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Pseudonymous Was a Woman

Pen Names, Louisa May Alcott, and *Feme Covert*

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A century ago, Virginia Woolf famously argued that writers who published anonymously were likely women. As Woolf noted, the conventions of feminine respectability forbade women from pursuing publicity or remuneration, so, in deference to polite decorum, women writers typically withheld their names and identified themselves, if at all, only as “a lady.” Perhaps because so many American women writers went unremembered until the late twentieth century, we have often presumed anonymity to be a gendered literary condition far removed from the brazen self-promotion undertaken by such male writers as Walt Whitman. Woolf’s assertion notwithstanding, however, anonymity was not the special province of women writers, for men also commonly published without attribution. Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope, and Tobias Smollett, among many others, all published anonymously, as did American writers Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Edgar Allan Poe.¹ Despite our long-standing assumption, anonymity traditionally signaled not gender but class, and it conveyed elite disdain for careerist ambition and publicity. As a result, both men and women writers often identified themselves solely in such classed terms as “lady,” “gentleman,” or “gentlewoman,” presenting their anonymity as the product of status and a refined distaste for the vulgarity of public exposure.² Within this context, Whitman’s self-promotion may be understood less as the prerogative of gender than as the defiant traversal of polite authorial gentility, consistent with his self-presentation as a working-class populist skeptical of such displays of refinement and social withdrawal.

Anonymity may not have been especially gendered, but by the second quarter of the nineteenth century the pseudonym most certainly was. A few mid-century men published under pen names, among them Donald Grant Mitchell and William Gilmore Simms, but men in this period increasingly published

under their own names. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, started his career by publishing anonymously, issuing both his first novel, *Fanshawe*, as well as short fiction without authorial attribution, but by the 1830s he began publishing under his own name and included his name on the title pages of all his mid-century novels (Leverenz 352). Women similarly began to reject anonymity, but they turned instead to pseudonyms, among them such single-name monikers as Dora and Julia as well as fuller, more genuine-sounding names like Mary Abigail Dodge's Gail Hamilton, Caroline Kirkland's Mary Clavers, and Mary Virginia Terhune's Marion Harland.³ Many other women elected more stylized, alliterative pseudonyms—Fanny Forester, Grace Greenwood, Lily Larkspur, Winifred Woodfern, and, most famously, Fanny Fern—that broadcast their artificiality and invoked the delicacy and natural beauty prized by conventional femininity.

The study of nineteenth-century American women writers retains a few notable pseudonyms—such as Linda Brent, Sui Sin Far, and Fanny Fern—but the importance of pseudonymity has largely receded from scholarly memory. Our collective forgetting of countless women's pen names may have been unwittingly enabled by late-twentieth-century recovery efforts, which, in bringing forgotten women writers to scholarly attention, sought to dispel the concealments that contributed to their invisibility. New editions and reissued works by nineteenth-century women writers typically trumpeted their real names, despite their omission at the time of their original publication. As a result, we recognize Susan Warner and not her pseudonymous alter ego, Elizabeth Wetherell, as the author of *The Wide, Wide World*, and we similarly recognize Lydia Maria Child as the author of *Hobomok*, despite her name's absence from the original title page. The field's decision to privilege women writers' names over their pseudonyms likely derives from the assumption, powerfully articulated by Mary Kelley, that pseudonyms "symbolized the invisibility of woman, the nonbeing of woman, the restriction of woman" (128). With pseudonyms thus configured as markers of women's lesser social and legal status, scholars have often elected to use writers' real names in an effort to bring pseudonymous women out of the shadows and into the public eye.

However, this essay seeks to show that pseudonyms played a more complex role in women's careers than we have often presumed. The disastrous public response to the Reclaim Her Name book series (2020), in which the English alcohol company Baileys and the Women's Prize for Fiction reissued the writings of numerous pseudonymous women under their real names, confirms that we should not reduce pseudonyms to shameful indignities imposed on women.⁴ Instead, pseudonyms often entailed carefully designed public personae that, as Lara Langer Cohen and Robert Gunn have shown,

could allow women writers to control their public image, affirm their compliance with normative respectability, and even elicit particular responses from the public. For instance, the familial honorifics included in the pseudonyms Aunt Kitty and Mrs. Clarissa Packard allowed the writers Maria McIntosh and Caroline Howard, respectively, to appear as benevolent, trustworthy authority figures. Some women writers, such as Elizabeth Oakes Smith, even used several different pseudonyms, publishing specific genres and styles under particular names and using pseudonyms to establish multiple distinct literary brands.⁵ Rather than merely obliterating women writers' authorship or identity, pseudonyms may be understood as a form of "performative opacity," to use Daphne Brooks's term, which shielded women writers from the public eye while also allowing them to create distinctive public identities (8).

As I will show, the conditions of female pseudonymity were not a mere quirk of the nineteenth-century literary market, but instead often expressly permeated the contents of these women's writings. For instance, these writers' novels often included a female character of indeterminate identity and concluded with the revelation of her legal name as well as the restoration of order, a recurring plot point that invited readers to accept unidentified women and to regard such disclosures as wholesome and necessary. In this way, pseudonymous women writers often thematized the conditions of their own concealment but invited readers to celebrate the public revelation of women's identities. At the same time, however, pseudonymous women novelists often included plots that worked against the grain of attribution and identification: in countless marriage plots and courtship narratives, pseudonymous women writers depicted the process by which all women might similarly become *femes covert*, as married women were legally known: women hidden by marriage, their names and legal personhood subsumed by those of their husbands. These novels disclose women's hidden names, only to depict their absorption and disappearance in marriage, required by legal strictures to renounce their civic visibility and rely on a surrogate name for public endeavors. In this way, marriage plots allowed pseudonymous women writers to depict the conditions of their own production.

