

## *Letter to the Editor*

### **Brothman on Authorship (The Author Responds)\***

I wish to thank Professor Duranti for her most generous remarks about "Orders of Value," which appeared in *Archivaria* 32. In response to her comments on my note concerning diplomatics (*Archivaria* 33), rather than returning once again to her very informative and wide-ranging multipart article, I shall try very briefly to state my own views concerning the status of context in diplomatics.

A recent issue of *New Yorker* magazine (30 December 1991) featured a cartoon that has an element of archival interest. The scene takes place in some vaguely medieval or early modern period. Occupying the centre of the frame is a bearded king seated in a stately high-backed chair. Surrounded by a coterie of court advisers, he wears a crown and is wrapped in—seemingly possessed by—a fur-lined, fur-cuffed royal coat. With quill in hand he is about to sign a document which lies on the large thick-legged table before him. At this moment of signing, one of the coterie, a long-nosed, thinly moustached, slightly bowed figure positioned closest to him, but still keeping a deferential distance from his royal person, says, "Your signature, Your Majesty, as well as your driver's license and a major credit card."

The anachronism which sustains the humour in this cartoon, it seems to me, implicitly draws attention to what is absent: the invocation of the credit card and driver's licence displaces, or at least devalues, the signature as the guarantor of authorial identity. Wrenched from its historical context, the king's signature has lost its governance of the document. The authorial identity and authenticity purported by the signature are implicitly undermined. (The final irony of the cartoon, of course, is the "author's" own pretension: he has signed the cartoon . . . with "his" name.)

As I understand its history, diplomatics first emerged on the cusp of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in an age when political intrigue and skilful forgery of state and legal documents went hand in hand, so to speak. Diplomats' value lay in its claim to competence in the matter of uncovering the provenance of the document, authenticating or verifying authorial identity through recognition of the hand (palaeography) that produced the writing. As recent literary analyses of Renaissance graphology have suggested, authorial identity and the signature, metonymically speaking, are intimately

related. Gutenberg's contemporaneous technology aside, not for nothing did Renaissance Europeans produce a myriad of texts on graphology, in which scripts were assigned and differentiated by class, status and even gender. In this historical context, as some historians have noted, diplomatics served the cause of state security against documentary deception and betrayal, as well as reinforcing social stability in the face of documentary pretension. For the authentication of authorial identity was principally located in the visible "hand."

The signature validates, even as it determines, the content. Diplomats, in other words, has been a *lectorial* art, but a very special sort of reading with a particular fixation: the diplomatic reader reads, first and foremost, for the signature, scanning for signs of the original, the copy and the true copy. It is the signature that imparts meaning to the content. For this reason, establishing authorial identity is integral to diplomatics.

The *signature is the context*. For, if we understand signature as connoting a transcendent status, as something foundational that is in a position to determine the text specifically because it exists—as diplomatics' implicitly logocentric standpoint demands—beyond the margins of the text, then does not the signature perhaps mark a liminal region. (Or, as I recall one scholar describing it, the area of the verge, for practitioners of diplomatics.) Again, one might also picture the signature as something of a hinge. In the diplomatic reading of documents, in other words, the signature is thought implicitly to transcend, to be detached from, the text. This transcendent status, furthermore, emerges in the contrast between the signature's necessary reliance on repeatability—form—for its authorial identity and the text's singularity. The text does not determine the individual, in other words; the individual determines the text.

Diplomatics, then, does perhaps brush against the "context," but the extreme context of the supposedly sovereign signature. For diplomatics, *context as signature* does exercise a meaning-constitutive influence. Embedded in diplomatics' approach, this context doubles back on itself as it contrives analytically to assert the authenticity, the presence, of the meaning-determining individual. The individual, or persona, guarantees and is guaranteed by the signature. The aim of diplomatics, then, is not primarily to affirm socially-structured meaning; on the contrary, its ultimate aim is to reunite the autonomous, meaning-giving, proprietary hand and its content; its interest in the individual document mirrors its prevalent concern with the moment of intention, with eventfulness or the "act," rather than structure. Notwithstanding diplomatics' reductive formalism, its attention to protocols, as well as its interest in the process of transmission and use, the space of subjectivity remains its final destination. It is interesting to note, in connection with this matter, the historical appearance of the term "signature" in musical discourse. It was in the late seventeenth century, about the same time as diplomatics emerged as a more codified formal discipline, that "signature" was first used to denote a controlling "key" of the entire musical text. Without this signature, the rest of the text was virtually unreadable.

As Professor Duranti is undoubtedly aware, the Renaissance secretary's rise to pre-eminence often rested not merely on his literacy. He also established his position by giving his hand to the skilled reproduction of his lord's distinctive signature, which was the latter's exclusive property and which, in some quarters, replaced the traditional royal seal as a mark of identification. Has the primary aim of diplomatics not been, then, precisely to establish the singular identity of the individual by scrutinizing the script of the

document? Thus, if the identification of an authentic subjectivity, or authorship, has been diplomatics' *raison d'être*, then it is understandably supportive of, or at least compatible with, the archival principle of provenance, for its scrutiny of the document concerns the point—the pen—of origin.

