“You’re Either Anonymous or You’re Not!”: Variations on Anonymity in Modern and Early Modern Culture

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My title is taken from an episode of the US sitcom, _Curb Your Enthusiasm_. The claim is made by the main character, Larry David (played by the real Larry David), and although it sounds reasonable enough, it is, in fact, as the entire episode reveals, perilously simplistic. Larry utters the fateful words at a gala evening at a research center in L.A., to which he has made a substantial financial donation. On arriving, accompanied by his wife Cheryl (not her real name), Larry is delighted to see the wall blazoned with the words: “Wing Donated by Larry David.” His delight is short-lived. As he proudly casts his eyes round the room to see who else is admiring the inscription, his eyes alight on the opposite wall. It says: “Wing Donated by Anonymous.”

LARRY: I’m not crazy about that. Now it just looks like I did mine for the credit as opposed, you know, to Mr Wonderful Anonymous.

CHERYL, _quietly_: I know who it is. It’s Ted. Ted is Anonymous.

LARRY, _irritated_: Well, he told you, so apparently he wanted somebody to know.

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1This essay has benefited from conversations with Lelsey Dawson, Katherine Ibbett, Anna Kemp, Ben Miller and Alain Viala, as well as from the discussions at the Anonymity conference, co-organized by The Singleton Center for the Study of Pre-Modern Europe at Johns Hopkins and the Besterman Centre for the Enlightenment at the Voltaire Foundation, University of Oxford, and held at Johns Hopkins, 18–20 November 2010.
CHERYL: He told me, ok?
LARRY: Who else did he tell? How do you know he just told you?
CHERYL: I don’t know. The point is he didn’t need all the fanfa . . .
LARRY, animated: Fanfare?! What fanfare?! I don’t like the fanfare! Are you saying I like fanfare?
CHERYL: He can tell a few people; he just doesn’t need the whole world to know he donated all this money.
LARRY, very animated and gesticulating: You know what? I didn’t need the world to know either. Nobody told me that I could be anonymous and tell people. I would have taken that option, ok? You can’t have it halfway. You either anonymous or you’re not! Which is it?
CHERYL, calmly gesturing to Larry’s wing: Look, people are pointing out, “Look there’s Larr . . .”
LARRY: Oh yeah, there’s Larry David, the guy who has to have his name up on the wall. As opposed to Mr Anonymous. But who’s really Ted.
CHERYL, gently: I am proud of you.
LARRY: Anonymous! It’s fake philanthropy and it’s faux anonymity. What do you think about that?

Well, what do we think about that?

Two things immediately come to mind, one concerning social politics, the other, the relative values of speech and writing. Larry discovers too late that having one’s name displayed on the wall is a social faux pas, that, as it were, publishing a work with one’s name on it is unseemly and vulgar, as compared to anonymous publication, the self-effacing nature of which is far more appropriate and dignified. Moreover, he discovers that his conceptual framework for understanding publication is simplistic: anonymous publication need not, in fact, mean that the author’s name is unknown. Ted’s name is a kind of open secret: it may not be written on the wall but it is known, and knowledge of it circulates by word of mouth. The relative values of writing and speech depend here (as they also do in, say, Plato) on their ability not so much to disseminate information as to control access to it; writing is inferior on the grounds that it speaks indiscriminately to everyone whoever they are (whatever their name is).² Larry’s name is there to be seen by the hoi polloi, while Ted’s is available only to a privileged group, and as that knowledge circulates, it establishes insiders and outsiders, those in the know and those not, those who knew before others did. If Larry is so furious, it is not least because he only discovered that the anonymous donor was his “friend” Ted when his wife told him; she knew before he did.

²See Plato, Phaedrus; see also Jacques Derrida, De la grammatologie (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).
A further issue might also be highlighted: the relationship between anonymity and pseudonymity. It has been said that inasmuch as the author’s real name remains hidden in a pseudonymous work, pseudonymity is a branch of anonymity. Yet in the case of the inscription on Ted’s wing, something like the reverse is true: the preposition “by” and the capital “A” turn the adjective “Anonymous” into a noun or name. He may not have his own name inscribed on the wing, but the wing does bear an authorial name: “Anonymous” is Ted’s pseudonym. And as a result, a fictional persona is conjured up, to whom Larry even gives a title and a first name: “Mr. Wonderful Anonymous.” We might wonder about this power of the pseudonym to create personas and, consequently, about what happens when, to take a literary example, we substitute Jonathan Swift for, say, Isaack Bickerstaff.

