

About American Pseudonymity

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THE IMPULSE WHICH LEADS A WRITER to conceal his creation behind a pseudonym is as old as the scribal art. The reasons for concealment are many: modesty (possibly colored by doubt about the creation's value); safety (in respect to satyric or erotic utterances); freedom (for unorthodox expressions); mystification (the delight in creating a new personality); vocational substitution (protection of a reputation in a particular field under one's true name); sex (especially when it was not proper for ladies to appear in print); style (each kind of creation under a different name); journalistic tradition (editorial anonymity); and human arbitrariness.

The choice of a pseudonym today follows a relatively simple pattern, a substitution of a given name and surname for actual names. Few modern, major prose writers use such concealment. Poets prefer their own names. At lower literary levels, correspondence to newspapers and journals, communicators of opinions and emotions make use of simple substitutions: a parent; worried; doubtful, etc.; rarely do unexpected or ingenious appellations appear. Such feeble nonce-names are mildly suggestive of the originality once employed in the boisterous days of American journalism, roughly, 1850-1890. One thinks at once of Mark Twain (Samuel L. Clemens) and his lively contemporaries, nearly all of whom were better known by their pseudonyms than by their real names.¹ Sam Clemens merely followed the fashion in his adaptation. His friend and mentor, Dan De Quille (William Wright), on the *Virginia City Enterprise*, represented the characteristic western dualism under which journalists and miner-writers lived a double identity. However, the range of pseudonymic ingenuity is insufficiently represented by established authors. We must look much lower to the host of minor contributors to publications of the past. The first volume of *Puck* (1877)

shows the possibilities of pseudonymous concepts, and their general classification indicates a play of fancy from dullness to wit.

1. Substitutes for conventional patterns: The choice of *Ebenezer Snaggs*, *Silas Drift*, and *J. R. Bazoo*, in the Artemus Ward–Josh Billings tradition, considered the unlikelihood of correspondence to names borne by living persons. The use of a nickname and unusual surname strengthened the possibility of uniqueness: *Ned Scupper*. Alliterative protection appears in *Harry Harewood*. Creations like *Gath Brittle*, *Clus Garnet*, *Mont Layne* and *Mel. R. Colquitt* suggest entire or partial anagrammatic play upon the author's true name.

2. Wordplay: Somewhat lower in the scale of name invention is the characteristic American humorist's tendency to play with words. We find such self-ascriptions as: *Sam Arkand*, *Jim Krax*, *Will Wander* and *Adam Shamly* (a damn shame-ly); or formations such as: *C. R. Edit*, *R. E. Son*, *D. I. Sappointment*, *P. Q. Lyre*, *E. U. Reca*, *R. R. Biler* (railroad boiler), *B. Dadd* (by dadd, euphemism for By God), *X. It* and *E. Udi*.

3. Learned reference: In the days when High School students studied classical and modern languages, and were familiar with the bible and general mythology and lore, readers might appreciate the allusions concealed in various categories of nonce-names: a) Latin: *Americus*, *Dubitatio*, *Fides*, *Vindex*, *Nemo*, *Radix*, *Medus*, *Vibrans*, *Nassiter*, *Asper*, *Domi*, *Custos* and *Mythus*. b) writers and heroes: *Terentius*, *Herodotus Jr.*, *Safoet* (= Sappho-ette), *Scipio* and *Leonidas*. c) mythology: *Nereid*, *Zephyr*, *Thespis*, *Calypso*, *Chiron*, *Lysander*, *Acheron* and *Pan*, as well as *Valkyrie* and *Pixie*. d) bible: *Esau*, *Jeremiah*, *Moses*, *Simon*, *Hepzibah* and *Zerubbabel*. e) general literary: *Roland*, *Shelley Jr.*, *Touchstone*, *McDuff*, *Godolphin* and *Barnaby*. f) various: *Almaviva*, *Barbe-Bleue*, *Carlyon* (= carillon), *Le Clear*, *Fanchon*, *Rajar*, *Elah Hodi* and *Deshon*.

4. Animal, vegetable, mineral: Choices of names, ready at hand, relevant perhaps to unconscious affinities, are the derivations from animate to inanimate nature: a) creatures: *Fish*, *Jay-Hawk*, *Pony*, *Pussie*, *Salamander* and *Warm Bee*. b) flora: *Rutabaga*, *Shagbark*, *Daffodil*, *Daisy*, *Magnolia*, *Pink Blossom* and *Rose*. c) jewels: *Carcanet*, *Jasper*, *Pendent* and *Smaragd*.

5. Locations and origins: Birthplaces, scenes of habitation and

visitation suggest ready pseudonyms: *Tennessee, Kansas, Belle Isle, Denver, Duluth, Key West, Keokuk, Sawkill, Waukesha* and *Yankton*. From Spanish sources, used possibly by western writers, appear: *Chico, Jacinto* and *Quito. Uintah* (Indian). College associations: *Harvard, Vassar* and *Phi Upsilon*.

6. States of mind: Casual contributors reflected themselves in qualifying adjectives: *Azurine, Bumptious, Culinary, Earnest, Frenzied* and *Patient*. Others use suggestive nouns: *Barleycorn, Etiquette, Gourmet, Sand-Flyer, Surf-Wrestler* and *Tenter-Hooks*.

7. Nicknames: An easy appellation of self are nicknames bestowed upon one by others: *Buz, Brin, Carli, Lulu, Sniggles, Toph, Tub* and *Van*. The adoption of a regional nickname served one contributor: *Blue-nose* (New Englander or Nova Scotian).

8. Miscellaneous categories: a) occupations: *Sailor, Scribe* and *Weaver. Typo* belongs here as a reflection of the printer's trade. b) alphabet: *A.B.C., X.Y.Z., Alpha, Omega* and *Didi* (D.D.).

9. Unclassified: Finally, human vagaries lead to the unexpected and limitless name-choices which defy any specific classification: *Bingo*: reference to the game or to the impact of sound. *Brevier*: choice of a gentleman of the cloth (?). *Bucket*: the contemporary popularity of "The Old Oaken Bucket" might be the source. *Buskin*: either an actor or an aspirant to the stage. *Clephane*: does not reveal its pronunciation, two syllables or three. Lost allusion (?). *Dolatka* (?). *Doremi*: for one musically inclined. *Dough*: from the thought of money (?). *Emigrant. Fountain. Gano* (?). *Kidoodle*: Not in Mathews, *A Dictionary of Americanisms*. *Mono. Muscatel. Muzzle. Pickleburg*: nickname of a town (?). *Schottische*: German for a favorite dance. *Subsoda* and *Xampi* (?).

The pseudonymic storehouse of yesterday, suggested by a single year's run of one magazine, reveals in cross-section a fertility of nonce-name invention as well as a literate-frequency which seems to have passed. Today's need, if any, might well be supplied by a handbook from a specialist.

NOTES

¹ One recalls some of these names as: Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne; Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw); Orpheus C. Kerr (Robert Henry Newell); Petroleum V. Nasby (David Ross Locke); John Phoenix (George Horatio Derby); Mrs. Partington (Benjamin Penhallow Shillibar); Doesticks (Mortimer Neal Thompson); Bill Arp (Charles Henry Smith) and Eli Perkins (Melville de Lancey Landon). In Nevada journalism, Fred Hart kept his name for his humorous effusions (*Sazerac Lyng Club*) but used Van Jacquelin for his political reporting. James W. Gally, a better than average writer, remained lost until recently in his signature, *Singeline*.