

Anonymity and Temporality

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For premodern literatures, anonymity has often been considered to be the standard form in which texts are authored, while the named author has frequently been seen as a characteristic of (Western) modernity. European literatures, especially, have been described as developing within a teleological framework positing the named and clearly identifiable author as the logical end-point of a historical development coinciding with and dependent on the rise of industrial capitalism, bourgeois societies and modern subjectivity. Paradoxically, such a perspective has been reinforced, rather than deconstructed by poststructuralism's onslaught on authorship (Barthes, Foucault).

That such a perspective is fundamentally flawed, if only because of its tendency to elevate a narrowly Western narrative of literary history to the status of a universal model, goes almost without saying. There are plenty of examples in the history of Western literature itself that serve to undermine such a teleological narrative. Not only do we have named authors, but – in medieval literature, for instance – we encounter a powerful desire for the kind of textual authority associated with the named author, a desire that results, for instance, in the practice of writing in the name of an authority or typical *pseudo*-author – such as pseudo-Albertus or pseudo-Dionysius – to whom works of special importance are attributed. While such *pseudo*-authors may frequently be the result of philologically untenable claims, their very existence testifies to the complexity of premodern attitudes to anonymity as we rethink them in modernity.

But even if we posit that anonymous authorship has always created a craving for a named authority, we still find ourselves succumbing to that implicit assumption inherent in most discussions of premodern anonymity, i.e. that premodern anonymity is primarily a lack to be dealt with, a deficiency to be overcome, a lacuna to be filled, a cultural stage to be left behind. Such a view lets us overlook the cultural uses and creative possibilities associated

with anonymity. If, by contrast, we refuse to see anonymity as a form of lack, but rather acknowledge its potential as a strategic device or even as an aesthetic choice in its own right, then we can open up perspectives on alternative concepts of the literary, on alternative practices of ‘doing literature’ as well as on the alternative temporalities both shaping and being shaped by these alternative ways of understanding the literary. And precisely because, within certain teleological assumptions about the developmental history of literature, anonymity has been conceived of as a mark of literature’s prehistory, a closer look at the temporalities involved in premodern anonymity seems in order.

What, for instance, if we saw in anonymity itself a deliberate counter-move against teleological history, a consciously chosen a-temporality that, in the act of resisting the named author, refuses to be placed in history and thus subjected to narratives of progress or decline and the cultural hierarchies such narratives entail?

What if anonymity constituted a form of self-consciously veiling authors, making them un-nameable and unknowable, thereby creating a sense of urgency and immediacy, of a revolutionary moment where time becomes dramatically condensed, as, for instance, in a radical manifesto or a revolutionary call-to-arms?

What if anonymity were to be seen as denoting shared forms of authorship, of drawing attention to collective forms of literary production? Both signalled and protected by anonymity, such shared forms of authorship might make it possible to expand the writing process over time and thereby to spread textual production out between different sources of inspiration – creating a rhizomatic structure capable of reaching both forwards and backwards in time. Anonymity would thus be a means to rethink the temporality of the textual itself.

And what if anonymity were conceived of as a device enabling a sophisticated comment on the politics of textual transmission and attribution, on the philological power inherent in the act of naming and the fixing of a text in time that such a naming implies – enabling a text not merely to move in time but to gather time, and even to absorb more than one temporality?

Or what if anonymity served as a means of empowerment, paradoxically feeding on the concept of the named author even as it claims for itself a special status in a cultural context where the named author is the default option of presenting literary texts? In such a case, the temporality implied by anonymity would be coloured by an attempt to transcend the individual personhood located in an author’s name, claiming for the text a time-scale of its own, liberated from the biographical rhythms and historical contexts associated with the temporal specificity inherent in the named author.

Building on the discussions held at the workshops ‘Anonymity’ and ‘Anonymity II’ workshops jointly organized by King’s College London and Freie Universität Berlin in November 2017 and December 2019 respectively – discussions which highlighted the astonishing range of possibilities associated with, primarily European, uses of premodern anonymity – this conference entitled *Anonymity and Temporality* seeks to explore a more specific perspective – that of anonymity’s temporalities – within a broad cultural and historical framework. The central issue to be investigated is that of premodern literary anonymity’s capacity for shaping temporalities, an issue to be addressed in a consciously global perspective. Instead of seeing anonymity as a cultural given that simply occurs during a particular period in (European) literary history, we wish to conceive of it both as a specific cultural practice and as a strategic resource that contributes to shaping temporalities in premodern literatures and cultures from all over the world.