Finally, we might observe that neither Larry nor Ted considered making a donation without telling anyone about it. Neither envisaged publishing a blank wall. Would a blank wall have been anonymous? The recent practice of inscribing donors’ names on new public buildings is not (yet) so well established and ubiquitous that the lack of a name would be perceived as a lack, a fact that no doubt explains Ted’s ostentatious gesture. This is important because it points up the fact that what is true of modern buildings is not true of modern books. A new book that bore no authorial name would be considered anonymous, and the lack of an authorial name would certainly be perceived by the reader as such, that is, as a lack. After all, the name of the author is a crucial element in today’s publishing world: the reader expects to see it on the book cover; it is key to the publisher’s marketing strategy; and indeed what the author is hoping for in publishing his work is to make, precisely, his name. Or at least, that is the case for most books. We would not, for instance, consider the phone book to be anonymous. It may be full of names but the fact that it bears no authorial name on its cover does not make it anonymous, and that is because it does not so much lack an authorial name as raise no expectations that there might be one to publish or, consequently,

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to withhold. Thinking about anonymity thus provides a new way of approaching Foucault’s question “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” The phone book does not have an author, and so, like the blank wall, it is not so much anonymous as, we might say, “un-authored.”

So the episode is certainly thought-provoking, but what, if anything, do we, as students of the literary culture of Ancien Régime France, think about the ways in which it raises the issues of the social politics of anonymity and its opposite, what we might call “onymity,” the questions of the exclusivity of speech and the democracy of writing, the nature of pseudonymity, and the category of the “un-authored” text? Do they have any historical resonance?

Inasmuch as the episode highlights the possibility that putting one’s name to a publication could constitute a social gaffe, something that is simply not the case in modern literary culture, the episode may serve to remind us that “onymous” publication is a relatively recent phenomenon. In France, it became standard practice only after the Revolution. The vast majority of books published in the Ancien Régime did not bear their authors’ names; even a work written by the emerging social persona of the writer, who might be thought of as a forerunner of the modern writer, did not necessarily bear his name for reasons that were often to do with the desire not to (be seen to) indulge in the unseemly act of self-promotion. Without wishing to force a comparison between Ted and an early modern writer, it is nonetheless true that the anonymous publication of the La Rochefoucauld’s Maximes (1664) did not mean that the Duke’s authorship was unknown. On the contrary. Moreover, the published text clearly aims to arouse the reader’s interest in the author’s name and to create a sense of complicity between author and reader. Alain Brunn has summed it up neatly: “L’anonymat des Maximes, où le nom est largement connu [. . .] même s’il n’est pas prononcé, n’est pas un anonymat privatif qui déprend l’auteur de son texte [. . .] c’est au contraire un anonymat par dénégation, un anonymat transparent, bref, un anonymat public.” Any

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5When I gave a version of this essay as a paper at the “Anonymity” conference, I tried out the neologism “a-onymous” to describe the authors of “un-authored” works. It had some utility at the conference, but I am no longer sure it’s helpful.


comparison between Larry David and an early modern author would also have its limits, of course, but the notion that it was unseemly to seek or, at least, be seen to seek public recognition for one’s works was, for instance, part of the *querelle* surrounding Corneille and *Le Cid* (1636), and it played a role in Descartes’ embarrassment when he discovered that the *privilège* for his *Discours de la méthode* (1637) had been granted to him personally rather than to a *libraire*, meaning that his name would appear on it.\(^{11}\)

However, if the *Curb Your Enthusiasm* episode suggests that the social politics of anonymity and “onymity” are still with us, albeit in the realm of charitable donation rather than publication, or if it suggests perhaps that publication in the Ancien Régime was (ideally) conceived of in a manner that resembles that in which donations are sometimes made today, it offers us no point of entry into that aspect of anonymity which is probably most readily brought to mind in the context of Ancien Régime France, namely clandestinity.\(^{12}\) As historians of the book have long emphasized, if many books were published anonymously, it was to protect their authors from persecution and imprisonment as a result of what the authorities considered to be the subversive nature of their works’ content. Anonymity was thus a synonym for “unauthorized,” and if it could serve as a form of protection for authors of unorthodox, seditious or libertine works, it could also be an effective marketing tool on the part of the *libraries*, hoping for a *succès de scandale*.\(^{13}\) If the “*anonymat de clandestinité*”\(^{14}\) is quite alien to Larry and Ted, as students of the literary culture of Ancien Régime France, we cannot ignore it. It is particularly associated with the Enlightenment: anyone promoting the view that all branches of knowledge and experience should be subjected to rational scientific enquiry had better say so anonymously. (Not that it always guaranteed protection, of course.)\(^{15}\)


\(^{12}\)There are numerous studies of this phenomenon; see, for instance, *Anonymat et clandestinité aux XVII\textsuperscript{e} et XVIII\textsuperscript{e} siècles, La Lettre clandestine* 8 (2000).


