

FICTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

FACT, EVIDENCE, DOUBT

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Edited by
Yota Batsaki, Subha Mukherji
and Jan-Melissa Schramm

Fictions of Knowledge

Fact, Evidence, Doubt

Edited by

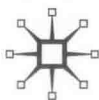
Yota Batsaki, Subha Mukherji

and

Jan-Melissa Schramm



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Also by Jan-Melissa Schramm:

TESTIMONY AND ADVOCACY IN VICTORIAN LAW LITERATURE,
AND THEOLOGY

ATONEMENT AND SELF-SACRIFICE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NARRATIVE
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1

Introduction

Yota Batsaki, Subha Mukherji and Jan-Melissa Schramm

In describing knowledge, Elizabeth Bishop evokes its elusiveness, fluidity and process, but also how this freedom and slipperiness are a function of its historical nature:

... drawn from the cold hard mouth
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts,
forever, flowing and drawn, and since
our knowledge is historical, flowing and flown.¹

It is at the intersection of history and the accretive and plural human procedures of knowing that this book seeks to locate knowledge, and offer insights into this larger flow. It does so by focusing on the kinds of knowledge that literary texts can offer, critique, or play with, at moments of English history where much has been at stake in how individuals and communities have practised, developed and thought about ways of knowing. Learning, experiment, belief, doubt, trust, judgement and attempts to define graspable knowledge, perhaps 'fact', are all part of this story – though the story is inflected at different historical junctures by specific cultural imperatives. Methods of learning have always been subject to debate and dispute. Francis Bacon, one of the earliest proponents of a systematic scientific method, was contemptuous of certain approaches to philosophy that he considered dogmatic – Aristotle and Plato's logically and theologically inflected philosophical systems, for instance. These he called 'Idols of the Theatre': 'for in my eyes the philosophies received and discovered are so many stories made up and acted out, stories which have created sham worlds worth of the stage'.² Yet fictive modes have proved to be an eloquent, effective and alternative approach to knowledge, bringing form and content into an aesthetically

determined, epistemologically meaningful and often ethically significant relation. Theology, fiction and indeed the stage itself have had a crucial role in telling stories and privileging precisely the imaginative method. In Bishop's poem, there is a hint, too, of the resistance of the world and its reservoir of knowledge to our attempts to 'draw' it out: it takes effort, and at times even strife. As John Donne writes in 'Satire III', truth stands at the top of a cragged hill, and he that will reach her 'about must, and about must go'.³ Literature's indirections have the potential to embody that strenuous, rigorous pursuit of truth – the legitimate mode that Bacon elsewhere praised, distinguishing it from the other, reprehensible desire for knowledge: 'upon a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite; sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight ... as if there were sought in knowledge a couch, whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit'.⁴

But difficulty and circuitousness themselves can be the function of clever, self-delighting forms. So literature's own methods are as rife with the possibility of moral dubiousness as with the potential for ethically aware epistemic labour. Between these two poles, literature plays out its negotiation of knowledge, and that process itself goes some way towards putting a human face to it. Imaginative literature can accommodate the ideas of indeterminacy, imperfection and approximation more readily than disciplines such as the law or theology, where arriving at a final judgement or an affirmation of faith are critical. But literature's free play can also acknowledge or inscribe the limits in our relation to available knowledge.

Fictions of Knowledge: Fact, Evidence, Doubt examines the transactions between literature and other areas of thinking focused on the nature, scope and methods of knowledge: philosophy, theology, science and the law. The essays engage with literary texts across a wide range of periods and genres, to address the continuities and paradigmatic shifts in certain key epistemological categories. These include questions of probability and certainty, problems of evidence, the uses of experiment, and the poetics and ethics of doubt. Investigation of any of these concepts is, by necessity, an interdisciplinary and collaborative endeavour. Our emphasis is as much on disciplinary differentiation as on common and continuous participation. Through it, we offer a thread – a sort of *filum labyrinthi* – that runs from the middle ages to the twentieth century, morphing variously in response to the pressures and impetus of particular historical moments, but indicating nonetheless a larger, evolving history of the relation between literary thinking, and theories and practices of knowledge in other fields. What these different

