Stylometry and the Computational Attribution of the Dutch Anthem

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The authorship of the Dutch national anthem Wilhelmus, created around 1570, has been a venerable and impenetrable problem since the early modern period. New computational, stylometric techniques have opened up an array of new possibilities for investigating this case. We revisited the attribution question from a fresh perspective, arguing that researchers have been hindered in solving the problem by the various ideologies that inspired their research. We learned that a quantitative, computational analysis such as a stylometric or the computational study of writing style, can help by offering new, quantitative evidence.

The Wilhelmus is a beggars song, lyrically glorifying, in the first person singular, William of Orange, the Prince of Orange. The song marks the beginning of the Prince's successful PR strategy to collect the funds and credibility to revolt against the Habsburg regime in one of the most dramatic and defining episodes in the history of the Low Countries. In Orange's communication strategy, the Wilhelmus played a crucial role: it was sung at the battlefields and perceived to be "stronger than 10,000 soldiers" by contemporaries. Likewise, it was able to unite inhabitants of the provinces that operated separately up to that point.

In the earliest known prints of the song, no author is mentioned. Later sources have attributed the Wilhelmus to a number of well-known Dutch poets. Since the 19th century an impressive amount of research has been published (500+ papers, and a great number of monographs which have been devoted to the topic in the past centuries), without, however, leading to conclusive agreement on the authorship of the text. Indeed, it has frequently been claimed that the question will never be answered definitively, since crucial historical evidence is missing. Nevertheless, the attribution of the text proves vital in answering the following questions: Who was William of Orange's spin doctor in the early stages of his career, did he commission this song, where should we thus locate the Prince's group of supporters, and why did his main supporter - the author of the Wilhelmus - stay anonymous?

The present state-of-the-art stylometric analyses we used, based on frequencies of e.g. function words, invariably point towards the radically reformed minister Petrus Datheen as the most likely candidate for the authorship of the Wilhelmus. A little known author, Datheen was never considered as a plausible authorial candidate, mostly because of his poor reputation as a poet but also because of a fall-out with the Prince in 1578. Datheen even called Wiliam of Orange an "atheist", based on the Prince's plea for religious tolerance. While for cultural historians the attribution to Datheen may seem implausible at first sight, a closer inspection of previous scholarship shows that nearly all existing arguments against his authorship stem from historical misconceptions and ideologically inspired prejudices (often inherited from much later times). Taking both this new stylometric as historical evidence into account, Datheen emerges as a plausible candidate for whom, uniquely, both textual and musicological arguments exist. This attribution would convey that a Flemish born minister, living in a German community of refugees, composed a song that proved to be crucial for the Dutch Republic, on a French tune. This would imply that the rhetorical strategies for William of Orange were based on the use of a very popular mass media (songs), and were surprisingly

international in nature - surprisingly international, given the crucial role this song played (over the course of centuries) in the strive for Dutch independence and the Dutch nation state.

By introducing Datheen as a likely author, we generated new insights in a seemingly cold case using DH techniques. The results of this project will be reworked into a mini-docu for Dutch high schools, to both demonstrate the power of DH techniques and to discuss the cultural roots of the national Dutch anthem (see: https://www.nwo.nl/en/research-and-results/research-projects/i/17/31017.html)