\(^{14}\)I borrow the terms “*anonymat de clandestinité*” and “*anonymat public*” from Alain Brunn (*Le laboratoire moraliste*, 233, italics in the original).

Such an Enlightenment view is perhaps most strongly associated with the *Encyclopédie*, which contains in its first volume (1751) an entry “ANONYME.”16 And yet what it says about anonymity is rather disconcerting, at least to the modern reader, because it says almost nothing of clandestinity, and focuses instead on, precisely, the social politics of signing and not signing one’s name. This raises a number of questions: have historians of the book been wrong to think that by the mid-eighteenth century the conception of anonymity in terms of aristocratic self-effacement had given way to a modern authorial desire to sign and make one’s name, a desire that would tend only to be overruled by the fear of persecution? If not, what is a rather old-fashioned view of anonymity doing in the *Encyclopédie*, a work that itself has a complex relationship to “onymity” and anonymity, as well as to clandestinity? Is the article out of touch, naïve, conservative? Or is there a deliberate strategy here? Does the article, in fact, succeed in drawing the reader’s attention to the libertine use of anonymity by means of the conspicuous near-absence of references to it, in a manner not dissimilar to the practice of withholding the authorial name to create a glaring absence on an anonymous text? And how might we know if that were the case? Could knowledge of the name of the author of the article help answer these questions?

“ANONYME”

There are two entries for “anonymous” in the *Encyclopédie*. (The noun arrives in French only in the mid-nineteenth century.17) The first is a “Terme de Littérature” and what is said about it will be our focus here. The second is not without interest, however: it is a term used in chemistry, first by Boyle, to refer to a particular chemical spirit that he was able to identify as being different from all others, but the exact nature of which he was unable to discover.18 Neither article is anonymous: the article on chemical anonymity was written by Paul Jacques Malouin, head chemist at the *Jardin du roi* since 1745. For reasons

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16ANONYME,” in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des métiers*, 28 vols (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton and Durand, 1751–65) 1: 488–89. All spelling has been modernized.

17Littré gives 1864, see Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872–1877), accessed on-line at http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/content/dictionnaires-dautrefois.

18“Trouvant par l’expérience qu’on pouvait séparer du tartre et de plusieurs bois, un esprit qui diffère par un grand nombre de qualités des esprits vineux, acides et urineux, et n’ayant pu en découvrir tout à fait la nature, il l’appella esprit anonyme, et dans d’autres endroits esprit neutre ou adiaphore, de tartre, de bois, etc” (*Encyclopédie* 1: 489).
that will become clear, I shall postpone discussion of the identity of the author of the article on the literary term “anonymous” and of the way in which he is named, and begin with a close reading of the text.

The article opens with the simple definition of “anonymous,” based on the etymology, according to which it “signifie qui n’a point de nom, ou dont le nom n’est pas connu” (1: 488). It could thus be anyone’s name that is absent, not necessarily an author’s, and it is worth noting that the name that was considered absent from a work of literature was the libraire’s. In many ways, the presence of his name was more important than that of the author’s: it was a legal requirement. (This did not, of course, prevent libraires from making use of pseudonyms or from publishing works with no name on them at all.) However, it is with the author’s name that the article is mainly concerned as a second definition, more concerned with usage than with etymology, makes clear.

It reads: “[o]n donne cette épithète à tous les ouvrages qui paraissent sans nom d’auteur, ou dont les auteurs sont inconnus” (1: 488). The contrast made here between a work that appears without an authorial name, and a work the author of which is unknown, is subtle but important. The second case retrospectively suggests that, in the first, the name may nonetheless be known, despite its absence. It might be known only to some readers, perhaps to a reader and personal acquaintance of the author or perhaps only to the libraire who received (and was named on) the privilège. This second dual definition also subtly evokes the question of the intention behind anonymity. In the case of a work that appears without an authorial signature, though its authorship is knowable (and may indeed be known, if only to some), its anonymity would seem to be deliberate, which it would not seem to be in the case of a work the author of which is simply unknown—the name could simply have been lost in the mists of time. The apparently intentional anonymity of works “qui paraissent sans nom d’auteur” is not presented here as a matter of curiosity, however, still less of suspicion, and there is no discussion of the possible motives for the absence of the author’s name nor of the person responsible for its absence—the libraire perhaps or the author himself. If there were something evasive about the article, then this could be the first sign of it.

