found in any standard dictionary of either medieval Latin or Neo-Latin, though the latest Dutch dictionary of medieval Latin, *Lexicon latinitatis Nederlandicae mediæ æví*, eds J. W. Fuchs and Olga Weijers, Vol. VI, Leiden, 1977, lists two instances of the word, from 1477 and 1480, in texts with very limited circulations. This ghost word was created by Huguccio of Pisa, a twelfth-century grammarian who tried to explain the variant spellings of auctor/autor (see *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed Joseph Strayer, New York, 1985, VI, 327–28). The word is then incorporated by Dante into his *Convivio*, as noted by Daniela Baroncini, “Citazione e memoria classica in Dante”: http://www.ledonline.it/leitmotiv, 22 June 2001 (accessed May 2005).