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John Mullan: Anonymity

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INTRODUCTION



It is not obvious to today's readers that publication and secrecy might go together, but so they once did. When Alexander Pope published his five-canto version of *The Rape of the Lock* in 1714, he claimed that his satire of feminine mores was originally intended only for private amusement – 'to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own'.¹ The private became public. 'But as it was communicated with the air of a secret, it soon found its way into the world': a paradox to amuse us. What is more publishable than a secret? *The Rape of the Lock* was a kind of 'secret history' – a story that had a 'true story' behind it. A certain Lord Petre had snipped a lock of the beautiful Arabella Fermor's hair, provoking a quarrel between their two high-born families. Pope's poem, a parody of epic conflict, was purportedly written to turn antagonism ('What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs') into amusement ('What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things') (Canto I, ll. 1–2). 'An imperfect copy having been offered to a bookseller', supposedly without the author's say-so, Pope explains that he was 'forced' to publish his 'heroi-comical poem', before he had completed 'half my design'. This first appeared anonymously, in two cantos, in a miscellany published in 1712.

After Pope's death, his editor and all-round stooge William Warburton claimed that when it was published Arabella Fermor 'took it so well as to give about copies of it'.² In fact, there is evidence that some of the real-life characters were touchy

about the glittering vanities of their counterparts in the poem. In a tone of mock-amazement, Pope wrote in a letter to a friend that ‘the celebrated lady herself is offended, and, which is stranger, not at herself, but me’. The poem prompted speculation about authorship, and a few months after it was published an essay in polite society’s leading journal, *The Spectator*, was admiringly attributing it to Pope.³ Now an ‘authorized’, and appropriately elaborated, version of the poem was called for, and Arabella Fermor, sensibly enough, reconciled herself to her transformation into the self-regarding but enchanting Belinda of the poem:

If to her share some Female Errors fall,
Look on her Face, and you’ll forget ’em all. (II, ll. 17–18)

Pope’s story was a convenient fiction, which exploited the frisson of knowing that real people were intended. The poem’s transformation from anonymous miscellany piece to signed text, which Pope pretended was forced on him, provoked and then satisfied the reader’s interest in who was being mocked, and who was behind it.

Over the centuries, the first readers of many famous literary works have been invited to unravel their secret histories. A good proportion of what is now English Literature consists of works first published, like *The Rape of the Lock*, without their authors’ names. These works are now collected in bookshops or libraries under the names of those who wrote them, but the processes by which they were attributed to their authors are largely forgotten. It is strange to think of *Joseph Andrews* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Frankenstein* being read without knowing the identities of their creators, but so they once were. There is no single book giving you the history of anonymity, but if you want to glimpse the sheer bulk of anonymous publication down the centuries you can browse one of the great, but neglected, monuments to

nineteenth-century scholarship: Halkett and Laing's *Dictionary of the Anonymous and Pseudonymous Literature of Great Britain*. In the 1850s, Edinburgh librarian Samuel Halkett began collecting materials for a dictionary of anonymous and pseudonymous publications. He died in 1871 and his editorship and all his notes were passed to another Edinburgh librarian, Rev. John Laing. Laing died in 1880, and editorial work was continued by his daughter, Catherine, who succeeded in completing the four volumes of the first edition, which was published between 1882 and 1888. (Her name has never appeared on the work's title pages.) Another Scottish clergyman, James Kennedy, helped Laing and his daughter, and set himself to produce a revised and expanded edition. He worked on the project for nearly fifty years, dying the year before the first volume of this new edition appeared in 1926. In 1934, its seventh and final volume was published. This edition, to which two supplementary volumes, edited by Dennis Rhodes and Anna Simoni of the British Museum, were added in 1956 and 1962, now resides in the reference section of most good academic libraries.

It is actually a dictionary of attributions. It includes only originally authorless works that have, since publication, been 'reliably' pinned on some particular writer or writers. Permanently anonymous publications are not there. It is a huge record of the activity of identifying authors that has preoccupied readers down the centuries. Nine massive volumes merely list works in English that were first published without their authors' names. They include books by almost every well-known English author from before the twentieth century. It is the accumulated evidence of a phenomenon that has never been plotted or explained. Attribution was for centuries the common habit of readers, the consequence of having to read in the absence of the author's name. That absence, the subject of this book, is not necessarily a matter of literal namelessness. What will provoke

readers to look for an author? Not just anonymity, but also pseudonymity, if the author's name as printed seems, to some readers, evidently fictional. Often it is difficult to distinguish between an anonymous and a pseudonymous work, and it was inevitable that Halkett and Laing's dictionary had to include both types of publication. *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719 without an author's name, but its title page declared it to be 'Written by Himself', so we might say that it appeared under the pseudonym 'Robinson Crusoe' (not least as we are told, in the novel's first sentence, that this is not the narrator's real name). When Thackeray used a pseudonym like Michael Angelo Titmarsh on a title page he was advertising the fact of a disguise to his readers. If we are interested in how speculation about authorship was part of what it was to read, then the distinction between anonymity and pseudonymity will often be indistinct or even immaterial. If a pseudonym signals that the true author is in hiding, you might say that the work is anonymous.

The compilers of 'Halkett and Laing' (as it has come to be called) seemed somewhat mystified themselves as to why so many authors might have initially concealed themselves from their readers. The dictionary's Preface tries to categorize the types of anonymity or pseudonymity illustrated by the thousands of works listed in the seven volumes that follow. We should understand these in terms of authorial 'motive'. 'Generally the motive is some kind of timidity, such as (a) diffidence, (b) fear of consequences, and (c) shame.'⁴ Motive (b) is interpreted narrowly as fear of persecution, imprisonment and the like, while (c) applies to pornography and spiteful personal attacks. 'The great majority of anonymous and pseudonymous books will be found to fall under these groups.' Only anxiety of some kind, including a proper 'diffidence', could explain an author's reluctance to be known. Yet much of the material gathered in Halkett and Laing exhibits anything but timidity or

shamefacedness. What are the other reasons why authors have chosen anonymity? And what about readers? If we reopen once celebrated cases of anonymity, can we see how, for their first readers, an uncertainty about their authorship could give new and original works of literature a special voltage?