Anonymity as a subject of curiosity does appear a little later in the article, but that curiosity is presented as purely scholarly and erudite. We are told that: “Decker, conseiller de la chambre impériale de Spire, et Placcius de Hambourg, ont donné des catalogues d’ouvrages anonymes. Bure, Gotth, Struvius, ont traité des savants qui se sont occupés à déterrer les noms des auteurs dont les ouvrages sont anonymes” (1: 488). Anonymity emerges here as a kind of challenge issued to scholarly readers who, from the mid-seventeenth century, had begun compiling catalogues of anonymous works and attributing them to authors. What is interesting here is that the task of attribution is presented in natural terms, as one of “unearthing,” as though the authorial name had simply been buried by the passage of time. This is no doubt the case for some works included in these catalogues, but the metaphor might nonetheless be thought rather remarkable since the most common metaphors used to describe anonymity in the period do not recall archeological excavation so much as the theatre, acting and possibly therefore, by extension, lying. Indeed the authors cited in the article wrote works with titles that employ just such metaphors: Placcius’s catalogue, posthumously published in 1708, bore the title Theatrum anonymorum et pseudonymorum, and Struvius wrote a work entitled Dissertatio historico litteraria de doctis impostoribus (1703). These scholars did not only dig up an author’s name, they also unmasked him. The context for their scholarly unmasking is crucial to understanding what the stakes were: in a Europe divided by religious conflict, it was important to know the author’s name because anonymous and pseudonymous works often contained heterodox ideas, the expression of which was forbidden.

So, is it odd that the Encyclopédie article does not give the titles of the works by Placcius and Struve? Are they not given so as to avoid words like “theatre” and “imposture”? Or were they so well known that it was unnecessary? Or were they not well known at all, and perhaps not even to the author of the article? The possibility that the author was not very well informed may be indicated by the fact that the article mistakes Burchard Gotthelfius Struvius for three different people.

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20See Vincent Placcius, De Scriptis & Scriptoribus anonymis atque pseudonymis syntagma (1674) and Johann Deckherr, De Scriptis adespotis, pseudepigraphis, et supposititiis (1678).
21Struvius’ work contains some discussion of what was perhaps the most famous anonymous, clandestine work of the period, the De tribus impostoribus.
(“Bure, Gotth, et Struvius ont traité . . .”), though it could also be a proofreader’s oversight. Yet could the archeological metaphor used to describe the work of attribution nonetheless have been chosen for the specific purpose of naturalizing anonymity and of countering its more usual presentation as artificial, which might raise the question of political and religious motivation?

Nothing more is said of scholarly excavations, and the article turns instead to the issue of the social politics of anonymity, which is its main topic from now on. To do so, it quotes from the section on anonymity in the first volume of Adrien Baillet’s learned work, *Jugemens des savants* (1685): “Parmi les auteurs, dit M. Baillet, les uns suppriment leurs noms, pour éviter la peine ou la confusion d’avoir mal écrit, ou d’avoir mal choisi un sujet; les autres, pour éviter la récompense ou la louange qui pourrait leur revenir de leur travail” (1: 488–89). It is this second kind of author, the one who wishes to avoid receiving any reward, be it financial or symbolic, on whom the article now trains its focus. Quoting Baillet again, it identifies three attitudes to publication among these anonymous authors and they are arranged in ascending order of hostility to “onymous” authorship:

> Ceux-ci par la crainte de s’exposer au public, et de faire trop parler d’eux; ceux-là par un mouvement de pure humilité, pour tâcher de se rendre utiles au public sans en être connus: d’autres enfin par une indifférence et un mépris de cette vaine réputation qu’on acquiert en écrivant, parce qu’ils considèrent comme une bassesse et comme une espèce de déshonneur [... ] de passer pour auteurs. (1: 489)23

The Christian virtues of humility and charitable good works are allied here with the self-effacing ethical code of the *honnête homme*, who, in the words of Arnauld and Nicole: “devait éviter de se nommer, et même de se servir des mots de *je* et de *moi*.”24 It is an idealizing view, of course: as we know from our brief discussion of La Rochefoucauld, anonymous publication was not necessarily the sign that the author did not wish his name to be known to the public; it could instead be the sign that he did not wish to be seen to wish his name to be known to the public.25 To quote Alain Brunn again, aristocratic anonymity produced “une figure auctoriale à la fois exhibée et dissimulée, publiée

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25The same was also true for Mme de Lafayette and *La Princesse de Clèves*. 
et déniée.”