To demonstrate the complexity and varied uses of pseudonymity, this essay ultimately considers the career of Louisa May Alcott, who over the course of her life published both anonymously and pseudonymously and whose decision in 1868 to publish *Little Women* under her own name signals a pivotal shift in the public attribution of women writers. In such pseudonymous writings as *V.V.* and *Behind a Mask*, Alcott often depicted the circumstances that compelled women to adopt false names. In contrast with her peers' marriage plot novels, Alcott's pseudonymous writings instead often blame marriage and its

failures as the primary reason women resort to such disguises: the solitary and desperate *feme covert* often takes advantage of her status as a hidden woman and works in the shadows to pursue financial security. In addition, Alcott often portrays these pseudonymous women as artists who rely on their creative skills to carry out their schemes, and her writings thereby offer an etiology of the pseudonymous woman writer, compelled to ply her creative wares because of desperate straits. In this respect, Alcott openly portrayed what other women writers left unstated, and exposed the private anguish that compelled so many women to enter the literary market and enlist pen names. Alcott achieved immense success publishing children's novels under her own name, but she later came to regret her public status and depicted pseudonymity as useful protection against a demanding public. In Alcott's life and work, pseudonyms and public disguises emerge as necessary protections required for anyone—men and women—to navigate the hazards of fame, but they prove especially vital for women seeking financial security outside the confines of marriage. Pseudonyms allowed these women to survive and seek justice.

THE HISTORY OF PSEUDONYMITY

Modern readers expect by-lines and clear authorial attribution, and anonymity today appears largely in the guise of internet trolls and the occasional publicity stunt, as with the 1996 political roman à clef *Primary Colors* and a 2018 *New York Times* op-ed authored by an unnamed member of the Trump administration. Until the mid-nineteenth century, however, anonymity was a conventional feature of the literary marketplace. Michel Foucault has commented that “[l]iterary anonymity was of interest only as a puzzle to be solved” (1629), but readers before the mid-nineteenth century were accustomed to anonymously authored texts and seldom knew the identities of the authors they read, though occasionally a sensation such as the novels of Walter Scott sparked interest in unveiling an author's identity. Pamphlets, newspapers, and periodicals all relied on unsigned material, and texts of all kinds commonly appeared without authorial attribution. James Raven has estimated that about 80 percent of all British novels issued between 1700 and 1790 were published anonymously (143), and major works of fiction published without attribution include Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Poetry was also widely published anonymously, with first-time poets especially inclined to withhold their names to avoid embarrassment if their poems received a lackluster response (Erickson 260). Even after novels and poetry collections started to identify their authors in the mid-nineteenth century, periodicals continued to

rely on unsigned content, due to reprinting practices as well as house styles that sought to create the impression of an editorial “corporate or collective authority” underlying the journal (Buurma 20).

Unidentified authorship was a common feature of print culture, but it specifically signaled status and an attendant disdain for public attention. We often perceive anonymity as a form of public erasure, but authorial concealment was particularly favored by elite writers, who were the least likely to be elided from public recognition or historical memory. For well-to-do writers, attribution evoked the advertisements of tradesmen and suggested the ambitions of social climbers eager for public attention. They instead elected to circulate their work in manuscript form among coterie of peers, resorting to print only to commission volumes for private circulation. Even in those limited conditions, they often withheld their names from title pages to avoid giving the impression of commercial ambition or the pursuit of fame (Feldman 279). This was especially the case for middle-class and elite women writers delimited by the strictures of both class and gender, who particularly avoided public exposure and participation in market exchange, both of which could implicitly position them as sexual commodities for sale. By contrast, working-class women writers were much more likely to identify themselves, and in Britain working-class women writers even identified their trades and places of origin, as with, for instance, “Ann Yearsley, a Milkwoman of Bristol” (Feldman 280). These disclosures emphasized these women’s availability for hire and characterized book purchase as a form of charity, impressions that more affluent women strenuously sought to avoid. The entanglement of class with attribution also underlay the identification of Susanna Rowson on the title page of *Charlotte Temple*. Hannah Webster Foster was identified solely as a “Lady of Massachusetts” on the title page of *The Coquette*, but Rowson was identified by name and trade, described on the title page as an “actress.”⁶ Because of her work on the stage, Rowson had already breached the conventions of female respectability and become a public figure, and this attribution attempted to publicize her theatrical renown to increase sales and public interest. It also implicitly ascribed her public attribution to her unseemly work as an entertainer and thereby reaffirmed the association of womanly gentility with invisibility.

Authorial attribution was thus inextricably entangled with the unequal distribution of status and resources. It accordingly registered conflicting attitudes toward the literary commodity, with unattributed authors politely ignoring the financial value of the text and attributed writers presumably seeking the economic and social capital afforded by publication. Despite middle-class and elite women writers’ efforts to present themselves as indifferent to market interests, dire financial need underlay many of these women’s entrance into the literary

marketplace, for they often sought publication because of economic hardship, concealing their identity to prevent others from learning about their private finances. As many critics have noted, writing provided a respectable means for educated women to earn money without leaving their homes or neglecting their household duties; they could undertake this work privately, their reputations shielded by the additional protections of anonymity or pseudonymity. As Fanny Fern famously observed, “No happy woman ever writes,” and her semi-autobiographical novel, *Ruth Hall*, recounts the financial desperation that compelled women, herself included, to enter print, as the widow Ruth Hall takes to writing under a pen name to support herself and her children (175). Fern’s 1853 short story “A Practical Bluestocking” similarly recounts how a married woman covertly embarks on a literary career after her husband’s financial failure, his unawareness of her successes suggesting that she withheld her name from her published work. Elizabeth Stoddard in 1854 offered similar commentary, noting, in the guise of a “Lady Correspondent” of the *Daily Alta California*, that women increasingly resorted to publication “to make money,” often because of the financial failures of their husbands (E.D.B. 2). Even Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, attempted to support herself by her pen and as a pregnant young widow submitted poems to *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Generations before, a man’s anonymous writings signaled his elite status and financial independence, but by the mid-nineteenth century women’s similar publications often conveyed the absence of such resources and a desperate effort to find a respectable source of income.

