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The Anonymous Audience

Owing, perhaps, to the ascendance and centrality of networked publics, and the proliferation

of anonymous participation on-line, studies of anonymity and pseudonymity experienced something

of a resurgence in the early 21st-century. Despite the prevalence of anonymous authorship in English

literature — according to Robert Griffin, the vast majority of published text "appeared either without

the author's name or under a fictive name" (1) — only sporadic scholarly investigations had been

undertaken. In attending to this academic gap, the overarching tendency was to evaluate anonymity

in terms of motive, or a particular form of authorship. John Mullan's *Anonymity: A Secret History of*

English Literature is indexed according to intent ("Mischief," "Modesty," "Danger," "Confession,"

etc.). In Robert J. Griffin's *Faces of Anonymity*, contributors examine various authorial facets

including: anonymity, pseudonymity, men writing as women, women writing as men, collaborative

authorship, ghostwriting, and so on. Though in no way invalidating these methodologies, Marcy L.

North argues for a far more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of anonymity. In *The Anonymous*

Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England, North analyses historical articulations

of anonymous authorship a socially- and culturally-contingent practices, unique amalgamations of

conventions both specific to the conditions in which they arise and are deployed, as well as anchored

in the forms that came before. Anonymity is, thus, a continuum; less a singular creature and more a

species, one of a cluster of fauna emerging from, and evolving within, a complex cultural ecosystem

continuously in flux. North exalts the "seemingly endless variation" in the uses and instantiations of

anonymity over time — authorial obfuscation could "take a number of shapes, suit a variety of

circumstances, and convey a range of meanings" — and it is precisely this malleability that "best defines anonymity's advantages for early authors and book producers" (14).

Further problematizing anonymity in terms of intent, North is adamant that the decision to include, withhold, or replace the name of a "true" or originating author was rarely the author's decision alone. Accreditation was more often assigned at the discretion of the publisher, or altered at the behest of a bookseller. Moreover, a missing signature could have nothing to do with choice whatsoever, but would result from errors in printing and/or transmission, whether accident, misprint, or outright omission. Nor is the "signature" as independent or exclusive signifier sufficient. Across manuscript and print culture, "book producers and compilers utilized a wide variety of conventions to present 'authors' to their readers" (Griffin 23). This spectrum of alternatives included initials; clues pertaining to social class or station; a unique, recursive repertoire of style or syntax, metaphor or imagery; correlative or coincident indicators of the author's *oeuvre.* In certain circumstances, anonymity was ill-suited to clandestine ends, as the author was well known to her/his immediate circle of readers, and his/her signature redundant. Irrespective of empty space on the title page, or enigmatically ensconced within the paratext, authorship may have been commonly known, or conferred through gossip, innuendo, or corroborations from friends, family members, colleagues, or intimates. Authors might be known to some but not to others. The question, then, is not *why* a work is anonymous, but *for whom.* Moreover, "what impact [did] that anonymity [have] on a text's various audiences" (North 46). The "lack" that anonymity represents is less elision than ellipses. As Joan Dejean muses in "Lafayette's Ellipses: The Privileges of Anonymity," ellipses are "[s]imultaneously absence and presence," and "give a plentitude to silence…the reader is made to recognize that there could have been something more, but that something more has been removed" (891).

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate a set of key incentives behind such removals, and explore both the intended and unintended effects of authorial elision upon the audience: what meaning(s) did the reader infer, or were they meant to infer, out of absence? Far from simple subsumption of selfhood, anonymity premises and incites a complex interplay of identifiability and interpretation between author, text, and audience that disputes a linear, causal trajectory from the conception/production of a text to its reception. Through applications of anonymity, we can observe the social and cultural contexts of production/reception less as separate spheres, and instead as overlapping and interpenetrating paradigms. Often employed to broker the terms of the dissemination and interpretation of a text, practices of anonymity were determined by, and rooted in, the distinct particularities and configurations of readers. The audience imagined the invisible author, and the author imagined their invisible audience. Furthermore, if the creation and consumption of a text is perceived not as an exchange, but as a collaborative act, then the presence or absence of an "originating" author necessarily impacts the meaning-making resources available to the audience.[1] Therefore, in terms of how and why an author is, or chooses to be and/or remain, known or unknown is a delicate and dextrous dance performed by author and audience in tandem.

Susan L. Lanser proposes, as a "critical axiom," that "authorship conventionally underwrites readers' engagements with literary texts…readers commonly strive…to establish 'true' authorship and to construct the text in its light" (Griffin 82). How, Griffin wonders, are readers left to elicit meaning from a text "in the absence of extra-textual information about the writer?" (12). In terms of

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[1] This would be the ideal opportunity to invoke Barthes and Foucault, as nearly every author seems to do at some point in their discussion of anonymity. Barthes killed the author, and Foucault reanimated the corpse as a "function." For our purposes, however, we will bypass the path that Foucault hacked through this thicket, while acknowledging (as nearly every author does) that textual interpretation remains predominantly predicated on authorial "personality," and that contemporary readers remain over-invested in "the cultural import and functional breadth" of many a famous name (Griffin 22). As the focus of this paper is the dialectic between (variously anonymous) authors and audiences, the "personality" of these authors is in some respects crucial. As Griffin notes, modern readers infer "an implied authorial consciousness," irrespective of a text's originator(s), whereby "the historical, social, and cultural codes that comprise the text come to the fore" (10).