Baillet, author of an anonymous work on pseudonyms entitled *Auteurs déguisés* (1690), and of another, *Des satires personnelles* (1689), in which every character’s name is an anagram of “Adrien Baillet,” was well aware of the double-edged nature of anonymity. Moreover, he does not avoid the link with clandestinity: the paragraph quoted in ANONYME is followed by a history of censorship with an explanation of the politico-religious context in which the Index was created. ANONYME, by contrast, seems to have a strong attachment to the idea of genuinely anonymous publication that invites no game of hide-and-seek, to the idea of the charitable donation of a useful work with no desire for any form of recognition. This attachment finds expression in a parenthetical and strongly moralizing addition to Baillet’s account of the *honnête homme’s* attitude to authorship. Following Baillet’s report that some viewed authorship to be “une bas-sessee et comme une espèce de deshonneur,” the article interjects: “(il fallait plutôt dire comme un sot orgueil).” The self-display involved in authorship is thus said to be deeply immoral, and ANONYME seems to be suggesting that the only text that a Christian could safely publish would be one that was not so much anonymous as “un-authored.”

Having exposed the perils, social and moral, of authorship, the article now turns away from authors, and focuses on readers and on the ways in which they respond to anonymous texts, as well as to “onymous” ones. We read:

Il résulte ordinairement deux préjugés de la précaution que les auteurs prennent de ne pas se nommer: une estime excessive, ou un mépris mal fondé pour des ouvrages sans nom d’auteur; parce qu’un nom pour certaines gens est un préjugé qui leur fait adopter tout sans examen; et que

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pour d’autres, un livre *anonyme* est toujours un ouvrage intéressant, quoique réellement il soit faible ou dangereux. (1 : 489).

Pairings and mirrorings of terms proliferate here, and it is important, if rather dizzying, to track them all. The reader is in a series of “lose-lose” situations: if the anonymous author leads him astray and makes him behave in one of two immoderate ways, responding with either “une estime excessive” or un “mépris mal fondé,” the “onymous” author, meanwhile, prompts not different but identical immoderate responses. Though “estime excessive” is first mentioned as a response to an anonymous work, the first example of it is produced by excessive esteem for an “onymous” work when we are told that knowledge of the author’s name leads some readers simply to believe what is said (“adopter tout sans examen”). This might be thought to be a recognizably Enlightenment and Encyclopedist critique of the scholastic motto, *Ipse dixit, ergo vero* just because some famous name said it doesn’t make it true. (Of course, though the article does not say so, a name might also inspire precisely the opposite response, “un mépris mal fondé”: if so-and-so said it, then it can’t be true.) If the anonymous texts is met with “un mépris mal fondé,” it because, lacking an authorial name, it also lacks any authority. Once again, the position is recognizably Enlightenment and Encyclopedist: an unattributed statement is no less unlikely to be true for being unattributed. However, just as there are readers who accord “une estime excessive” to a name and others who respond with a “mépris mal fondé” to the absence of one, so others still accord “une estime excessive” or, as the article now puts it, find the anonymous book “toujours [. . .] intéressant.” This is the first acknowledgement that an author might make strategic use of anonymity in order to excite a reader’s interest, but the object of interest is not the author’s identity; it is instead the contents of his work. And, in this case, if readerly esteem is excessive, scorn is not, in fact, unfounded because the anonymous work is not interesting; it is either dull or dangerous.

The adverb “réellement” suggests this is a revelation, an unmasking even, but this is rather surprising with respect to “dangerous” since one might rather imagine that the reader interested in anonymous books knows full well they might be dangerous; indeed danger is likely to be precisely what he is interested in. And the reader of the

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31“Interest” could be read as a synonym here for “curiosity,” a passion as culpable as pride, to which reference was made earlier; see Alain Viala, *Lettre à Rousseau sur l’intérêt littéraire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, coll. Quadrige, 2006).
Encyclopédie article is also likely to understand “interesting” to be not so much the opposite of “dangerous” (as “réellement” suggests he does), but rather a synonym for it. Does the article assume an (impossibly?) naïve reader? Or is it a sign of (genuine?) naivety on the part of the author of the article?