By midcentury, women increasingly elected pseudonymity over anonymity, a shift that provides an important data point in the history of American women’s authorship. Anne E. Boyd and Susan Coultrap-McQuin have examined the development of the professional woman author, who writes not as a diversion or as an act of financial desperation but as a dedicated, ambitious artist. Pseudonyms appear to be at odds with this ambition, because they seem to conceal the woman writer and impede public recognition and status. However, the pseudonym functioned differently from anonymity, which ostensibly obliterated the author from public view (although anonymous writers could receive some form of attribution in being identified as the author of prior writings, as with, for instance, Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s frequent identification as “Author of ‘A New England Tale’”). Instead, pseudonymity allowed women writers to respectably assert proprietorial authorship of their works, and it likewise suggests an interest in an extended literary career carried out over multiple texts and venues. Anonymity functioned as the favored device of first-time writers looking to dip their toe in the literary market without risking their reputation, but use of a pseudonym suggests an interest in developing a public

literary persona, accumulating a recognized published corpus, and establishing a reputation (Erickson 260). The pseudonym conveys that writing for these women was less an occasional amusement, as had often been the case with the anonymous gentleman amateur, than a considered, long-term undertaking.

That said, women's reliance on veiled authorship was unevenly distributed across literary genres, and the patterns of authorial attribution attest to the relative respectability of different literary forms. Women poets commonly published individual poems anonymously or pseudonymously, often because of the customs of periodicals, but by the second quarter of the century women frequently published poetry collections under their own names, among them Sarah Wentworth Morton, Frances Sargent Osgood, and Lydia Sigourney. By the 1840s prominent periodicals began to identify women poets, a development that further advanced their public visibility (Richards 11–12). By contrast, women novelists identified themselves far less frequently. Lydia Maria Child, for instance, published the domestic manual *The Frugal Housewife* under her name but did not do so with the novels *Hobomok* or *The Rebels*, and Louisa May Alcott similarly used her name to publish her early poems but withheld attribution from her sensationalist novel *V.V.*, despite her publisher's offer to increase her pay if she included her name (Rostenberg 135). Countless nineteenth-century women novelists relied on pseudonyms, among them Emily Edson Briggs, Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Sr., Margaret Bayard Smith, and Anna Warner. Harriet Beecher Stowe constitutes a notable exception to this pattern, and she likely published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* under her own name to leverage the moral authority of the Beecher family name.⁷ Caroline Lee Hentz may have elected to identify herself as the author of the proslavery novel *The Planter's Northern Bride* to position her novel as a rejoinder to Stowe's bestseller.

Sentimental writers like Stowe helped rehabilitate the reputation of the novel form, but women novelists of the second quarter of the nineteenth century likely withheld their names because of the novel's continuing disrepute, which ran the risk of presenting women writers as frivolous, immoral, and hazardous to the public good. We have long recognized the novel as a feminized form believed to endanger female readers, but those dangers seem to have extended to women writers themselves. This seems to have been especially the case with novels depicting controversial or sensationalist subjects, which ran so far afield of conventional modes of feminine respectability that women writers used pseudonyms to protect their reputations, as with Alcott's refusal to publish *V.V.* under her own name. However, women who authored wholesome sentimental novels also declined to identify themselves publicly. As a result, pseudonymity reflected less the specific contents of a novel than the problem-

atic nature of the novel form itself. Novels typically provide intimate access to characters' private lives, exposing characters' hidden thoughts and feelings as well as the inner workings of households and families. As a form, novels constituted a significant breach of everyday privacy, which may have contributed to women novelists' decision to withhold attribution and protect themselves from similar exposure. These women were right to have such concerns, for, as will become clear later in the essay, Alcott's eventual decision to publish under her own name resulted in the loss of her personal privacy. By midcentury, significant numbers of men published novels under their own names, Hawthorne and Melville among them, but fictional narratives about private matters remained too outré for women writers to affix their names to without loss of reputation.

The generic patterns of concealed authorship seem to have extended to Black women writers, though to somewhat different effect. The published work of Black women poets often included their names, such as Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Forest Leaves*, while Black women writers of novelistic prose instead concealed their names, among them Hannah Bond, Harriet Jacobs, and Harriet E. Wilson. Hannah Bond cleverly included her last name in the title of *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, but the title page of her holographic manuscript also includes the pseudonym Hannah Crafts, an addition that conveys her familiarity and compliance with the protocols of genteel women's authorship. Harriet Jacobs explained that she used the pseudonym Linda Brent because she remained wary of her former lover, a white elected official, but her pseudonym also affirmed her compliance with the gendered conventions governing attribution of prose narrative and may have been designed to enhance her respectability rather than undermine it. Jacobs became well known in the Black press, but white readers misconstrued *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a work of fiction by Child, an erroneous attribution that conveys a perception of pseudonymous works by Black women as fraudulent rather than deferential to gendered custom (Yellin 261, 262). Feminine authorial modesty evidently did not extend to Black women, who were expected to prove their legitimacy through public attribution, and pseudonymity may have instead undermined their wider literary status.

