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# Anonyma's Authors

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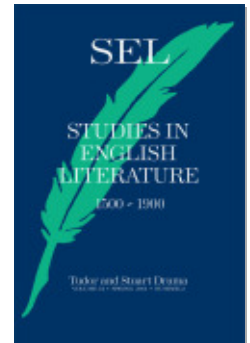
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Rachel Sagner Buurma

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## Anonyma's Authors

RACHEL SAGNER BUURMA

*Anonyma, or, Fair but Frail*—a novel that came into the world with no fixed author, and remains, despite the best efforts of more than one bibliographer, without one—was first published by George Vickers in London late in 1863.<sup>1</sup> *Anonyma* was the first of a group of loosely related novels about women of the London demimonde that appeared in the midsixties. The formula by which authorship was attributed to each of these substantively anonymous yellowback novels varied as much as their material forms and publisher imprints. Michael Sadleir explains that the fifteen or so books in this “series” came to be grouped together not because they share a single author or publisher, but rather through more contingent and flexible kinds of affiliations. “Perhaps it is misleading,” he writes, “to speak of the ‘Anonyma’ Series” as they are not “a formal series of the *Parlour Library* class. Actually the success of the first two volumes created a sort of group-popularity for books of a more or less similar kind.”<sup>2</sup> Pointing out that “[t]he authorship of this reputedly licentious series of stories about the smart world, the half-world and the underworld of Victorian London (and elsewhere) has never been established,” Sadleir tentatively identifies Bracebridge Hemyng as the author of the first two novels, *Anonyma* and *Skittles*. Yet Hemyng’s probable authorship of these two texts, Sadleir notes, hardly confirms that he also had a hand in the ensuing series, which Sadleir suggests “developed into the product of a syndicate.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1865 Anthony Trollope asserted that “[i]t is, I think, now generally acknowledged that all literature of a high class which

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presents itself to the public alone, standing on its own merits, and not as a part of any combined effort [such as a magazine or a newspaper], should present itself accompanied by the name of its author."<sup>4</sup> But yellowback novels such as *Anonyma*, perhaps either because they were not recognized as "high class" or because they were part of a combined effort, clearly felt bound by no such imperative.<sup>5</sup> Loosely related to one another by content, each novel in the group signifies authorship through improvisational variations on the attribution to "the author of . . ." rather than with a unifying name. And while several of the books were published by Vickers, the publisher of *Anonyma*, other novels with similar attributions appeared under entirely different imprints. The affiliations between the texts in this "series" therefore seem in some ways stronger and in others more attenuated than the simpler affiliations defined by the sharing of a single author or publisher also common in mid-Victorian print culture.

Indeed, the way authorship is attributed to each novel in this nonseries varies greatly even among the volumes that share the Vickers imprint. As probably the first of the group, *Anonyma* provides no author attribution whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> *Skittles: A Biography of a "Fascinating Woman"* describes itself on the title page and back cover advertising material as a "Companion to 'Anonyma,'" implying but not stating that the two novels are from the same hand. *Left Her Home: A Tale of Female Life and Adventure, in which the Fortunes and Misfortunes of a Charming Girl Are Narrated*, however, is described as "by 'Anonyma.'" The authorship of *Cora Pearl*, published slightly later under the imprint "E. Griffith," is signified by an inordinately lengthy formula: "by the author of 'Anonyma,' 'Skittles,' 'Left Her Home,' 'Kate Hamilton,' 'Incognita,' 'The Soiled Dove,' 'Skittles in Paris,' etc. etc." The places of later additions to this "series" become increasingly difficult to determine. An advertisement on the back cover of *Cora Pearl* aligns it with the earlier novels, but it remains unclear whether this advertisement represents a Griffith reissue of the entire group, or simply serves to link the later volume to the earlier group of novels in order to capitalize on their popularity (see Figure 1). The back cover of *Cora Pearl* emphasizes the popularity of the earlier volumes by noting, for example, that *Anonyma* is currently selling its "[t]wenty-fifth [t]housand" and *Skittles* its "[t]wenty-first."<sup>7</sup>

Such formulas for attributing authorship were of course almost as common and expected in the mid-nineteenth century as the use of an author's proper name.<sup>8</sup> In the case of this specific group, however, the combination of the title *Anonyma* with the

Never before Printed, price 2s. Ornamental Boards.