North's framework, there is no single suitable response to so general a query: "Within each author's environment, name suppression serves a different function and conveys a different message to the reader" (115). "[M]any scholars," North asserts, "miss the point of the hidden name altogether; anonymity and naming often function as a single mark to be interpreted variously depending on the audience and social context" (16). Audience responses to anonymity were as divergent as the forms of anonymity deployed. Extant accounts of public opinion indicate that the "full interpretive potential" — "the intentions, the playfulness, the necessity, and the familiarity" (North 89) — that attended anonymity's manifold conventions were widely known and understood. Readers variously "grumbled and railed" and "praised the modesty" of absent authors, and openly debated the vices and virtues, and "advantages and disadvantages," of anonymous publication (North 89).[2] Readers may have had cause to be skeptical of an anonymous agent's motives, as "[m]any conventions of discretion [seemed] designed to provoke a response." (Moreover, many a Tudor-era criminal act was assigned to the scapegoat "Nobody.") "In any of its forms, anonymity could prove exceedingly visible to the watchful or suspicious reader" (North 90). John Wigand's *Contra Neministas et Neministica Scripta* (1576), a reactionary polemic condemning the evils of the emergent print industry, turned skepticism into an anti-anonymity crusade. Wigand's "expansive treatise against anonymous publication" characterized the practice of spreading nameless texts as a "plague." As an active effort to "deceive readers," Wigand saw anonymity as a debased moral affront (North 91, 92).

Prior to the rise and preeminence of print, however, anonymity served a discrete set of author/ audience functions. In Virginia Woolf's elegiac treatise, Anonymous is the nameless, itinerant bard for whom singing and storytelling is a face-to-face prospect: "the audience was so little interested in

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[2] North credits the attentiveness of early readers to the myriad iterations and applications of anonymity with being "largely responsible for making the convention's nuances legible today" (89).

his name that he never thought to give it. The audience was itself the singer… Every body shared in the emotion of Anon's song, and supplied the story" (qtd. in Griffin 75). Woolf's thesis is two-pronged. On the one hand, as shall be elaborated further on, she indicates that authorship is an inherently collaborative process — the act of transmission is in and of itself participatory. On the other, the recognition implied by co-presence precludes the necessity of naming. Identity is constellatory, and "name" is only one constituent star. In the context of oral dissemination, therefore, "anonymity…should be understood as a performative convention… Literature that privileges performance establishes attribution very differently than [written text]" (North 45). One crucial difference is the lack of an originating author. Rather, such texts were considered as communally co-authored: freely accessible to all; passed along a chain of eyes, ears, and tongues; revised and renewed at the discretion of whomsoever happened to be telling the tale, to suit the time and place in which it was being told. In other words, the text was a diffuse and ongoing collaborative endeavour. Because of the inherent fluidity and interpretability of the oral text, as well as the fact that its "current" author was present to her/his audience, accreditation would have been seen as absurd.

In their infancy, literate cultures payed little heed to matters of authorial signature. In contexts of scribal production/publication, manuscripts were circulated "amongst those in the know," and this was the only means by which a writer "could make his work known to a socially restricted readership" (Mullan 224, 225). In some respects, a "restricted readership" was precisely the point of coterie culture. By its very design, the coterie was insular and exclusive, and authorial identities were "intended to be recognized only by members of [the] circle." As such, signatures were redundant. The "audience" comprised a "social group for whom a…statement of the author's individual identity was simply unnecessary," and the affixing of names to a text "irrelevant" (Griffin 71). The authors, in other words, *were* the audience. Not only could coterie members profess themselves aloof to

"commercial success," and exult in brandishing elite *bona fides* — if, say, the sonnets of a celebrated Bard were "kept within a restricted circle of readers…privileged knowledge [became] a badge of membership" (Griffin 24) — but so condensed and circumscribed an audience permitted authors to foreswear "the vulgarity of entering print" (Mullan 38, 225).[3]

In one sense, "vulgarity" implies authorial humility, a surprisingly resilient and oft-recurring concern, especially as coincident with the advent and commodification of print. Here, the recalcitrant author refuses to indulge in the vanity associated with publicizing and circulating their signature, and eschews the egoism and pridefulness assumed to be induced by the public recognition and acclaim, resulting in material "less contaminated by personal self-interest" (Easley 36). Among Elizabethan-era aristocracy, for example, anonymity was considered a useful tool "in creating a facade of elite discretion and nonchalance" (North 105).

This ambivalent "facade" served a dual purpose: hand-wringing over vulgarity elucidates the growing distain for the promulgation of printed text amongst an unknown/unknowable audience. As the market for books began to swell, so too did the demand for "entertainment, and flutter — popular culture" (Tuchman and Fortin qtd. in Easley 182). It was not the promiscuity of printed text itself that was considered obscene, but how an author imagined the potential audience(s) for their work and, accordingly, how the author imagined the audience imagining her/him? As North notes, "[p]rint also made the reader more anonymous" (57). Print profoundly altered the relationship between author and audience, not only in terms of the mechanisms through which the author could throttle the availability of their work to this newly invisible readership, but the ways in which that author was

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[3] Clearly, the interpretation of a text is impacted by the intimacy of author and audience: "meanings shift depending on proximity of readers to circles that control story of a text's origins" (North 198).

portrayed to that selfsame audience. Anonymity was both a means to circumvent the demands of a "public persona," as well as a strategy to determine how, and by whom, the work was received.