NARRATIVES OF UNKNOWN WOMEN

The customs of female authorial attribution were not merely incidental features of nineteenth-century publishing but instead raised serious questions about women's identity that often permeated the texts themselves. In the case of poetry, women who published under their names likely intensified common

nineteenth-century poetry-reading practices, which often entailed biographical interpretation. Virginia Jackson, Tricia Lootens, and Eliza Richards have examined popular perceptions of the poetess as a figure of special literary transparency, her emotions presumed to be laid bare and exposed before the reading public.⁸ Elissa Zellinger has also recently shown that lyric convention reinforced the widespread conflation of women poets with their verse (22–23). Women who published poetry under their names may have contributed to the public's confusion of the poetess with the contents of her verse and bolstered reader presumption that the sentiments and experiences conveyed in women's poems were necessarily autobiographical. Attribution likely amplified the exposure and vulnerability of women poets, circumstances that anonymity and pseudonymity were originally designed to prevent. As Zellinger has demonstrated, women poets often responded by devising artful public personae engineered to foil these intrusions, and in so doing they constructed substitutes for the pseudonyms favored by their novelist counterparts.⁹

By contrast, women novelists often dramatized the conditions that rendered women's identities unknown, placing this subject at the center of their novels. Nineteenth-century women's novels often directly addressed the difficulty of identification in an era when women's status was so often unstable. Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, and Cindy Weinstein have noted how frequently nineteenth-century women's fiction depicts the instability of women's lives, pitched between penury and wealth, orphaned isolation and pedigreed kinship.¹⁰ It is often difficult in midcentury novels for women simply to know who they are: their biological families, their histories, and their social station all frequently remain unknown, and they find stability through marriage and reunion with long-lost relatives. The revelation of a family name often confers a prestigious lineage and situates the solitary woman within a powerful network of connections. Similarly displaced characters commonly appear in novels authored by men, as with, for instance, Oliver Edwards in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* or Holgrave in Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables*, but these men often know their identities and family histories, though they keep that information to themselves.

In novels authored by women, displaced female characters tend to be unaware of their own origins, and as they pass through an array of changes and reversals they often undergo serial name changes that correspond with their changing status. In Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, Ellen Montgomery moves among several households and last names, eventually learning that she is the long-lost descendant of an aristocratic Scottish family; following her adoption by her uncle, she becomes Ellen Lindsay, but in the novel's unpublished final chapter she becomes Ellen Humphreys after marriage. Similarly, when Maria

Susanna Cummins's *The Lamplighter* begins, the main character, Gerty, is an orphan with no last name, and she becomes Gerty Flint after she is adopted by the titular lamplighter, Trueman Flint. When her family history is later revealed, she becomes Gertrude Amory, but following her marriage to William Sullivan her name changes yet again, to Gertrude Sullivan. The novel's plot thus illustrates how readily women's names and familial attachments may change.

It bears stressing that these novels about unknown women were authored by similarly unidentified women whose names were also withheld from the public. The novels' contents thus often overlapped with the authorial conditions of publication. Cummins withheld attribution from *The Lamplighter*, but her extended narrative about an unknown young woman seems to have sparked public interest in determining Cummins's own identity, which became a lively subject of inquiry in the Massachusetts press (Williams 73). The revelation of Gerty's history may have prompted reader recognition that the novel left unresolved the author's own identity and kindled interest in solving the remaining puzzle of a different mysterious woman's identity. In this respect, the novel's plot became entangled with Cummins's own elusive identity, and it appears that readers' interests in authorial biography extended just as readily to fiction as it did to poetry, with readers perhaps even resenting how concealed authorship thwarted this interpretive mode.

Many women's novels similarly thematize the conditions of the authors' own uncertain identity, and they present the revelations of these characters' names and histories as essential to the rectification of social order and the righting of wrongs. Ellen reconciles with her mother's estranged family, and Gerty is similarly restored to her rightful place among the social elite. Warner and Cummins declined attribution, but their novels suggest that women's public identities need not be shameful but may instead correct errors and eliminate confusion. Ironically, then, these novels uphold the importance of revealing women's identities despite their reliance on cloaked authorship. In so doing, they implicitly primed readers to accept the looming change in attribution over the coming decades, when women would increasingly publish under their own names.

These novels typically conclude with the heroine safely lodged in the bosom of family and matrimony, but this conclusion reminds us that marriage effectively rendered all women *femes covert*, the common legal term meaning "hidden women" used to describe the status of women after marriage. In this way, pseudonymously written novels reveal the identities of their heroines but conclude by situating these women in a different kind of concealment. Sir William Blackstone explained how marital union necessarily resulted in *femes covert*: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very

being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and *cover*, she performs everything; and is therefore called in our law-french a *feme covert*" (441–42). The wife's merger with her husband causes the dissolution of her independent legal status, with the husband's name and civic position effectively subsuming her own. The context of coverture, as this legal condition was termed, suggestively evokes Kelley's description of pseudonyms, quoted earlier, as evidence of "the nonbeing of woman" (128), for coverture extinguished the married woman's legal personhood and permitted men to usurp their wives' property. Surrogacy and the blurry boundaries of female identity figured centrally in coverture, which authorized husbands to stand in for their wives and presumed that marital union rendered two people interchangeable, despite the husband's superior status.

Women writers enlisted some of the features of coverture in their adoption of pseudonyms, among them the perception that concealment was a respectable, even desirable posture for women to assume. They likewise relied on the legal customs granting women permission to operate under another person's name without risk to their reputation. Coverture required the dissolution of the wife's independent legal status, but it nonetheless allowed her name to proliferate, producing a married name, a husband's name (which became her legal proxy), and assorted variations using the honorific "Mrs." Coverture consequently produced several respectable options in lieu of formal pseudonyms. Many women writers published under their husband's names as protection from public exposure, as with Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who occasionally published as Mrs. Seba Smith, and Mrs. A. J. Graves, author of *Girlhood and Womanhood* and *Woman in America*.¹¹ E. D. E. N. Southworth fashioned a kind of pseudonym out of her initials and the last name of her estranged husband, building a masculine-sounding pen name out of the assorted components of her married name. Southworth's example reminds us that, while marriage provided a respectable precedent for these literary *femes covert*, many women entered print because of the failures of marriage, because of husbands' deaths or abandonment, the failure of businesses, or the financial needs of unmarried women without a private income.