The article does not close on the reference to danger. In what looks like an attempt to contain it, brief though it was, the article suggests readers should judge anonymous books by their authorial intentions, which are, it says, by and large, morally beyond reproach: “ce n’est que dans ce dernier cas [that of the “interesting” but (/and) “dangerous” work] qu’on peut condamner les auteurs anonymes: tout écrivain qui par timidité, modestie, ou mépris de la gloire, ne s’affiche point à la tête de son ouvrage, ne peut être que louable” (1: 489) And so in a mirror image of the earlier example, in which the reader had an excessive esteem for the anonymous book when there were, in fact, good grounds for scorn owing to its dangerous nature, here the reader’s scorn could never be more ill-founded and no amount of esteem could ever be excessive owing to the wholly admirable intentions of the anonymous author. Yet how is a reader to fathom authorial intention(10,9),(993,983)? How is he to know whether the author of the anonymous work he has in his hands simply feared he might be lacking in talent, whether he was being genuinely modest and indifferent to the allure of a public reputation, or whether he was hiding from the authorities? On these surely crucial questions, the article offers no guidance; it says nothing, for instance, of the fact that a dangerous publication would be likely also to lack a libraire’s name and that it would probably give London or Amsterdam as a place of publication. In fact, the reader of an anonymous work is left in a profoundly paradoxical position: how could he know what the author intended if he does not (even) know his name?

Fittingly enough, the article now reveals the name of its author, but not before quoting a line from Cicero criticizing those philosophers who put their names to works in which they condemned authors for seeking public glory: “Ce [mépris de la gloire] n’était pas la vertu favorite de ces Philosophes dont Cicéron a dit: Illi ipsi Philosophi qui de contemnenda gloria scribunt, etiam libris suis nomen suum inscribunt. Pro Arch. Poet.” (1: 489). Is there a hint of self-awareness on the author’s part here, given that his signature follows?
ANONYME is not only not anonymous, it is not, as was more usually the case for dictionary entries and encyclopedia articles, “un-authored.” One of the innovations of the *Encyclopédie* might be said to be that it conceives of encyclopedia articles as being individually authored, where other dictionaries and encyclopedias of the period bear a single institutional name, such as the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* or the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*. Although the title page of the *Encyclopédie* announces an institution, “une Société de Gens de Lettres,” it is very deliberately not an Academy, and we are also given the individual names of its two editors, Diderot and d’Alembert. Moreover, once inside the first volume, each article is signed by its author. Whose decision it was to attribute the articles and the reason(s) behind it are not known, but it is clear that the authors are to take responsibility for what they have written: “tous ceux qui ont travaillé à cette *Encyclopédie* devant répondre des articles qu’ils ont revus ou composés, on a pris le parti de distinguer les articles de chacun.”

The authors’ names are not all recorded in the same way, however. In some cases, the article gives the author’s full name at the end; this is the case for a “celebrity” author: “Article de M. de Voltaire.” Was this a marketing strategy on the part of the libraires? Or did this author wish to be named rather than be designated, as is the case for most of the authors (at least in volumes that appeared before 1765), simply by means of a letter of the alphabet? The letter does not in most cases have any relation to the author’s name—“M” may be for Malouin, but “V” is for Eidous. Does this make it a cryptonym? The key provided at the beginning of the first volume makes it more like a kind of shorthand. And it is not a (transparent) pseudonym either since they have no symbolic meanings that could conjure up fictional personas. That is, except perhaps in the case of the letters adopted by the two editors. D’Alembert’s “0” may well have been chosen in playful reference to Saint Jean Le Rond, the patron saint of the church where his mother abandoned him and whose name is included in his full name Jean Le Rond d’Alembert. Diderot has two signatures, one as editor and one as author: “les articles qui n’ont point de lettres à la fin, ou qui ont une étoile au commencement, sont de M. Diderot; les premiers sont ceux qui lui appartiennent comme étant un des

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32 “Discours préliminaire” 1: xlvi.
33 Marc-Antoine Eidous was a translator, who had worked with Diderot on the translation of James’s *Medical Dictionary*. 
Auteurs de l’Encyclopédie, les seconds sont ceux qu’il a suppléés comme Editeur.”34 We do not know what motivated these choices. Perhaps “*” was chosen with a view to figuring the editor as a footnote (the asterisk being the standard footnote call), a figure that is not quite as self-effacing as it might sound when we recall the footnotes in Bayle’s dictionary.35 And as for the explicit statement that the articles authored by Diderot (at least in the first volume) are those that bear no sign of authorship, this is not dissimilar to saying they are “by Anonymous.”36 In such circumstances, we might indeed be curious to know who wrote ANONYME.