This "humility," however, need not be sincere. As a veneer, authorial nonchalance could function as a form of advertising, and anonymity could be used to promote the very auspices of discretion the "unknown" author claimed to exalt. "The ambivalence that many authors had or claimed to have about the public nature of print encouraged acts of discreet authorship that charmed patrons and the broader print audience alike" (North 99). During the transition between manuscript/ scribal culture (with its restricted readership), and the proliferation of print (and its emergent mass audience), the role of an author (and the public perception thereof) was "not yet fully created, or instituted" (Miller 220).[4] Herein lay an opportunity for authors to explore in earnest the extent to which conventions of anonymity could be appropriated and reconfigured to shape how both the authorial "personality," and the text itself, was understood and interpreted by their anonymous audience. In other words, how could anonymity be employed as a marketing technique?

In "Authorship, Anonymity, and The Shepheardes Calender," David L. Miller examines Spenser's attempt to maneuver his epic poem, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), into the classical canon through a canny use of authorial absence. In and of itself, the Elizabethan readership would have likely considered anonymity "acceptable, commonplace, [and] unremarkable" (North 115). This was, after all, a time in which nearly eighty percent of manuscripts appeared without signatures (Miller 220). What Spenser was attempting, however, was to use anonymity to lay the groundwork for an authorial identity. "Whoever creates a text," writes Miller, "is creating his own identity as a writer. If he publishes, then the identity he creates is a public role"; authorship is, thus, a project of

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[4] Miller contends that in "English literature authorship does not emerge as an important category for fictional writing until the 16th century" (220).

"self-definition" (219). Miller posits that Spenser used *Calender* as an opportunity to insert himself

into the canon of revered English poets such as Chaucer or Virgil (whose works were originally

published anonymously), and to whom accreditation was retroactively conferred. To this end,

Spenser inscribes his poem with faux-annotations as a framing device to de-temporize the text. That

is, he appropriates a technique familiar to students of classical poetry (the annotations that

accompanied "classic" works, and function both as commentary on the work, and as historical stamp

of acclamation of their stature/classification *as* a classical work) in order to contemporaneously align

Calender with the works of his revered forebears. In a sense, Spenser turned early paratextuality into

a genre. Spenser then waited ten years before claiming credit for the poem, by which time its

reputation — and, accordingly, that of its unknown author — was secure. Having bypassed the

vanity of accreditation, Spenser could claim commendable humility while simultaneously asserting

his "continuity with a tradition of greatness" (Miller 227).

That decade of anonymity, and the subsequent acknowledgment of authorship, allowed

Spenser to "leapfrog the constraints of class and authorial apprenticeship" as well as history itself

(Rothery 6), by which he forged a new conceptualization of authorship. By concocting an esteemed

lineage for the *Calender* equal to the most venerated works of the past, Spenser constructs the author

as free from the bondage of class or station. Rather, poetic authority is realized through a "sense of…

vocation" (Miller 229). The muse attends to all, rich and poor alike. This authority, however, is

vested first and foremost in the poem itself: "[i]nstead of deriving its authority from [Spenser]…the

Calender created an authority which he could later assume with ease, almost with

nonchalance" (Miller 225, emphasis mine). That is, Spenser enabled the poem's audience to conceive

of creative authority as an external force, an authority that lies beyond the immediate social and

cultural circumstances. Situated outside of space and time, this text can be conferred prestige only by

the audience itself. In Spenser's absence, it was the audience entrusted to "'father' the text…to accord it a public authority independent of its natural father's identity" (Miller 225).

The form of "authorship" engineered by Spenser through the *Calender* is dyadic: it lies within the text itself and through the protracted process of public recognition and eventual unmasking and celebration of the author. The strategy of publishing the poem anonymously, in this instance, is a form of collaboration between author and audience. Spenser's use of "meta" framing devices (i.e. annotation) both compliment the stylistically "classical"/atemporal conceit of *Calender*, and also represent an active attempt to condition its interpretation. However, claiming authorship of the poem ten years after the fact would only have paid dividends had that reception proved positive and sustainable. Spenser's risk may have been calculated, but it was nonetheless a risk, ultimately dependent upon the public embracing the poem. That his readers accorded the work the acclaim Spenser sought is, perhaps, a testament both to his constructivist approach to reception, as well as the agency he expected from its audience.[5]

Spenser's attempt to contour *Calender*'s reception exemplifies one of the ways in which, despite the segregation of authors and audiences effectuated by the spread of print, his audience was nonetheless endowed with an elevated level of autonomy and agency, and asked to play a participatory role in textual consumption.[6] As indicated earlier, due to the prevalence of anonymous and pseudonymous ascription, readers were equipped to interpret the blurred boundaries of authorial identity and sublimation in myriad ways; anonymity's "traditions, fashionability, dangers, and occasional playfulness made it a nuanced and meaningful gesture" (North 4-5). As Spenser amply

[5] North labels this authorial strategy "ambitious anonymity," which is concerned primarily with "maintaining control of author information (or at least the illusion of control), so that anonymity creates the author in the right place and manner and at the right time" (108).

[6] Spenser was, in fact, straddling two distinct readerships: patronage (to whom Spenser was known) and print (to whom he was not). That patrons conspired in maintaining Spenser's disguise "was the very sign of their approval" (North 101).

demonstrates, anonymity might be employed as "an author's means to garner patronage or career opportunities, to exercise influence over readers, or…to make his or her name" (North 99). Furthermore, as the materiality of printed texts, as well as the indices and paratextual information present therein — "title pages, pagination…printer attribution, and prefaces to readers" — continued to change and evolve concomitant with conventions of authorial accreditation (initials, intimations of authorial canon, etc.) so too did the "set of expectations through which print readers could interpret subtle variations" (North 59-60).