One final point concerns the traditional primacy in diplomatics of official, legally-constituted documents. Such documents have provoked dialogue among a number of legal and literary scholars in recent years. Legal documents, some scholars maintain, remain distinctively different from literary and other historical texts. The interpretation of statutes and the study of literature, in other words, are said to have virtually nothing in common. Others, however, have challenged this view. This debate has spawned a host of questions concerning the legitimacy or impermeability of the boundary that has always separated the reading of "law" from the interpretation of "literature." This, moreover, has implications for some assumptions upon which diplomatics' analytic has been based. As they *verified* the authenticity of the document or charter, diplomatists, in some cases, also implied the *truth* of its contents. Once its authenticity and veracity had been established, the legal record ostensibly became invested with the authority to measure and control the statements and testimonies of truth purported by other documents.

There is a paradox lurking here, however. Diplomatics has drawn on "contextual" knowledge—the signature—to establish the scientific fiction of a legal document's impersonal, indeed unauthored, transcendent status. The document's statements, in other words, are rendered invulnerable to the influence of historical context. The legal or "official" record—the charter, the constitutive document—contained the exclusive truth—the precedent without origin—against which all other, subsequent, historical records could be tested. Based on this elevated status, the legal record could be regarded as the final court of appeal in the process of determining historical truth, serving to write/right the rights claimed and interests advanced by other historical evidence. What—or who—gives, one might ask, between the (authentic) letter of the law and the law of the letter?

Diplomatics, in this instance, represented the scientific pretension of defeating the vicissitudes—the limiting effect—of interpretive context and the heated political polemics that had marked historical dialogue in the earlier part of the seventeenth century. In the age of scientific revolution, it sought to accomplish this by establishing the *scientific* authority for its *historical* practice and, concomitantly, refusing even to acknowledge its implication in contemporary controversies about the past. One of its aims, in other words, was to stanch the political haemorrhaging and threats of delegitimation that had followed in the wake of the rise of historical criticism. (What correlation may be found, for example, between the career of diplomatics and the apologetic appearance of divine right/write, as well as invented tradition, during the period roughly spanning the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries?) The consequence of this leap toward timelessness, then, is eradication of the author. There is no signature, really.

Having said thus much about the eccentric location of social context in diplomatics' purview; having tried, in a sense, briefly to glimpse the genealogy, the identity, of diplomatics' own signature, I should explain that it is the very power claimed for signature/provenance that "Orders of Value" tries to put in doubt. Leaving aside the question of modern *typography's*, not to mention "personal" computing's, apparent obliteration of the existential traces of "writing," their annihilation of graphological—personal—character, recent works in literary theory as well as in philosophy have tried

to expose the precariousness of our fundamental commitment to the metaphysics of presence. The ontological sign/guarantee of the signature is as illusory as it is necessary.

I realize that this is a very incomplete response to Professor Duranti's comments. In part, this may reflect both the strengths and weaknesses of her article. Her description of diplomatics is extremely suggestive, rich with ideas and information. It has been very difficult in a rejoinder, therefore, to explore in a truly satisfactory manner some of the highly complex issues implicit in Dr. Duranti's contention for diplomatics. At the same time, my own "tense" use of verbs, that is, the variable time-scale within which my own comments may appear, derives from the article's lapses in conceptual clarity or consistency, wavering as it sometimes does, implicitly at least, among normative affirmation, social theory, historical analysis and scientific formulation. I was thus perplexed at times by what Dr. Duranti's various sources of evidence actually demonstrate. Do they serve to remind us of the historical antecedents current to archival practice in diplomatics? Do they establish homologies between archival science and (modern?) diplomatics? Do they revive unjustly neglected diplomatic methodology in order to strengthen or supplement current archival wisdom? Do they, as she suggests in at least one instance, make the case for adapting diplomatics to current realities of the information age, and aligning it with current archival practice? Or, finally, does her tour of the parameters of diplomatics amount to a logical or historical contraction, a retroactive reduction of archival science and diplomatics to different names for virtually identical fields of practice?

To conclude, Professor Duranti should be applauded for bringing diplomatics into the Canadian discourse on archives. Although she disavows her account of diplomatics as representing her own views, she must understand that her arguments and often uncritical invocations of authorities and evidence could not help but lead one to the conclusion that these are her personal views. I hasten to add, however, that her general advocacy of diplomatics offers up some challenging issues for archivists to think about. It has done so for me. I am particularly interested in diplomatics' account of the transitivity of historical documents. I hope that Dr. Duranti's series will encourage archivists in Canada to explore the significance of diplomatics for their work.

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\* Dr. Brothman's article has been awarded the W. Kaye Lamb Prize for 1991.