It is signed “G.” Disappointingly for the reader, hoping for 0 or * or the anonymity that we have been told is the exclusive sign of Diderot’s authorship, G, so the key informs us, is the abbé Mallet. Not a well-known figure today nor, it is fair to say, in his lifetime; an author then, but not an authority, his name inspires neither “une estime excessive” nor “un mépris mal fondé,” nor does it immediately provide a clue as to whether the article is old-fashioned and conservative, even naive and ill-informed, or whether it is purposefully any or all of those things. However, we find in the “Discours préliminaire” of the first volume an explanation of who Mallet was, the subjects he given responsibility for, and why:


34“Discours préliminaire” 1: xlvi.
35For more on *, see Tunstall, Blindness and Enlightenment.
36One other Encyclopedist has a mark that is possibly intriguing: d’Holbach is “–.”
If we are to attempt to uncover the authorial intentions behind ANONYME, we must read his other works.

The two works mentioned by d’Alembert are both textbooks, and as he would later say in his obituary for Mallet, published in the sixth volume of the Encyclopédie (1756), which appeared in the year after his death, they are wholly doxographic:

Il n’y faut point chercher, comme il nous en avertit lui-même, des analyses profondes et des brillants paradoxes: il croyait, et ce sont ses propres paroles, qu’en matière de goût les opinions établies depuis longtemps dans la république des lettres, sont toujours préférables aux singularités et aux prestiges de la nouveauté [. . .] Ainsi [. . .] l’auteur se borne à exposer avec netteté les préceptes des grands maîtres, et à les appuyer par des exemples choisis, tirés des auteurs anciens et modernes.38

Is this also the case for the articles he wrote for the Encyclopédie?

G wrote over 2000 articles; 562 of them are to be found, along with ANONYME, in the first volume. At first sight, they suggest a rather different figure for among them we find the notorious and much-anthologized ANTHROPOPHAGES, an article on cannibals that has cross-references to the Christian ritual of taking Holy Communion (EUCHARISTIE, COMMUNION and AUTEL).39 Could there be a better example of a “brilliant paradoxe”? And the cross-references seem to do exactly what * envisaged them doing, namely producing subversive effects: “[les renvois] attaqueront, ébranleront, renverseront secrètement quelques opinions ridicules qu’on n’oserait insulter ouvertement.”40 However, the standard reading of ANTHROPOPHAGES as ironic and subversive suddenly looks rather doubtful when we turn to other dictionaries of the period since the article is, in fact, lifted, cross-references and all, from the article ANTHROPOPHAGI in Chambers’ Cyclopaedia, which is itself taken, cross-references excepted, from ANTHROPOPHAGES in the Jesuit Dictionnaire de Trévoux, which explains, as Chambers and G subsequently do, that missionaries often reported the heathen “calomnie,” which involved interpreting the Christian Eucharist in terms of their own cannibalistic practices.41 G

37 “Discours préliminaire,” in Encyclopédie 1: xli.
39 Encyclopédie 1: 498.
40 “Encyclopédie,” in Encyclopédie 5: 642A.
seems simply to have copied out what he found in Chambers,⁴² and in the absence of cross-references going in the other direction—EUCHA-
RISTIE does not direct the reader to ANTHROPOPHAGES—it is likely
that no subversive message was intended. So, is ANONYME also the
work of a doxographic copyist?

To some extent, yes. The early part of the article is lifted from
Chambers, who supplied the basic definition and the references to
Decker, Placcius and Struvius (though G didn’t copy them out accu-
rately—the error regarding Struvius’s forenames is absent from his
model). Chambers’ article is itself modeled closely on that in Trévoux,
and although it is not clear whether Trévoux was a direct source for
G, it can, along with Chambers, provide a useful point of comparison
with G’s article, enabling its originality to come into view.

The first thing to note is that neither Chambers nor Trévoux have
anything whatsoever to say of clandestinity. Chambers says nothing
of unmasking in relation to the scholars whose names he gives, and
in Trévoux, anonymity is presented exclusively as the mark of the
aristocratic ethos of honnêteté by means of quotations from Morvan
de Bellegarde and Saint Evremond:

Il y a un je ne sais quoi d’honnête, et de modeste dans la timidité d’un
Auteur qui se produit anonyme dans le monde. BELL. L’humilité de ces
Auteurs qui se tiennent derrière leur ouvrage anonyme, et qui laissent tomber
à terre les louanges qu’on leur donne, est bien rare en ce siècle. S. EVR.⁴³

If the production of what we might call an authorial “je ne sais qui”
involves too much worldly self-fashioning (“se produit anonyme dans le
monde”) for G, who expressed his moral condemnation of any kind of
display, we should note that by the standard of the dictionaries of his
day, G’s conception of anonymity in terms of honnêteté self-effacement is
in fact, though it may come as a surprise to us, wholly unremarkable.
Moreover, if the quote from Saint Evremond was included by Trévoux
to signal that self-effacement was nonetheless rather outmoded and
that “onymity” had become the norm (deplorable though that might
be), G’s decision to include any reference at all to anonymity as the
mark of the unauthorized constitutes a significant departure from his

⁴²Is it possible that there was some ironic intent in Chambers, given the Protestant
reading of the Eucharist as a metaphor, which is in opposition to the literal Catholic
reading?