**CORA PEARL;**  
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- IV. **LEFT HER HOME.** Twentieth Thousand.
- V. **KATE HAMILTON.** Thirtieth Thousand.
- VI. **AGNES WILLOUGHBY.** Fourteenth Thousand.
- VII. **INCOGNITA.** Companion Volume to "SKITTLES."  
Nineteenth Thousand.
- VIII. **LADY DETECTIVE.** Twelfth Thousand.
- IX. **BEAUTIFUL DEMON.** Tenth Thousand.
- X. **SKITTLES IN PARIS.** Tenth Thousand.
- XI. **THE SOLED LOVE.** Tenth Thousand.
- XII. **LOVE PROLOGUES OF A YOUNG SCAMP.**  
Tenth Thousand.

Price 2s. 6d., with Twenty Illustrations. "Pliz."

**THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON.**  
These extraordinary revelations, affecting persons of the highest rank,  
will create an interest and amazement only parallel to Eugène Sue's  
"Mysteries of Paris."

London: **E. GRIFFITHS, 13, Catherine St., Strand;**  
AND SOLD BY ALL BOOKSELLERS.

Figure 1. An advertisement on the back cover of *Cora Pearl* (London: E. Griffith).

anonymity of the novels themselves seems to have produced a slippage between book title, author, and character. The idea that *Left Her Home* was written, as its title page claims, "by 'Anonyma,'" suggests (however implausibly) that the book was penned either by the woman upon whom the protagonist of *Anonyma* was based or by some other female author eager to mask her identity. Such ambiguity establishes marketable connections among the novels while also suggesting to potential buyers that some of them may

offer personal memoirs of fallen women who require the protection of anonymity.

The hybrid mixing and matching of authorial naming (and non-naming) practices that characterized the publication of this loosely affiliated group of novels in the 1860s changed radically, however, during their later republications. During the later 1860s, reissues of some of the books from the group slowly came to be referred to and advertised as part of "The Anonyma Series." And, in 1884, when the reprint publishing house C. H. Clarke brought out "A New and Uniform Two Shilling Edition" of the group printed from the original 1860s plates, it offered an entirely new version of the relations among these texts.<sup>9</sup> By publishing the novels in a uniform format and by creating title-page author attributions and advertising materials that standardized the previously scattered and inconsistent textual relations, C. H. Clarke in effect constructed an entirely new author function and a uniform series out of an assorted and disordered set of older texts (see Figure 2).<sup>10</sup> Further, by republishing the "Anonyma Series" within the wider purview of "Clarke's Standard Novel Library," Clarke gave the novels new paratextual stability. These republication changes reframed the relations between the *Anonyma* novels, transforming the group into a series perhaps more recognizable to the 1880s consumer of popular fiction than it would have been to the 1860s book buyer. Each title page of the C. H. Clarke uniform reissue of the "series" attributes authorship through a variation on the formula "BY THE AUTHOR OF SKITTLES—LEFT HER HOME—ANNIE—DELILAH—KATE HAMILTON—AGNES WILLOUGHBY—THE SOILED DOVE—SKITTLES IN PARIS—LOVE FROLICS OF A YOUNG SCAMP—INCOGNITA—FORMOSA—THE BEAUTIFUL DEMON—THE LADY DETECTIVE." This fixing of attribution is especially notable because it eliminates the earlier slippage between the title *Anonyma*, the authorial attribution "by the author of *Anonyma*," and the authorial attribution "by 'Anonyma'" of the Vickers editions described above.