> Early title pages were surprisingly versatile. They could advertise any combination of title, author, printer, bookseller, location of bookshop, city, and year of publication. Many included popular features such as epigraphs and frontispieces. The conventions on a title page could also be manipulated in a variety of ways so that even when an authorial name appeared, it was not necessarily the predominant feature… (North 61)

A crucial consequence of the elaboration of paratextual content was to "make anonymity 'visible.'" As title pages became commonplace, the "absence of the author's name was now marked…[as] a decisive omission." This omission — the inscription of authorial lacunae — further stoked audience inquisitiveness (Mullan 285).

This last point — the use of anonymity to incite interest in an author — seems contradictory, and yet was adopted as a sound strategy for testing the waters for a first edition. As printing and book-selling became profitable industries, so too could authorial names accrue renown. A name's marketability, however, was a double-edged sword: that "name" could propel the success of a book, or — should the work flop — cripple an author's long-term prospects. Anonymity, thus, allowed known authors to submit works to critical and public appraisal without compromising their future commodifiability. If glowing, the author shed their guise to bask in due adulation: "[most] authors

were eager to shuck off their disguises when praised." Whereas Spenser waited a decade before claiming credit for *Calender*, other authors were not content to wait so long: "indeed many who published first works anonymously announced themselves very quickly in a second edition" (North 101). Alternately, if the book received a critical thrashing, its author need never claim credit.

While anonymity could be used to safeguard reputations, it could also cultivate an age-old promotional conceit: the aura of mystery. The concealment or befogging of authorial identity might portend "a lively game between author and audience" (North 5). Mullan sees Jonathan Swift as an assiduous *agent provocateur* "practiced in the provoking tricks of authorial disguise" (10). Swift seems acutely aware of the pitfalls that public authorship entailed, and opined that "true genius is too modest to risk the embarrassment of being known before his work has been judged" (qtd. in Mullan 14). However, Swift also had a "strong feeling for the habits of interpretation of his readers," and anonymity was only the posture of reticence for an author that craved their admiration (Mullan 14, 10). In these circumstances, the missing signature served as a protracted act of self-promotion; the author never intends to remain unknown, but actively foments speculation, enticing readers to locate and expose her/him, thereby "discovering" his/her genius (Mullan 29, 14). The effort to unmask the author functions as a tantalizing and self-perpetuating marketing campaign, and the potential benefits were twofold: first, the more frenzied the speculation, the greater the stir, the greater the stir, the more attention is afforded the book, the more attention, the more success; second, focussing this fervent attention on uncovering an originating author is to foreground the preeminence of originating authorship itself. In contradistinction from Spenser, who was content to allow *Calender* to be venerated on its own terms over an extended period of author-less percolation, for Swift "anonymity [was] most successful when it provokes the search for an author" (Mullan 30).

Over time, the "game of attribution" (Mullan 135) would coalesce into a field in its own right, leading to the current *contretemps* between advocates of attribution studies — such as Donald Foster and Harold Love — and its (mainly Foucauldian) critics, such as Mark Robson. Modern-day attributionism — a protean and expansive field encompassing comparative evaluations of syntax, grammar, vocabulary and idiom; and historical and biographical portraitures that enfold any and all available social/cultural/economic indices — is predicated on the tendentious claim that anonymity and pseudonymity represent "a vacuum in nature which it is [an attributionist's] moral duty to fill with an author" (Love 45). Saturated in the language (and aspiring to the certitude) of forensic science — Foster claims that "[the] words on the handwritten or printed page are more indelible than fingerprints, and more dependable than eyewitness testimony" (282) — Love proposes that "[the] great majority of writers wish passionately to assert their responsibility for their creations" (3). Ergo, absent names are inherently "unnatural"; *a priori* errors that attributionists are duty-bound to rectify.

Despite his dogmatism, Love has a point. Though initially published anonymously, Spenser eventually sought recognition for his epic poem. According to Mullan, Swift kept his signature secret in order to sustain a guise of nonchalance while spurring readers to "discover" him. Authors who published anonymous first editions as a trial run desired acknowledgement, provided it took the form of acclaim. What Love and Foster fail to take into account, however, are the multiplicity of motives and interrelationships at play, not to mention agents involved, in the production and distribution of text. Presuming that a work was published anonymously at the author's behest (which, as we have seen, was not always the case), we cannot conclude that the author's identity was unknown to all. "The absence of a name on a title page is not quite the same as saying that a reader was kept in the dark about the identity of a novel's author" (Griffin 144). Historically, identification was not a binary — an author is either known or unknown; full stop — but rather concentric rings of conspicuousness,

with a text's author known to some and not to others. Here, again, are shades of a dialectic at play: to what extent were audiences equipped to identify an author? To what extent were they meant to? How did those "in the know" interact (or how were they supposed to interact) with those who were not?