ALCOTT'S PSEUDONYMITY

The varied personal and professional uses of literary concealment underlie the career of Louisa May Alcott, who throughout her life employed just about every mode of attribution. In her youth she published poems under her own name, and she used her initials to publish her first short story in 1852. By the

early 1860s she used both anonymity and the male-sounding pseudonym A. M. Barnard to publish sensationalist short fiction, finally publishing more wholesome children's fiction under her own name in the late 1860s. In her personal life she frequently used several other pseudonyms, on several occasions jokingly adopting the persona of a public lecturer named Oronthy Bluggage, and in letters to friends calling herself Sophia or Sophy Tetterby.¹² She also gave her intimates different names, calling her sister Anna "Pythias," for instance, a nickname that invoked the classical pen names favored in the eighteenth century (Alcott to Anna Alcott, 28–31 Dec. 1856).

Alcott's affection for pseudonyms seems to have emerged in equal parts from her lifelong love for theater and her resolve to transform herself even from a young age. As a child, Alcott aspired to become an actress, later in adulthood even writing such plays as *Nat Bachelor's Pleasure Trip*. She included depictions of such amusements in *Little Women*, as the March sisters similarly delight in performances that allow them to present themselves in the guise of other people, whether in a Christmas melodrama, the Pickwick Club, or reenactments of *Pilgrim's Progress*. For Alcott, the temporary assumption of an alternate persona constituted a form of entertainment, but her childhood writings also convey a belief that such transformations occupied a more serious role in her development. In her journals she repeatedly expressed a desire to transform herself in order to correct perceived character flaws. In March 1846, at the age of thirteen, she wrote in her journal, "I have made a plan for my life, as I am in my teens, and no more a child. . . . I have not told any one about my plan, but I'm going to be good. . . . Now I'm going to *work really*, for I feel a true desire to improve, and be a help and comfort, not a care and sorrow, to my dear mother" (Alcott, *Journals* 59). Readers familiar with *Little Women* and with nineteenth-century women's literature more generally will recognize these statements as characteristic of the March sisters' efforts of self-improvement as well as the period's frequent depiction of girls in need of reform and socialization. Writings of this kind convey a belief that girls and women require fundamental change in both character and conduct and that they need to transform themselves so fully that they essentially become someone else altogether. Women's novels often depict this process of transformation, as with Gerty Flint's evolution in Cummins's *Lampighter* from a wrathful child into a caring young woman who bears little resemblance to her earlier self, a transformation punctuated by repeated name changes. In the ideal developmental scenario, girls and young women are *supposed* to become someone else as they mature, an expectation that also results in women's compulsory name change upon marriage.

Alcott's journals allow us to see the pseudonym as another possible outcome of these efforts of self-transformation. In adulthood Alcott annotated

her childhood journals and often observed that her early efforts had failed to effect any lasting change, commenting on an 1843 journal entry resolving self-improvement, “Poor little sinner! *She says the same at fifty*” (Alcott, *Journals* 45). Alcott suggests that these efforts failed utterly, and the pseudonym emerges as a convenient shortcut to female transformation, allowing the woman writer to adopt an alternate public persona and bypass the grueling efforts of personal reform expected of young women.

Alcott never married, but with the pseudonym A. M. Barnard she effectively granted herself the protective cover of a gender-neutral, if not overtly masculine, name. The pseudonym provided the insulation and invisibility associated with coverture, but Alcott turned these features to her advantage and was able to carry out a prolific career publishing sensationalist fiction without endangering her reputation or privacy. Alcott’s pseudonymous writings often depict some of the conditions of female concealment, focusing in particular on the desperation of divorcées and abandoned wives who enlist disguise to protect themselves. Her fiction thus departed significantly from the more conventional writings of her peers: where her contemporaries commonly concluded their novels with matrimony and relegated their heroines to the legal invisibility of coverture, Alcott instead depicted the afterlives of marriage and even its failures, showing the continued resourcefulness of *femes covert* compelled by financial need to take extreme action. These *femes covert* do not attempt to solve their financial difficulties by entering print, as did Alcott and her peers, but Alcott nonetheless often depicts these women as gifted artists: actresses, sculptors, and dancers who take advantage of their creative abilities to solve their financial problems. In this way, Alcott’s writings offer an etiology, however sensationalist, of the concealed woman writer.

For instance, the story “La Jeune; or, Actress and Woman” follows two different men’s attempts to court a famed French actress, whom the male narrator comes to believe is a promiscuous gambler and addict. He turns out to be mistaken on all counts, and Natalie is revealed to be a faithfully married Englishwoman who works as an actress only to provide for her disabled husband. Though not a writer per se, Natalie resembles her literary peers by adopting false names and personae for the stage, and she likewise dramatizes stories for the public’s entertainment. Natalie exerts authority in her financial and creative endeavors, but she is nonetheless a *feme covert*: a married woman of hidden identity whose earnings go directly to her husband. In her portrayal of Natalie, Alcott offers a reminder that the pseudonymous woman artist often engages in commerce because of dire financial necessity, with few other economic options to support herself and her family.