Whether the result of a nonstandardized process of print production or of a careless theoretical distinction among text, author, and character, this earlier slippage also occurs within the text of *Anonyma* itself. The novel is in part about, I argue, the complex hybridization of different forms of authorial attribution, particularly those of anonymous journalism and of the novel, and further points to an engagement between newspaper writing and the authorship of fiction. Just as the fictional fallen woman in *Anonyma* is, in the words of the narrator, "what the world had made

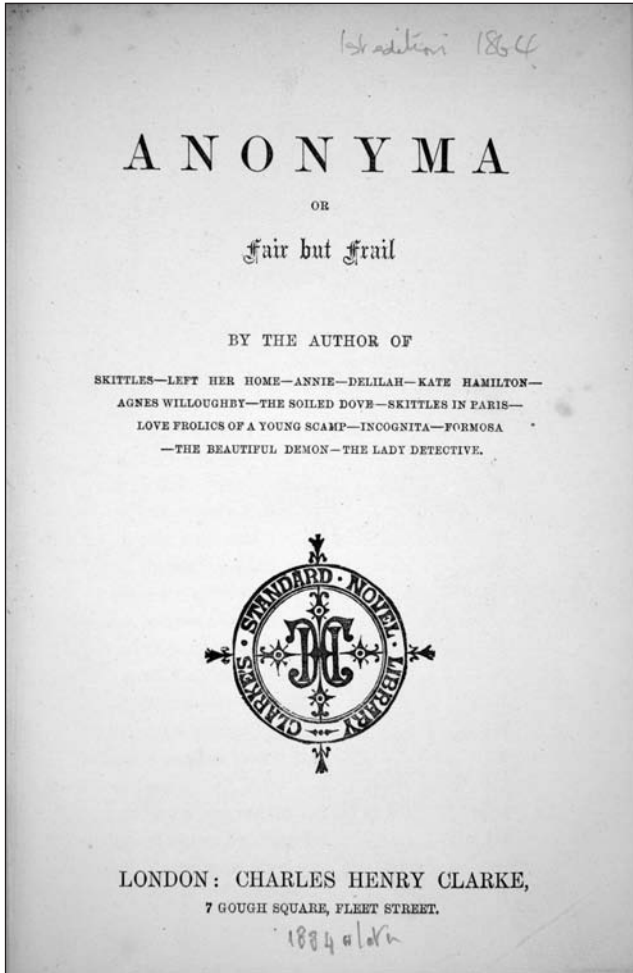


Figure 2. *Anonyma, or, Fair but Frail* (London: Charles Henry Clarke [1884?]), title page.

her,” the very figure of “Anonyma” herself turns out to be a textual creation formed at an intersecting point of the newspaper and the novel.<sup>11</sup> By standardizing the authorial formula of the *Anonyma* group, C. H. Clarke eliminated the fluidity of its author function by constructing a single and stable series purportedly produced by a single anonymous author. The narrative of the first volume of the series, however, continues to foreground in 1884—just as in 1864—the difficulties of the process by which anonymous writing is assigned a single author or attached to a single image.

Like most of the other novels in the "series," *Anonyma* is titled after its main character, a London lady of the demimonde. From at least the middle of the nineteenth century, the word "anonyma" was used to refer to an imagined category of expensively "kept" women whose social circle was seen as a less moral mirror of "respectable" London society. However, a specific character named "Anonyma" first appeared in 1861 in the pages of the *London Times*, where she was the topic of articles and of a series of pseudonymously signed letters to the editor about the problems of London courtesans and their deleterious impact on the "marriage market." Apparently written by different hands, with different pseudonymous signatures and in different styles, the letters approached the problem of the urban "ladies of the demi-monde" from the perspectives of different members of the London community. These letters were written not primarily, as one might expect, by concerned citizens, but rather by the collaborative efforts of an indeterminate number of anonymous newspaper writers.

In the first *Times* letter to appear, titled "A Belgravian Lament" and signed "A Sorrowing Mother for Seven of Them," a lady complains to the editor of *The Times* that she is failing to find husbands for her daughters because women such as the famous courtesan Anonyma "occupy naughtily and temporarily where we should occupy *en permanence*." "Go where we will," this matron complains, "the mother's eye has this social cruel pest intruded upon it; these bad rivals of our children are no longer kept in the background, as things we know, but, knowing, are to seem not to know." "And then," she adds as an afterthought in the last line of her long letter, "the sin of it all!"<sup>12</sup>

This tongue-in-cheek complaint about "Anonyma" and women like her seemingly inspired a string of both serious and satirical responses during the next few weeks. "The Very Well-Contented Mother of Four Incipient Old Maids" wrote to denounce the Belgravian mother's worldliness; "A Father of Six" complained that the real problem was that society women would not marry penniless men (like his son); "Beau Jolias" defended the young men who refuse to marry; and "A London Incumbent" and "An Old-Fashioned Parson" offered city and country versions of the Church's perspective on the question.<sup>13</sup>

The stir caused by this correspondence was revived a few years later by the novel's transformation of the "Anonyma" figure of the *Times* letters into the title character of a semibiographical story based on the life of Victorian courtesan Cecelia Gale.