As with Swift, some material, such as "lampoons, encouraged readers…to 'discover' the authorship of authorless works" (Mullan 154). Readers of satires were provided stylistic cues and clues in order to guess at authorial identity, and "[a] clever reviewer might hope to be recognized by the informed reader" (Mullan 203). Such guesswork was not only a lively game between the author and her/his audience, but a tested the acumen and attentiveness of that audience. Speculating on authorship was a means of "claiming kinship" with "those in the know" (Mullan 203, 202). "To know what you were reading," and by whom it was written, "was to belong to a select group" (Mullan 231). In a sense, the signature was withheld in an effort to reestablish the intimacy between author and audience that was a feature of manuscript circulation within coterie circles; a closeness through contact lost when the audience was atomized by the printing press.[7]

Sometimes it was their own insider status that an author sought to protect. The *roman à clef* was an historically popular genre whereby "readers 'with a key' [were] admitted to a partly hidden world" to which the anonymous author has access (Mullan 30). The "key" allows the audience to project the true identities of those depicted — "recognizable…versions of real people" (Mullan 30) — onto the characters in the book. Attributing a *roman à clef* could expose an author who was risking their own livelihood and/or reputation by "breaking confidences and passing on secrets" in order to "[reveal] what was supposed to be concealed." These "[secret] histories…relied on the mystery, or pseudo-mystery, of their authorship" (Mullan 31, 231). Such thinly-veiled accounts of

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[7] "Anonymity…is a convention particularly suited to the distance print creates between book producers and consumers, [and] to the collaborative nature of the print industry" (North 29).

actual events and prominent figures opened a window into a world of privilege and power to which most readers did not, and would likely never, belong.

Dejean explores just such a "pseudo-mystery" in her account of Marie-Madeline Pioche de la Vergne, comptesse de Lafayette, who was widely acknowledged as the co-author of the popular *La Princcesse de Clevès*. "[M]any, if not most, of the seventeenth-century works printed with no authors' names on their title pages would not have been considered anonymous in their own time, because the authors' identities were an open secret" (885). Lafayette, however, publicly disavowed accreditation, and even critiqued the novel through an entwining of "flattering…commentary" with "repudiation" (893). Dejean perceives Lafayette's feint as "a carefully calculated strategy" that inaugurated "modern techniques of book promotion" (889, 887). In the epigraph of *Princesse,* the male-gendered author claims that the author has withheld "his" name because it will unfairly impinge on the novel's public reception. As such, anonymity allows for "'freer and more equitable judgments'" (894). As we saw with Swift, "freer" judgments stoke controversy, and controversy can fuel attention and success. Unlike Swift, however, Lafayette's co-authorship was an open secret, which begs the question: Why the pantomime? If Lafayette sought to beguile venomous critics, then the ruse failed: those who had barbs to direct directed them at her. Dejean posits that given attribution, fictions were "judged solely as extensions of their [authors]" (894); that is, in a market brimful with *romans à clef,* the audience would invariably interpret the work as autobiographical. If her identity, however, had been kept completely secret, then Lafayette "might never receive credit for [her] production, and [her] unclaimed [text] would fall into the public domain, where [it] would be attributed to others, [and] appropriated by others" such as profit-hungry editors (894). Anonymity, therefore, was a tactic by which Lafayette could deny authorship, antagonize critics, foment controversy, and drive sales, while simultaneously commenting on (and garnering attention for

commenting on) her attributional "lack." By subverting the narrative surrounding the publication and publicity of her novel, she was able to control it, assuring the maintenance of "textual authority with no risk of personal exposure" (899). Lafayette, perhaps, imagined her readers and critics alike as canny enough to know she was almost certainly the author, but curious enough to continue to tilt at the windmill. The ruse was, thus, part taunt, part wink. The book was a huge hit.

A further iteration of the "humility topoi" (North 44), instances of the anonymous publication of female authors are often framed as acts of modesty or discretion. There is a dual implication at play: on the one hand, women are "naturally" demure and delicate creatures, and thus reticent to receive attention or acclaim; on the other, as a subordinate "other" infiltrating one of many male dominions, women were wary of the social and critical opprobrium their trespass could provoke, and sought to "develop authorial strategies to protect their reputations as socially acceptable females" (Griffin 63). Once again, by locating authorial motive in broader social and cultural concerns, we neglect the more immediate considerations pertaining to the relationship between author and audience; this dialect forms the axis on which the use of anonymity pivots, and determines the selective amalgamation of anonymous conventions employed.

Accordingly, anonymous female authorship — often published under the sobriquet "By A Lady" — "was a means of engaging the desired consumers of the texts, in effect of appealing to a female community as having shared interests" (Griffin 74). Far from obscuring authorial gender, "By A Lady" accentuates it (Griffin 67). As a form of feminine mask, "By A Lady" acted as "an amplification device as well as a cloaking one, an attractive advertisement rather than a humble excuse" (Griffin 74). The flourishing book trade was frequented by a burgeoning demographic: female readers who recognized that "By A Lady" titles were more likely to treat in (pseudo-)female-centric content such as "courtship, entanglement, and suffering in love," and by the mid-18th

century, the audience for the novel was was apprehended as predominantly female (Mullan 57). The pseudonym became such a lucrative marketing strategy that male authors began to publish "By A Lady" novels in order to appeal to a wider audience and boost sales. Male infiltration of the "By A Lady" market provoked redoubled critical attempts to evaluate indicators of male contra female authorship. Reviewers "condescendingly picked on feminine details," such as intimacy with domestic duties solely the province of women, in their efforts to divine the author's sex (Mullan 57).