Many of Alcott’s other pseudonymous writings portray these women as so

desperate that they resort to elaborate plots to secure financial stability. Alcott's pseudonymous novel *V.V.* depicts the conniving Virginie Vane and her use of several false identities to conceal her past. A former ballerina, she presents herself as the widow of a retired military man, claiming that, following her evident abandonment by another man, he insisted on his deathbed that she marry him and take his name "as a shield against a curious world" (108), an assertion that invokes coverture and acknowledges the special protective powers that a man's name may provide a vulnerable woman. Throughout the story, she repeatedly characterizes names as an asset of special value to women. In discussing her poverty, Mrs. Vane comments, "I possess one jewel which I value above all these—a noble name" (93), and in her youth she states that she is willing to marry a man solely for his name, asserting that she will do so "if no one else will offer [her] a name" (83). In remaking herself from the ballerina Virginie to the widow Mrs. Diana Vane, the protagonist treats names as a kind of passport that offers penniless women access to opportunities otherwise unavailable to them. Alcott here acknowledges that pseudonyms prove necessary to women with no other financial prospects.

The best-known of Alcott's works in this vein is her pseudonymous novella *Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power*, which depicts the cunning Jean Muir, a divorced former actress who presents herself as a virtuous, well-born governess in order to lure a member of the aristocratic Coventry family into marriage. Jean adopts the artifices of the stage—hairpieces, false teeth, and accents—and crafts a compelling narrative about herself as the daughter of a penniless Scottish aristocrat. Her story and performance are so convincing that they result in her betrothal to Sir John, the family patriarch. When the younger family members reveal Jean's history and private letters, Sir John blithely dismisses her past as the mistakes of youth and, with full knowledge of her history, gladly accepts her as his wife. With this triumph, Jean changes from a divorced actress with limited financial options to Lady Coventry, a title that, in keeping with coverture, effectively insulates her from any potential danger. It likewise evokes the earlier aristocratic connotations of authorial concealment.

In all these writings, the pseudonym functions not as a vehicle of female self-effacement or social invisibility but as a useful means for solitary, poor women to circumvent social convention and exert control over their lives. Covertures required the absorption of women within marriage, but pseudonyms helped women who had been failed by marriage—through abandonment, divorce, or men's inability to fulfill marital responsibility—to seek justice for unaddressed wrongs and find financial security. At the same time, Alcott's pseudonymous writings also show the underside of the transformation that nineteenth-century girls were expected to undergo. Girls in sentimental nov-

els by Cummins, Warner, and even Alcott herself typically learn to renounce their will and submit to the volition of both divine and worldly authority, but the women in Alcott's pseudonymous fiction transform with a different objective in mind, changing themselves to advance self-interested claims and secure their status: transformation need not entail renunciation or self-denial, as sentimentalism typically suggests. Furthermore, pseudonymity also enabled Alcott herself to pen splashy melodramas, which diverge significantly from the wholesome children's writings for which she later received renown. Against the grain of Kelley's association of pseudonymity with the "nonbeing of woman, [and] the restriction of woman," Alcott's pseudonymous writings suggest that these disguises enabled creative freedom, the acquisition of social and economic security, and even justice. The *feme covert*, Alcott suggests, should take advantage of her invisibility and pursue her ambitions.

By the late 1860s, however, Alcott promoted an alternate view and suggested that women artists should renounce all such artifice and adopt a posture of sincerity in their artistic endeavors. "Psyche's Art," one of the first stories she published under her own name, follows the education of aspiring sculptor Psyche Dean, who leaves art school to care for her family after her father's financial failure. Pseudonyms figure prominently in Alcott's story about female artistic ambition: Psyche's name, for instance, resembles the classical pen names common to the eighteenth century, and Psyche's art school peers jokingly use pseudonyms to discuss their male counterparts, dubbing one Michelangelo and another Titian.¹³ Alcott suggests that these girls lack genuine artistic ambition and attend art school only to meet a potential husband and acquire their own marital name change. Amid such pretenses, Psyche learns from a fellow artist, Paul, that artistic greatness derives not from technique but from personal character. Art functions as a transparent expression of the artist's own nature: artistic greatness both expresses and confirms the artist's own personal virtue, whereas deceptive guile only impairs the artist's capacity to produce meritorious work. Psyche leaves art school to begin her moral education, caring for her family amid financial hardship and the decline of her beloved sister. It is only after enduring these trials and fully relinquishing personal ambition that Psyche finally executes a sculpture that meets her standards, and Alcott suggests that this success derives not from Psyche's training or ambition but from her candor and sincerity. Alcott's pseudonymous fiction often depicted devious women as skilled artists, but as part of her shift from sensationalist to sentimental fiction, she here suggests that the selfish motives that propelled these women—self-protection, financial need, or revenge—only taint the artist's work and must be abandoned in favor of a loving selflessness and transparent vulnerability. Alcott pointedly concluded the story without a marriage between Psyche and Paul,

inviting her readers to envision a “world outside of a wedding-ring” (226). In this respect, Alcott rejected the conventional marriage plot and the heroine’s transformation into a *feme covert*, inviting readers to recognize that women may have meaningful lives outside of marriage.

Alcott’s insistence on artistic transparency may have motivated her decision to publish under her own name as well as her willingness to document her family and early life in *Little Women*, which was published that same year as “Psyche’s Art” and which may be understood as a landmark publication in the history of American women’s literary attribution. Alcott could publish *Little Women* under her own name because decades of sentimental literature had helped render the domestic novel more respectable, and, unlike her sensationalist pseudonymous writings, *Little Women*’s wholesome stories of family life in no way endangered her reputation. However, the personal candor of *Little Women* ended up causing Alcott other kinds of problems. In her account of the March family, Alcott mined events, family dynamics, and dialogue from Alcott family memories, even recycling family names for the March family. In sharp contrast with the traditional invisibility of women writers, Alcott exposed her family to public view, laying bare their financial difficulties, squabbles, and even their threadbare clothes and furnishings. Alcott herself found the novel stiff and mediocre, but its immense popularity suggests that she may have been on to something when she asserted in “Psyche’s Art” that artistic success requires authorial sincerity and vulnerability.