Presenting itself as the story of a “fallen woman” who by “the force of circumstances, and the injudicious conduct of mistaken friends . . . had become one of those pretty butterflies who revel in the delights of love, without being fettered by the chains of wedlock,” *Anonyma* engages with the process of authorial attribution on many levels.<sup>14</sup> It distances itself from the *Times* letters by questioning their authenticity and multiple authorship. The public pseudonyms of the letter writers, the narrator of *Anonyma* suggests, are really reducible to the name of a single author whose true identity remains hidden. Introducing the topic of the letters, the narrator explains that “in the ‘Dazzler’ appeared those remarkable epistolary productions that might have been written by Sydney Godolphin Osborne, or by Jacob Omnium, though more after the manner of ‘S. G. O.’ than that of Higgins [sic].”<sup>15</sup> The narrator here refers to the concealments practiced by *The Times* (itself given a pseudonym), which often printed letters to the editor signed by the well-known pseudonyms of Matthew Higgins (“Jacob Omnium”) or Sidney Godolphin Osborne (“S. G. O.”). The narrator claims that all of the letters to the editor about “Anonyma” are written by the same hand, and discerns in them a unifying individual style that belies the fiction created by the shifting pseudonyms. Criticizing a journalistic authorial agency so free-floating that it could be attached to different names for different purposes, the *Anonyma* author seeks to link the letters to a single, individual hand and name. In so doing, he (or she) claims both that the seeming multiplicity of letter writers are really the same “S. G. O.” or “Omnium,” and that these inscrutable pseudonymous figures were really the private individuals Sidney Godolphin Osborne and Matthew James Higgins.<sup>16</sup>

The novel’s representation of “Anonyma” herself metaphorically extends its concern with authorial attribution. Indeed, the figure of the London courtesan becomes a figure for journalistic anonymity. Simply by naming the novel *Anonyma* after the “Anonyma” figure invented by the press and then immediately revealing her to be the well-known Cecelia Gale, the narrative defies the concealments of journalistic texts. The novel’s persistent association of its protagonist with periodical circulation and textual attribution culminates when Cecelia/Anonyma boards the train on which she meets the man she eventually will marry. Surrounded by periodicals of her own (which include the *Saturday Review*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and the *Illustrated London News*), Cecelia sits down next to a handsome stranger who nods to her as if he already knows her, although she does not remember ever

seeing him before. She worries about her reputation: "I wonder," thought Cecelia to herself, "if this man knows who I am, or whether he takes me for a lady? He must know me, though; every man in London knows me, knows my ponies, knows my turn-out, and everything. Oh! yes; he must know me. I wish he didn't, though."<sup>17</sup> As it turns out, however, Mr. Arthur Waite "did not suppose that Sissy was the famous 'Anonyma' of the *Times*; he did not even suppose that she was anything more than eccentric, and that she owed her oddities possibly to a continental education. Yet he wished very much to know who she was; and he laid a little plot to find out her name."<sup>18</sup>

From Cecelia's wondering about whether Waite can identify her with the textual "Anonyma" of the newspapers to Waite's plot to uncover her true name, the novel uses metaphor in order to toy with the difficulties of author attribution that beset bibliographers such as Sadleir. Yet the anonymous *Anonyma* narrator's claim that the authors of anonymously and pseudonymously published journalistic texts ought to be publicly disclosed reasserts the very difference between the authorship conventions of journalism and those of fiction that the novel's narrative tends to trouble. The unknown writer, who so readily became identified with a female "Anonyma," thus produced a fictional narrative out of the hybrid forms of authorship created by the continued tension between Victorians' craving for mysteries about authorship and their imaginative reliance on the collaborative journalistic models of textual agency that tended to displace such mysteries.