In *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media, 1830-70*, Alexis Easley examines how female authors — Harrient Martineau, Isobel Johnstone, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Christina Rossetti[8] — published work anonymously/pseudonymously as well as signed. Easley is intrigued by "the *intersection* of women's careers as celebrity authors and anonymous journalists" (2, emphasis in original); namely, how their anonymous endeavours premised, incited, influenced, and inflected their accredited material. As journalists and/or editors at periodical publications, these authors published unaccredited work.[9] Subsequently, in establishing literary careers as authors of fiction, non-fiction, or poetry independent of the periodicals, they began affixing names to texts. Anonymous articles for the periodical press "enabled women to address broad audiences and subject matter, writing on subjects as diverse as slavery, women's emancipation, parliamentary reform, and industrialism," and facilitated the development of a "proto-feminist political consciousness" (Easley 2). By accessing a broader audience, Easley argues that Martineau was able to "expand the audience for the woman Question" (58). Johnstone, too, availed herself of this newfound contact with readers forged through anonymous publication; audiences otherwise "inaccessible to a celebrity female author or editor" (Easley 62).

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[8] These five authors were among the 1500-plus women who wrote for periodicals in the Victorian era (Easley 2).

[9] Until the 1870s, it was standard practice in Victorian England for periodicals to publish the bulk of their content unsigned.

The transition from anonymous to accredited authorship was in many respects a perilous project. Issues and ideas that they could freely and provocatively opine on as anonymous contributors were considered unworthy of an accredited female author. Female authors had far more to fear *vis-à-vis* how their private lives would be publicly perceived. Of the assorted double standards women endured, the private/public paradox was no less pernicious: the private woman in the domestic sphere "[exerted a] moral influence that would serve as a corrective to the degraded values of the literary marketplace." Within that same marketplace, however, the female author was a "social anomaly whose work lowered the overall moral and aesthetic quality of contemporary literature" (Easley 18). Female authors were all too aware that, as public figures, their private conduct would be brought to bear in their adjudication by critics and audiences alike. "Johnstone was…reticent about assuming a public identity…partly due to the fact that [she] was a divorcée and consequently had good reason to avoid public attention" (Easley 62). George Eliot was all too aware of the "possible repercussions if her scandalous social situation were to be known by her readers" (Mullan 103), and contrived her famous pseudonym in order to "distance her identity from her work." "George Eliot" was, thus, a useful "intermediary persona" that she could insert "between herself and her readers" (Easley 117). In the Victorian cultural context, both critical and public appraisals of a female author's relative moral rectitude/turpitude, as well as their private comportment, had an indelible impact on their prospective careers, and anonymity had afforded them a formidable shield against the slings and arrows of specious conjecture.

The potential consequences of accredited authorship, and the delineation of what was rightly public and private, was not entirely exclusive to female authors, but ultimately concerned all contributors to periodical publications wherein anonymity was considered an immutable status quo. In the 1870s a tectonic rearrangement was underway, and the majority of periodicals ratified their

authorial policies to institute signatures, the ensuing debates would inflame many longstanding (and still-simmering) tensions. An unattributed editorial in *The Times* from October, 1861 testified that "[t]here is not the smallest doubt in any quarter that Anonymous Writing is the only eligible or effective form of public writing," and Eneas Dallas wrote (anonymously) in *Blackwood's* that "gradually it must come to this…public talk will swell with pride, glitter and tinsel, and nauseate us with its magniloquence intimately more than it now does with its dullness" (qtd. in Liddle 31). Likewise, R.H. Hutton, a co-owner and editor of the *Spectator,* saw signatures as endemic to vanity, and posited that "the presence of a signature was motivated by the love of display" (Tener 64). Across the breach, Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hughes defended this brave new world of authorial identifiability, framing the contest as one between "manly" "open dealing" and the "timidity" innate to female authorship; those predisposed to speak from "behind a veil" (Easley 133). Hughes muses that anonymity "perpetuates a set of rules which encourage and reward lackadaisical writing and thinking. As long as writers are not held accountable in public for their actions…simple human weakness will tempt them to indulge in unfair attacks and ill-considered statements" (Liddle 44). Because journalists are not immune to the seductions of anonymity's innumerable sins, it is only communal knowledge and oversight of their authorship that enforces piety.

To Trollope's mind, consonant with the publication of "masculine" subjects such as "science, theology, social matters, and politics," signatures are equally necessary in periodical reportage to "establish his credibility" (Easley 132-33). According to Trollope's "market-oriented view of journalism," journalists are no more than private entrepreneurs providing consumers with a product. With the "elimination of anonymity, each writer would have a personal stake in the quality of written products, and competitive self-interest could then be trusted to improve the quality of those

products." Accreditation effects authorial accountability to the consumers of the journalistic product, and consumers are the ultimate "[arbiters] of value" (Liddle 48, 49).

As with anonymity in general, these debates hinge on the "metaphorical construction of the reading public" (Liddle 46). Here the contest is between the audience as eager students "sitting uncritically at the feet of the mentor" (Liddle 51), and the audience as savvy and perspicacious consumer, window shopping for the best available info. Moreover, the pro-attributionists — Hughes, Trollope, et al — "presume a reader who can be misled by anonymous writers." Where anonymity advocates presume a lopsided relationship — the sage and erudite journalist/teacher instructing impressionable youth — the attributionists see readers and writers as equals mutually ensuring honest dealings in concordance with the rules of the "institutions that govern their relationship" (Liddle 46).

If the overarching concern of the anonymous author is his/her interrelationship with an audience, then what can the examples of Spenser, Swift, and Lafayette tell us about how this dialectic has transmuted over time? How does vacillation between anonymity and accreditation, and the Victorian-era debates over the vices and virtues of each, further inflect the debate?