Alcott eventually changed her mind once again after she saw the personal costs of literary attribution and the exposure of her private life. Following the novel’s publication she became deluged with fan mail and invitations, with hordes of visitors regularly appearing at her door. Alcott depicted these intrusions in *Jo’s Boys*, with Jo’s efforts to manage the crowds of enthusiastic readers who tramp through her home and ruin her carpets with their muddy shoes. Alcott complained about the loss of her privacy, in one letter commenting, “I dislike to receive strangers who come out of mere curiosity, as some hundreds do, forgetting that an author has any right to privacy” (Alcott to Viola Price, 18 Dec. 1885). In another letter she opined that “over a hundred [people] a month, most of them strangers” regularly visit her home, and local “people bring all their company to see us. This may *seem* pleasant, but when kept up a whole season is a great affliction. . . . [T]he Alcotts are not on exhibition in any way.” She continued by asking her friend to “write an article on the rights of authors, & try to make the public see that the books belong to them but not the peace, time, comfort and lives of the writers. It is a new kind of slavery” (Alcott to Mrs. Woods, 20 July 1875). Transparency and personal forthrightness may have imbued *Little Women* and its sequels with a pleasing intimacy, but

Alcott's authorial candor also led readers to believe they were entitled to unmediated access to her, and she responded by seeking to protect the privacy of the domestic life she had willingly exposed to public view. We might presume that public literary attribution is intrinsically desirable and regard it as signaling women's final, full acceptance in the literary mainstream, but Alcott's experiences convey that attribution came with significant costs.

Other women writers shared this unhappiness with the public's demands, and Sedgwick even commented that, despite having published anonymously, she felt she had become "so woven into the fabric of others that I seem to have had no separate, individual existence," further observing that her public persona "has always seemed something accidental, extraneous, and independent of my inner self" (qtd. in Boyd 2). Pseudonyms may convey women writers' desire for attribution and recognition, but these pen names also proved useful when that recognition threatened to become overwhelming and even intrusive. Mary Abigail Dodge made this point explicit by describing her pseudonym, Gail Hamilton, as a lightning rod that she used "to catch all the flash and crash of the outside electricity, and leave the inner home of privacy unharmed, untouched" (qtd. in Coultrap-McQuin 118). Her pseudonym diverted public attention and left her private life intact. By the late century, Rebecca Harding Davis so resented the demands of the public that she continued to publish without attribution and refused to give interviews even after such practices had fallen out of fashion (Zibrak 523).

Less than a decade after the immense success of *Little Women*, Alcott explicitly addressed these issues in *A Modern Mephistopheles*, a novel about the dangers that may befall writers who drop all protective artifices, pseudonyms included, and receive unfiltered public attention. *A Modern Mephistopheles* follows the career of poet Felix Canaris, who makes a modern Faustian bargain by surrendering control of his career in exchange for fame. When the novel begins, Felix yearns not to produce great work but to achieve renown. He admits, "I do hunger and thirst for fame; I dream of it by night, I sigh for it by day; every thought and aspiration centres in that desire" (*A Modern Mephistopheles* 17). In exchange for fame, he allows the mysterious Jasper Helwyze to manage his life and career, even allowing Helwyze to select his wife for him. Following this bargain, Felix achieves immense renown, but his desire for fame only grows, overshadowing everything else in his life and causing him to lose interest in writing itself. Public attention, Alcott suggests, is like a narcotic that produces an inexhaustible appetite: "Praise seemed to intoxicate him, for he appeared to forget every thing else, and bask in its sunshine, as if he never could have enough of it" (153). So preoccupied with his public standing, Felix wholly neglects his personal life—his wife, his character, and

daily habits—and the novel affirms Alcott's view that public attention may prove toxic to the writer and the private domain.

The novel eventually reveals that Felix's fame is undeserved because Helwyze, and not Felix, authored the celebrated poems in question. In publishing another man's poems under his own name, Felix in effect allowed himself to become Helwyze's pseudonym. This revelation runs afoul of the conventions of pseudonymity, which presume the pen name to be a mere fiction that allows the writer to remain invisible and withdrawn from public view. By contrast, Felix embraces public attention and falsely presents himself as the author of another man's work, and in so doing he reveals the line separating protective pseudonymity from outright fraud. Helwyze defends his decision to use Felix as a public decoy by explaining, "What did *I* want with praise and honor? To be gaped and gossiped about would have driven me mad" (271), a view that comports with Alcott's own frustration with public attention. Once this deception is exposed, both men are ruined and suffer public shame. Alcott suggests that writers who seek fame run the risk of being destroyed by the public whose attention they court. By the same token, she also suggests that writers who wish to evade public recognition should strictly follow the established conventions of authorial concealment.

Alcott was able to make these trenchant comments about the perils of literary fame because she released the novel anonymously, returning to the customs of veiled authorship with which she began her career. She originally used such disguises to publish sensationalist fiction, but this later novel was marketed precisely to elicit the public attention she decried. *A Modern Mephistopheles* was published by Roberts Brothers, her long-standing publisher, in their No Name series, which between 1876 and 1887 issued thirty-seven volumes, among them Helen Hunt Jackson's *Mercy Philbrick's Choice* and Hjalmar Boyesen's *A Daughter of the Philistines*.¹⁴ However, all the publications in the No Name series were released anonymously, a ploy engineered to generate publicity and activate reader interest in identifying the authors. Indeed, Alcott placed this very premise—the disclosure of an unknown author—at the center of *A Modern Mephistopheles*, which depicts the exposure of a writer working under a false name. Her earlier writings depicted disguise as a useful device for resourceful women, and in *A Modern Mephistopheles* she similarly took advantage of its affordances: the novel's anonymity was designed to elicit public interest, but she nonetheless used concealment to comment on the dangers of public exposure and the demands of the reading public. Anonymity enabled her to air some personal grievances without danger of public reprisal.