⁴³Dictionnaire universel français et latin (Paris: Jean-Michel Gandouin, 1732)1: 434.
Spelling has been modernized. Chambers omits the quotations but signals their omis-
sion by means of the mark “–.”
models. Does anything suggest that he thought interesting anonymous books were anything other than dangerous?

I think the answer is “no.” Although in the obituary, d’Alembert presents Mallet as tolerant, an enemy of religious persecution, Walter E. Rex’s research has shown that he was a conservative, even in some respects a reactionary.\(^\text{44}\) We do not know how exactly he came to be a member of the “Société des Gens de Lettres,” but it is rather surprising that he did: in a work written a year before he joined the Encyclopédie team, Mallet argued that the study of English should be outlawed to prevent access to the wave of dangerous ideas arriving from across the Channel,\(^\text{45}\) and a close reading of articles such as ACTES DE FOI, ALBIGEOIS and ANABAPTISTES reveals a degree of hostility to unorthodox beliefs and to holders of those beliefs that goes against the spirit of toleration expressed elsewhere in the Encyclopédie and notably by its editors.\(^\text{46}\) There can be no doubt that Mallet believed “interesting” anonymous books were dangerous; if he chose to include some mention of them in ANONYME rather than follow Chambers or Trévoux, it was no doubt in part prompted by his reading of Baillet, but it could also have been owing to his commitment to combating the ideas they contained. And if the reference to them produced the paradox observed earlier—the reader of an anonymous text must judge it according to its author’s intentions, knowledge of which depends on knowing the author’s name—it seems likely that nothing ironic was intended by it.

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So, once again, what do we think about that? To conclude now, two things come to mind, both in relation to the question of why it was that we wrongly suspected the intentional presence of irony in ANONYME. The first is the power of a name, in this case not that of the author of the article but of the work in which it appears and of one of its editors. In the same volume as ANONYME, we find, for instance, the article AVEUGLE. It is signed “0,” who is, we recall, d’Alembert,


\[^{46}\text{See Rex, “L’ARCHE DE NOË, 136–38. Some of his articles were so reactionary that they were simply censored (CONSTITUTION UNIGENITUS) or partially rewritten before publication (PACIFICATION).}\]
and it refers to “un auteur anonyme [qui] a publié [. . .] en 1749, un petit ouvrage très philosophique et très bien écrit, intitulé *Lettres sur les aveugles*.”

0 does not give the anonymous author’s name, but many readers would have known it to be that of his co-editor, Diderot, whom they also knew to have recently been released from prison following the publication of the *Lettre* and two other anonymous works, and whom they also now knew either by the “name” of “*” or as the absence of any mark designating a name. In such a context, it was tempting to resist the idea that G-Mallet was short-sighted, which is not, of course, to say that ANONYME, like ANTHROPOPHAGES, cannot be read in ways he did not intend. The second is the focus on clandestine publication that characterizes modern scholarship on the Enlightenment. That focus is not itself inappropriate given the success of the illegal book trade in the period, but it has obscured the fact that the term “anonyme” could clearly also refer to the practice of the self-effacing *honnête homme* despite the fact that such a practice was by 1750 rather old-fashioned.

If this conception of anonymity, which Larry (quite rightly) called “faux anonymity,” is in fashion today in the world of charitable donation where the new aristocrats publish their good works, it was also conceptually very much available in mid-eighteenth-century France. To overlook the variations of anonymity in the Ancien Régime and to think instead in terms of the binary opposition “you’re either unauthorized or you’re not” is perilously simplistic. We saw where that kind of thinking got Larry David.

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47 *Encyclopédie* 1: 870.

48 We note, for example, that G’s reference to dangerous books is the only line quoted by Françoise Weil in “L’Anonymat (imprimés et manuscrits) au XVIIIᵉ siècle,” *Revue des sciences humaines* 237–238 (1995): 149. Such selective quotation distorts the focus of article in order to bring it in line with the more familiar conception of anonymity as clandestinity.