approaches call for, in turn, is a set of nuanced reading practices that are further inflected by the disciplinary divergence that has happened over time. Correspondingly, earlier texts' intervention in the larger cross-disciplinary conversation may be more indirect than the criticism or comment offered in later periods. Carl Watkins's essay on medieval evidence of doubt, for example, must read between the lines to assess the degree to which conventional literary tropes hold serious sceptical content, while Sarah Kareem's reading of an eighteenth-century parody of Humean scepticism as Gothic romance shows how the debate between the period's common-sense philosophy and radical scepticism is played out with ironic reference to the Gothic's extreme affective and representational effects. The very category of the 'literary', which comes to indicate a putatively autonomous field from the eighteenth century onwards, must be conceived in broad and somewhat protean terms in such a long span.

Barbara Shapiro's overview of the evolution of the concept of 'beyond reasonable doubt' provides the larger canvas against which the essays, ordered in rough chronology, are placed. Shapiro has referred back to a twelfth-century epistemological 'crisis', when 'irrational proofs' and trial by ordeal were abandoned in favour of the Romano-canon inquisition process on the Continent, and the jury trial in England.⁵ Her substantial body of work takes us forward to the seventeenth century, recording the matrices and impact of the rise of 'probabilistic empiricism'.⁶ Shapiro has shown that an account of probabilistic empiricism must ground itself in the theological, legal, natural philosophical and rhetorical contexts of the early modern period. Natural philosophers rejected abstract syllogisms and turned to experimental and experiential means for establishing 'matters of fact'; Protestant theologians probed the ability of religious truths to withstand sceptical attack once they were stripped of Roman Catholic claims to infallibility and reduced to the status of evidence; the widespread familiarity with a culture of fact-finding and evaluation in the jury system, meanwhile, facilitated the absorption and spread of the new version of 'fact' in England. One important shift is encapsulated in the changing meaning of 'probable' itself: from the 'evaluative, even moral sense' of that which is supported by authority and is worthy of approbation and applause to that which invites degrees of assent bolstered by general laws of natural philosophy or human nature.⁷ The Aristotelian categories of opinion (*endoxa*), limited to probability, and knowledge (*episteme*), capable of yielding certainty, had indicated radically different areas of knowledge. By contrast, the combined effect of the developments highlighted by Shapiro

was that 'knowledge in all fact-related fields was seen to fall along a continuum' whose lower reaches comprised 'fiction', 'mere opinion' and 'conjecture', rising to the 'probable' and 'highly probable', and culminating in 'moral certainty'. As a result, "Knowledge" was no longer reserved for the logically demonstrable products of mathematical and syllogistic "science". The morally certain was also a form of knowledge, and the highly probable came close to being another.⁸

With this frame on early modern developments in place, the volume goes back in time to explore the expressions and negotiations of doubt in the medieval period, and to reflect on how theology offered one of the earliest vocabularies for discussing proof, uncertainty and evidence. Watkins's essay on 'Providence, Experience and Doubt in Medieval England' offers a fresh perspective on the middle ages by demonstrating how doubt was integrally enmeshed with faith in a shifting and complex relation – one that makes us think anew about the heuristic value of uncertainty as well as the strategies of belief. Doubt also emerges as a plural entity, with many shades and strands. The nature of the material available from this period – consider the unavailability of trial records, for instance – necessitates the use of narrative sources as historical evidence of both pious and impious doubt. Examining a range of genres, from chronicles, saints' lives and miracle collections to vision narratives and moral *exempla*, Watkins argues that doubt in these texts is not just a rhetorical trope but has experiential and ethical content, even though it can only be glimpsed through rhetorical figures. The incipient differentiation among these different genres and their employment of experience will become more pronounced in the centuries that follow, with the taxonomic distinctions between fact and fiction hardening in the course of the early modern period. Watkins's efforts to disentangle the factual from the fictional at a time when none of these categories was stable opens up the way for subsequent essays to prise open the cracks between imaginative construction and historical record in provocative and compelling ways.