Spenser allowed his audience to engage with the (albeit manipulated) text on more or less their own terms, while only later — once canonization of his work was secure — claiming credit. Swift saw anonymity as a friendly game of hide and seek: initial anonymity was the prologue to incipient authorship: he could pretend to adhere to the stoic nonchalance and humility of his coterie circle forebears, while surreptitiously laying a trail of breadcrumbs leading to his discovery and acclamation. Lafayette held her audience and critics at arm's length, neither fully repudiating nor admitting to authorship. As with Swift, the intense speculation engendered by the mystery of her

authorship proved a savvy marketing strategy and spurred the financial success of her novel, unlike

Swift, she remained elliptical, never providing the satisfaction of a straight answer.

Taken together, these examples display a movement of authorial control over the reception of

the text — that is, the degree to which the author exerts control over how the audience interprets a

text through the prism of that author's identity — from a lesser degree of control (in the case of

Spenser), to a greater degree (with Lafayette). Though Spenser conditioned the reception of the

Calender according to paratextual affectations, his decade-long remoteness furnished his readership

with vast interpretive terrain. Swift balanced textual authority against his eventual unmasking. With

his authorship established, however, his public personality and the text were braided into an

interpretable whole, and his control was diluted. Through her continued beguiling of accreditation,

Lafayette maintained "textual authority" without sacrificing "personal exposure," deftly maintaining

sovereignty over her own authorial narrative" (Dejean 899).

"[A]nonymity," writes North, "often provoked a reader's anxiety about his or her relationship

to the text. It introduced questions about the author's honesty and trustworthiness. It denied a reader

the opportunity to evaluate the character or 'worthiness' of the author" (102). Susan S. Lanser

suggests that

> "readers bring at least two distinct but related types of prior inferential knowledge to their
>
> construction of an implied author: the assumptions about reliability, credibility and wisdom
>
> that a given culture confers on authorship, and some rudimentary sense of a particular

authorial biography" (Griffin 84).

"Readers," Lanser continues, "become most conscious of this process of inference…when the author

produced in the course of this heavily conditioned reading is either troubled by textual dissonance or

challenged by external facts" (Griffin 84).

This is, in effect, precisely what Barthes and Foucault sought to uproot and supplant, and the fate to which the attributionists have succumbed: the "author-centeredness of critical practice" initiated by print. "[With] print came the attribution of a text — a fixed object — to a single individual, with no space to acknowledge any participation of a reader" (Griffin 87, 75). Owing, perhaps, to the author/audience chasm prompted by print, the now-(physically-)absent author is reified as a set of "interpretive indices" (Griffin 88); signposts that prompt the reader down the "correct" exegetical path. The interpretive strategy proposed by this paradigm is one in which the text is indicative of, and only as comprehensible as, its author; worshipped as a singular and infallible authority. Not only does this biographical veneration of originating authors rob the audience of interpretive autonomy, and obscure the fundamentally collaborative process of creation — to borrow a phrase from Kittler, the assorted agents implicated in the generative "chain of assemblages" (153) that comprise the conception, gestation, and birth of any artwork — but portends the very cult of personality that formed one front in the battle over signed pieces in Victorian-era periodicals. This is the architecture of *auteur* theory, which has so thoroughly infiltrated the Western *mentalité* that credit for explicitly collaborative disciplines such as filmmaking, involving upwards of thousands of creative and technical personnel, are ultimately assigned to a single authorial individual: the director.

By denying an audience direct access to an author (much less their moral character or worthiness), certain configurations of, and motivations inciting, anonymity can be conceived of as efforts to redirect and focus the audience's attention back onto the work itself. Consequently, the work is received not as an edict, but as a web of contingent and intersecting agencies (of which the author is only one). Any "text" is a form of communion: between the audience and author or authors, the various associated/peripheral actors involved, the myriad contexts of time and place — social,

cultural, political, historical — within and through which the work was produced/received, as well as the sometimes nuanced, sometimes explicit push and pull between this and other works of art, past and present. Every text is, no matter how insular and isolated the author(s), the product of a dense and fluctuating field of agencies and and influences, and, as such, is an inherently participatory endeavour through which author(s)/audience(s) create a "common voice" (Woolf qtd. in Griffin 75). Through anonymity, audiences are empowered as no less a collaborator than any other actor, and is, thus, an essential tool in leveling the playing field and reallocating creative and interpretive authority.

Lisa Freinkel contends that "Foucault loses sight of the *reader's* function…of reading *as* authorization: as that activity according to which empirical beginnings are yoked to transcendent ends" (qtd. in Robson 359, emphasis in original). Spenser's *Calender* "positions the reader to ally him/herself not with some transcendental poetic voice but with the *community of readers* constructed by the dialectic of proffering and denying" (Tribble qtd. in North 103, emphasis mine). Spenser sought a legacy, Swift a chase, and Lafayette a controversy, but irrespective of their intentions, each author effected it through anonymity in order to "[tease] the reader with what can and cannot be known" (North 230). The continued revitalization of the knowing/unknowing dichotomy is essential: vesting ultimate authority in an author implicitly supports the illusion of "knowability" — a vestige, perhaps, of coterie circles — and the text is contorted into a bridge across the chasm: "in our collective practice as readers and agents of the literary institution we evidently persist in expecting that the [text] will express the poet's subjective truth and reflect his or her true identity" (North 235). Anonymity, by contrast, is *self*-reflexive, exposing the "knowable author" fallacy by "[telling] us more about what the modern reader misses and seeks than what a text actually lacks" (North 14). The modern reader's mandate is to accept the "[radical] uncertainty" of an anonymous text, and desist in our obsessive ascription of authorial intent in order to better understand our own. Every text "exists

as a 'social text,' and its significance, far from being its author's exclusive control, is collectively and dialogically negotiated" (Griffin 238). The centripetal force of originating/individuated authorship hastened the coagulation of copyright and intellectual property laws, which in turn infused creative acts with the semiotics of privateness and ownership. Artistic authorship, however, "is a social nexus, not a personal possession" (McGann qtd. in North 9).