## NOTES

This essay has benefited greatly from the generous comments and editing of Ulrich Knoepflmacher and two external readers and editors of *SEL*. I am also indebted to UCLA's Young Research Library's Department of Special Collections for the James and Sylvia Thayer Short-Term Research Fellowship, which made it possible for me to use the Sadleir Collection, and to Jeff Rankin and the rest of the special collections staff, who helped make my time there both productive and enjoyable.

<sup>1</sup> For more bibliographic information, see Michael Sadleir, *XIX Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Record Based on His Own Collection*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1951), 2:8–12; and Chester W. Topp, *Victorian Yellowbacks and Paperbacks, 1849–1905*, 9 vols. (Denver CO: Hermitage Antiquarian Bookshop, 2003), vol. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Sadleir, 2:8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Sadleir also notes that, in addition to some bibliographic reasons for assuming this attribution of the first two books, Bracebridge Hemyng (also spelled "Hemyng") was "the avowed author of the Prostitution section in May-

hew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861); and the two together seem to me convincing evidence that Hemyng was responsible for at least the earlier 'Anonyma' books" (2:8). William Stephens Hayward is also often proposed as an author of the series, and is even cited in some library catalogs as the author of *Anonyma*. Both authors had histories of publishing with Vickers, but no conclusive evidence exists to link either writer to the series.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Trollope, "On Anonymous Literature," *Fortnightly Review* 1 (1 July 1865): 491–8, 493.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note, as Sadleir does, that despite what one might assume, the novels in the series are decidedly not pornographic, and that the anonymity of the novels is therefore not based on related fears (2:8). An actual reading of the novels reveals that they are more akin to social-problem novels than to pornography. The narrators of these novels seem fairly sympathetic to their subjects, and tend to echo some of the contemporary debates over prostitution.

<sup>6</sup> At least on the cover and pages of the novel itself, there is no attribution. Advertisements for the book in other books, periodicals, or separate advertising materials could have included some kind of attribution of authorship, but Sadleir does not mention any in his general description of the "series," and I have never seen one.

<sup>7</sup> These kinds of numbers are best taken as evidence of the desire of the advertiser to produce or emphasize the popularity of the novels in question than as accurate statistics. The practice of inflating or fabricating figures such as these was common in the nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the advertisements for issues of periodicals on p. 13 of *The Times* of 27 June 1862, which describe featured fictional serials as "by the author of" nearly as often as they give author names.

<sup>9</sup> As noted in Sadleir's description of the C. H. Clarke series in his collection (2:8).

<sup>10</sup> As Sadleir points out, "The issue of this (virtually) sham collected edition not only gave the impression that the books were all from one hand, but also that they belonged together from the first, and therefore created a 'series,' even though no series title was given them" (2:8).

<sup>11</sup> *Anonyma, or, Fair but Frail: A Romance of West-End Life, Manners, and "Captivating" People* (London: George Vickers, 1864), p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Times* (London), "A Belgravian Lament" signed "A Sorrowing Mother for Seven of Them" (27 June 1861, p. 6, col. d).

<sup>13</sup> See *The Times* (London), "The Very Well-Contented Mother of Four Incipient Old Maids" (28 June 1861, p. 12, col. E); "A Father of Six" (28 June 1861, p. 12, col. F); "Beau Jolias" (*Ibid.*); "A London Incumbent" (29 June 1861, p. 12, col. E); "An Old-Fashioned Parson" (4 July 1861, p. 6). For more on these letters and related newspaper writing, see Trevor Fisher, *Prostitution and the Victorians* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 48–60.

<sup>14</sup> *Anonyma*, p. 67

<sup>15</sup> *Anonyma*, p. 82.

<sup>16</sup> This attribution remained unsettled even after the deaths of both Matthew James Higgins and Sidney Godolphin Osborne; the obituary for Higgins in the *Graphic* mentions "a Belgravian Mother," the signature to the *Times* letter titled "A Belgravian Lament," as one of Higgins's "various signatures" (p.

510), while the volume of the collected letters of Sidney Godolphin Osborne reprints "A Belgravian Lament" and protests against the *Graphic's* attribution (*The Letters of Sidney Godolphin Osborne*, vol. 2, ed. Arnold White [London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh (1890)], p. 364). Interestingly, neither source suggests that the entire series of letters was written by a single hand, as *Anonyma* implies is the case.

<sup>17</sup> *Anonyma*, p. 221.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*