As we go forward in time, we encounter genres of imaginative literature that seek to make a self-conscious intervention in epistemic debate and exploit the absence of a clear segregation of the vocabularies of science, religion, philosophy and, to an extent, law. Subha Mukherji's essay on 'Epistemic Plots and the Poetics of Doubt' shows how early modern drama intervenes in a conversation about the epistemologically related processes of trying, believing and knowing, in a way that is distinct because of the affective and aesthetic tools available to the genre, which in turn bring their particular ethical insights. But it also picks up

on the afterlife of the mixing of doubt into the process and substance of faith that is teased out by Watkins in medieval writing, by addressing the uses of doubt across secular drama and religious literature. In the other direction, its focus on the dramatic questioning of the impulse and methods of enquiry into human motives intimates how certain seventeenth-century literary genres look forward to eighteenth-century critiques of experiments on living beings.⁹

A legacy that becomes a crucial component of early modern literature's participation in the larger epistemological field, owing largely to the humanist curriculum, is rhetoric. Playwrights, many of them trained in law or exposed to litigation, but also inheritors of the rhetorical tradition, were uniquely placed to explore their discursive and epistemological overlap, with varying degrees of implication or critical lucidity. Lorna Hutson's essay, 'Law, Probability and Character in Shakespeare', taps into this nexus. It demonstrates the role of circumstantial evidence in the suggestive power of the hinterland of off-stage action. Early modern dramatists' instinct for the potency of inference is shown to be inflected by the legal habit and concept of inferring from 'circumstances', learnt from grammar-school lessons in rhetoric where *enargeic* (that is, so vivid as to be visually present) or evidential narration was centrally premised on the forensic skills of evocation. On the one hand, Hutson's argument has provocative and revisionist implications for Shakespeare criticism, reviving the apparently 'novelistic' Bradleyan approach in the light of forensic concerns. On the other, it is a caveat against the current critical trend of discrediting 'character criticism' in favour of the more fragmented notion of character and action derived from, say, performance criticism. Motive, in Hutson's reading, becomes an 'invention' that intertwines circumstantial probability with narratological suggestiveness and metonymy. In the process, what comes into view sharply is the literary productiveness of the indeterminacy of the legal status of 'fact' in the period – alleged deed, necessarily controversial, and therefore probable.

The coincidence of *enargeia* and *evidentia* in the rhetorical tradition, however, is complicated by the drama, which is acutely aware of the potential for slippage between the legal and the rhetorical, the epistemological and the aesthetic. This makes the ethical field ambiguous. When Gertrude, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, talks *enargeically* about Ophelia's picturesque drowning, and the playwright makes her ekphrastic speech end with the sudden, ugly thud of 'muddy death', we are alerted to the danger of taking *enargeic* narrative as evidential testimony.¹⁰ Mukherji's essay explores the ethically double-edged nature of probability in Shakespearean as well as post-Shakespearean drama. Focusing on plots of

trial, it shows how the impulse to know or to ascertain – whether scientific, or legal, or epistemological in a more general sense – can itself slip into, or be overtaken by, a desire to craft that is ethically dubious. What is narratologically seductive and rhetorically effective is not always legitimate: probability and necessity are liable to be riven apart. But the means of the plays' ethical investigation is affective: by bringing alive the emotional cost of games of knowledge, as well as of process, these plays question the urge to truth itself. The subjectivities that Hutson demonstrates emerging out of rhetorical skill are precisely the instruments that can threaten to dislodge the moral premises of rhetoric. Yet the drama can also suggest the legitimate uses of process, even as it makes aesthetic capital out of it: here, the potentials for critique and complicity are finely balanced.