Because "every text is a collaboration, a social rather than a personal product" (North 9) — in production as well as consumption — anonymity is best apprehended as a discrete component of a collaborative process. Anonymity undermines the authority of originating authorship by making every anonymous author "Anonymous." The all-encompassing conflation — or, rather reconciliation and unification — of authorial voices challenges and compromises "the reader's inclination to distinguish between voices" (North 213-4). In opposition to the attributionist effort to parse and differentiate the "traces of agency that cohere in pieces of writing," and, thus, to disassemble the text in order to "validate individual agency" (Love 32), anonymity not only allows these heterogenous agencies to retain cohesion within the text, but "tends to illuminate similarities between voices that might not be visible if the [texts] were attributed" (North 226). The "By A Lady" sobriquet, Ezell argues, "[creates] a sense of not an individual writer but a composite one" (Griffin 75). "The anonymous woman becomes all women and every woman," allowing the reader "to interpret these stories as universal female experiences" (North 228). Anonymity powerfully illustrates not our differences, but our similarities.

As "non-originary and non-assertive authorship" (Carson 446), anonymity dislodges the author(s) (as well as the institutional hegemony of publishers and booksellers) as creative epicenter, and instead inspires a diffuse and egalitarian ethos: a "shared community of writers and readers, not distinguished by individual features"; Woolf's "common voice" (Griffin 75). Dejean proposes that

Lafayette's profusion of pronouns in place of proper names in *Princesse* was an intentionally de-hierarchical diegetic strategy that employed "elimination for the purpose of multiplication." "These incompletely anchored pronouns work against the principle of difference, as characters seem almost interchangeable… [suggesting] that individuals are, grammatically if not socially, infinitely replaceable" (891). Though it could be perceived as an imperialist tic, or a monarchical wink, Liddle observes that in the debates over signed periodicals, advocates for anonymity "always construct both journalists and readers in the plural" (59). As far back as the Marprelate tracts (1588-89), which so vexed Elizabeth I, "Martin" was the prototypical embodiment of democratic ideals, implicating the entire public as potential co-conspirators: "the day that you hange Martin / assure your selves / there wil 20. Martins spring in my place" (North 148).

This is not to imply that anonymity is always assumed solely in the interests of propagating equality. There were real dangers these authors had to contend with. "Martin Marprelate," most likely a composite of several alternating authors, could very well have been hung for sedition. Many a 16th- and 17th-century printer suffered imprisonment, severe corporeal harm, and even execution in lieu of the absent author whose work they had published and/or distributed. Victorian-era female journalists, such as Martineau, Johnstone, and Eliot, were well aware of the possible repercussions of exposing their private selves, through signature, to public scrutiny. Nor am I suggesting that financial interests played a subordinate role; anonymity was (and, if the anonymously-published *Primary Colors* (1996) is any indication, still can be) a lucrative publicity ploy to fan the flames of curiosity and controversy, and propel sales.[10] Furthermore, as North is wont to emphasize, we should cast a jaundiced eye on *a priori* assertions of a linear progression from *authorlessness* to accreditation

[10] Using his patented "literary forensics" methodology, Donald Foster concluded that erstwhile *Newsweek* columnist Joe Klein had secretly penned *Primary Colors.* As with Lafayette before him, Klein mounted a vociferous (if coyly ambiguous) defense denying authorship, but eventually admitted that he was indeed "Anonymous." The admission was a sensation, and many a hand was wrung over journalistic ethics in the hoopla that ensued.

(what North describes as "evolutionary" or "revolutionary" models of authorship). Anonymity is not

a single practice, but an interrelated, intersecting, and richly multivalent cluster of conventions.

"Anonymity…functions to combine or collapse the old and the new; it facilitates the appropriation of

past conventions and encourages participation with the standards of the present" (North 4).[11]

However, by setting aside compartmentalized concepts of authorial motive, including marketing, and

(re-)examining "anonymities" through the lens of an author(s)/audience(s) dialectic, anonymity is

(re-)animated as an emancipatory and collectivizing force that revitalizes audience agency, and

underscores the profoundly collaborative process of textual creation, dissemination, and reception.

       In considering the multiple functions of the mask, Ezell asserts that "[t]he potential for

subversion through the mimicry or ironic performance of the cultural expectations of the dominant

group in power is central to recent psychoanalytic and postcolonial strategies of members of muted,

or colonized groups" (qtd. in Griffin 76-7). By subverting the hegemony of originating authorship,

anonymity challenges the dominance of individuation and intellectual proprietorship in

contemporary cultural production. As a "common voice," Anonymous speaks to all, for all, and *as*

all. As Tennyson wrote of his anonymously-published *In Memoriam*, "it is rather the cry of the whole

human race than mine" (qtd. in Mullan 279).

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[11] Anonymity, in fact, might be more accurately and advantageously distinguished as "anonymities."

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