The central role of rhetoric as an instrument of education and as a discipline that dictated the organisation of discourse provided a major source of continuity well into the early modern period. However, in the same period, radical developments in epistemology tested the relation of the rhetorical legacy to the new science, which gained momentum in England largely under the influence of Bacon. If the Baconian vision of a pursuit of knowledge grounded in the empirical did not diminish the relevance of rhetoric in actual practice, it did interrogate the importance of discourse in arriving at truth: 'the true end, scope, or office of knowledge ... consist[s] not in any plausible, delectable, reverend, or admired discourse, or any satisfactory arguments, but in effecting and working, and in discovery of particulars not revealed before'.¹¹ At the same time, Bacon 'considered "Method of Discourse" or "The Wisdom of Transmission" to play an integral part in the study of presentation of existing knowledge'.¹² Although the first historian of the Royal Society, Thomas Sprat, emphasised the need to keep 'the Ornaments of speaking' in check, lest they corrupt the 'whole spirit and vigour' of new scientific procedures 'by the luxury and redundancy of *speech*',¹³ the new science depended in its turn on literary technologies of 'virtual witnessing' to guarantee the validity of empirical observation of particulars.¹⁴

Bacon's turn to experience and the empirical was also a revaluation of the particular, but this revaluation brought with it a host of newly pressing epistemological challenges that are explored in Kathryn Murphy's essay, 'The Anxiety of Variety: Knowledge and Experience in Montaigne, Burton and Bacon'. Experience yields an embarrassment of riches: the proliferation of particulars fuels an anxiety that defies cognitive processing and threatens to be epistemologically unproductive. Bacon's inductive ambition finds its darker counterpart in the scepticism about the mind's

ability to rise from particular observations to general truths. Murphy's essay puts pressure on the potential of newly reconceived experience to determine literary form, even as she shows that the epistemological quandary can, at best, be salved by means of distinct formal solutions at the hands of Montaigne, Burton and Bacon. The anxiety of variety is thus shown to generate new aesthetic forms (the essay); to find its counterpart in the period's prevailing aesthetic (*copia*); and/or to generate new vehicles for containing experience, such as the experiment. But in noting that despite scepticism about induction, 'mean' experience (Montaigne) is considered 'sufficient' by these three authors, Murphy also looks forward to the more radical scepticism of David Hume. Kareem's essay later in the volume picks up this thread and reminds us that for Hume, too, radical scepticism does not lead to experiential impasse, but rather to a return to experience as the normative, socially and culturally determined context in which we lead our everyday lives and make judgements about matters of fact.

Aristotelian knowledge had to be all-encompassing and universally valid; in that framework, commonplace, received or general experience was most useful for the construction of knowledge. The sidelining of Aristotelian/scholastic philosophy entailed a shift from general or commonplace to particular or situated knowledge.¹⁵ 'By the end of the seventeenth century', Peter Dear has argued, 'a new kind of experience had become available to European philosophers: the experiment.'¹⁶ The Baconian rehabilitation of the particular also granted epistemic value to nature's deviations, which could be observed in her monstrosities, or brought about artificially in the laboratory: 'it is an easy passage from miracles of nature to miracles of art. For if nature be once detected in her deviation, and the reason thereof made evident, there will be little difficulty in leading her back by art to the point whither she strayed by accident.'¹⁷ One can speak of an expansion of the senses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, embodied for instance in scientific instrumentation: the air pump, the microscope. But this recourse to contrivance brought up, with renewed force, the question of how a universal knowledge claim can be substantiated on the basis of individual experiments, the latter often mediated as historical accounts of specific events.

Knowledge is reconfigured as a public good (by contrast to medieval 'books of secrets' or arcane knowledge), but it also depends on being publicly shared for its validation. This can happen through public demonstration, albeit still within a restricted community.¹⁸ But it also draws, as suggested above, on strategies of 'virtual witnessing' that are often predominantly narratological. Yota Batsaki's essay shows how a

late eighteenth-century novel's use of alchemy, with its imperative of secrecy, is a self-conscious reference to the genre's own commitment to shared, public knowledge, a commitment that is expressed through the protagonist's transition from alchemy to a recording of his experiences as a series of successive 'experiments'. The detailed experimental report, written in as plain language as possible and replete with details of time, place, action and the like, has been likened to the novel's 'formal realism': both modes aim for an effect of 'virtual witnessing'. The eighteenth-century novel emerged as a popular genre that successfully recast itself into a moral shaping of contemporary experience. It has thus come to occupy a prominent position in accounts of literary genre as a response to the period's epistemological transformations.¹⁹ In particular, the novel's style of presentation is often seen as uniquely analogous to the shift towards matters of fact and empirical observation: 'The novel's peculiar gravitation towards a neutral transparency of style (the opposite of rhetorical overcoding) participates in the genre's conventional pretence to reportorial accuracy'.²⁰

In 'Novel Knowledge', John Bender provides a comprehensive account of the novel's role within the cross-currents of eighteenth-century experimental natural philosophy. He shows that by adopting several features of the experimental method, such as 'virtual witnessing' and attention to 'matters of fact', the novel presents itself as able to offer surrogate experience, indeed an expansion of experience. In so doing, the novel intervenes in the period's most salient epistemological question: how to make the move from the particular historical instance to statements of universal validity characteristic of the inductive method, in the process exploring the evidentiary standing of the unique event. Bender offers the intriguing possibility that novelistic plot serves as an aesthetic counterpart to inductive causality: 'the manifest fictions of the new novel could work, paradoxically, to guarantee induction by framing it within tightly controlled narrative structures'. At the same time, the reader is invited to adopt the epistemological posture of 'ironic credulity' defined by Catherine Gallagher as characteristic of novel reading; poised between belief and scepticism, the reader participates in the novel's expansion of experience by subscribing to its promotion of probabilistic judgement.²¹

The challenging predicament of 'ironic credulity' is played out in the period's, and the novel's, complex attitude to romance. Romance became a negative shorthand for theoretical *and* aesthetic systems unsupported or untested by practical experience. Thus, while the novel incorporates and transforms romance conventions, it is also conceived, and conceives

itself, in opposition to romance, and this opposition serves to bolster its own epistemic claims. Gothic romance is often used by progressive writers to describe the old, corrupt political and religious order. The controversial theologian and political theorist Joseph Priestley, well known for his chemical experiments, declared that: 'the whole of the Gothic *Feudal* system, embracing matters both of a civil and ecclesiastical nature, is beginning to shake to its foundation' and 'may vanish, like an enchanted castle in a romance'.²² For Ian Watt, the novelty of the eighteenth-century novel stemmed from its formal and epistemological opposition to romance and attested to the novel's intimate connection to empiricism; while Michael McKeon located the novel within a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemological cycle where the progressive ideology of 'naïve empiricism' sought to refute the aristocratic ideology of 'romance idealism', only to be refuted itself by conservative 'extreme scepticism'.²³

Kareem's essay 'Lost in the Castle of Scepticism: Sceptical Philosophy as Gothic Romance' positions itself in the next step of this cycle, at the point where conservative ideology seeks to brand naïve empiricism as a new form of romance. But her use of Hume further complicates the opposition between romance and empiricism. While several scholars of the novel have signalled a break-up of the fact/fiction continuum in the eighteenth century, Humean scepticism makes the difference between romance and true history a question of vividness of belief or *enargeia*: all categories generated by the mind to understand causality are fictions.²⁴ Using as her case study James Beattie's parody of Hume's sceptical philosophy as Gothic romance, Kareem probes Hume's own complex relationship to the effects of Gothic romance, and to its structure which she identifies as the circular trajectory of someone fleeing the terrors of a Gothic castle, only to find oneself all the more entrapped. Because Hume self-consciously describes his own sceptical trajectory through the tropes of Gothic romance – and because the genre, as Kareem shows, is itself capable of ironic distance from its own conventions – Beattie's parody of Hume ends up replicating the terms of Hume's own self-critique.

Batsaki's 'From Alchemy to Experiment: The Political Economy of Experience in William Godwin's *St Leon*' returns to the affinities between the circumstantial narrative of experiment and the representational resources of novelistic realism. Reading a late eighteenth-century tale of alchemy by the prominent Enlightenment rationalist philosopher William Godwin, she shows that the plot progression from the secrets of alchemy to the rigours of experiment is also a move from romance