Following the example of such characters as Jean Muir and Virginia Vane, Alcott also used disguise to expand her artistic range and experiment with

alternate artistic styles and forms. She began her career as the pseudonymous writer of sensationalistic fiction about the exploits of the cosmopolitan elite, but her renown as the author of wholesome children's literature prevented her from publicly revisiting this lurid early style. Alcott was able to do so only under cover of anonymity, and *A Modern Mephistopheles* depicted a decadent elite inclined to use narcotics and engage in adulterous sexual seduction. Her publisher, Thomas Niles, commented on the novel's stylistic dissimilarity from her popular children's fiction, describing it as "weird & unearthly," and insisted that readers would fail to identify her authorship (qtd. in Stern xix). Niles's predictions proved correct, and readers attributed the novel instead to Julian Hawthorne. In her journal Alcott recorded that friends insisted she could never contribute to such a series, claiming, "you can't hide your peculiar style" (qtd. in Stern and Shealy 386). The inability of the public, including members of her own family, to identify Alcott's authorship confirms that she succeeded both in hiding her "peculiar style" and in enlisting alternate styles and genres. Alcott's extensive anonymous and pseudonymous writings showcase the significant uses of concealed authorship, which could allow women writers to respectably seek income, to evade the intrusions or judgment of the reading public, and to expand their literary repertoire by experimenting with new styles and forms. Disguise and concealment need not obstruct women's literary careers but could enable them to circumvent public restrictions, whether coverture, gender convention, or literary reputation.

The public's interest in the No Name series confirms that, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, anonymity and pseudonymity had become relative rarities designed primarily to spark public interest. For generations, such devices had worked to protect writers' privacy and evade public attention, but by this point they became mere publicity stunts. Shifting attitudes toward women's attribution had already become visible for decades, perhaps due in part to sentimental novels that celebrated the disclosure of women's names and identities. Critics frequently identified concealed women writers, and even anonymous women writers were known to name their peers. In *The Mother's Book*, for instance, Lydia Maria Child openly identified Sedgwick as the author of four different novels, though none of those books had been originally published under Sedgwick's own name. Child herself published novels anonymously, but she seems to have felt no compunction about outing a fellow woman writer. In his anthology *The Female Poets of America*, Rufus Griswold similarly identified such pseudonymous women poets as Maria Gowen Brooks, Emma Embury, and Elizabeth Oakes Smith (Richards 165). Several years later, George and Evert Duyckinck's *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* disclosed the names of such pseudonymous women writers as Emily Chubbock, Sara Jane

Lippincott, and Susan Warner, even revealing personal details about their family history and marital status.

The shift toward attribution notably coincides with the gradual weakening of coverture and the expansion of women's rights, enabled by state laws that granted married women the right to own property separate from their husbands and to retain control over their income. By the late 1860s, when Alcott decided to publish under her own name, twenty-nine out of thirty-six states had statutes granting women the right to property ownership, and in some states women could use their income as they saw fit and even own a business (Kahan 14–15). Alcott's decision in the late 1860s to abandon such concealments and publish under her own name heralded a decisive shift in women's authorial attribution, and the next generation of women writers followed her lead by readily publishing under their own names, among them Sarah Orne Jewett, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Many of these late-century women used their new visibility to advocate for women's rights, and Gilman in particular insisted that authorship, textual production, and meaningful work were fundamental rights that must be extended to women.¹⁵ The complex history of women's attribution conveys that women writers earlier in the century labored to find a respectable means to execute these rights. They often turned to pseudonyms to affirm their deference to the customs of female invisibility and aversion to fame, even as these pseudonyms bequeathed them large followings and financial remuneration.

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NOTES

1. Charles Brockden Brown published anonymously and under his initials, and Cooper anonymously published *The Pioneers*. Longfellow's first book, *Outre-Mer*, was anonymous, and Poe identified himself on the title page of his first book only as a "Bostonian."

2. Anne Bradstreet, for instance, was identified as a "Gentlewoman" on the title page of her 1650 collection *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, and Jane Austen was similarly identified only as a "lady" on the title page of *Sense and Sensibility*.

3. Putzi details the history of the pseudonym Dora in the *Lowell Offering* as well as Sarah Forten's use of the pseudonym Ada (65, 93). Leverenz notes that anonymity dissolved by the 1840s, but his essay overlooks the publication histories of women (350).

4. Baileys's Reclaim Her Name series was issued in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the British Women's Prize for Fiction, and it republished numerous women writers' works under their full names rather than their pseudonyms, as with the publication of George Eliot's work under the name Mary Ann Evans. For a fuller history of and response to the Reclaim Her Name book series, see *Legacy's* September 2020 forum on the series. <https://legacywomenwriters.org/conversations/>.

5. Elizabeth Oakes Smith used several pseudonyms, among them the letter E., Mrs. Seba Smith, and Ernest Helfenstein. She also published anonymously and added the name "Oakes" to her name, an addition that Richards interprets as a concession to the popular botanical and floral pseudonyms widely used by women writers (152).

6. During her lifetime, Hannah Webster Foster's authorship of *The Coquette* remained a secret, identified in print only after her death in 1840. As a result, Foster's papers were destroyed, and scholars know little about her life or other publications (Harris and Waterman xviii).

7. Later in the 1860s, Stowe used the pseudonym Christopher Crowfield to publish *House and Home Papers* and *The Chimney Corner*.

8. See Jackson and Richards, "The 'Poetess' and Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets"; Lootens, *Political Poetess*; and Richards, *Gender and the Poetics of Reception*.

9. See Zellinger 35–61.

10. See Baym, *Woman's Fiction*; Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; and Weinstein, *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy*.

11. Other women sought to take advantage of the affordances of coverture and relied on their husbands to negotiate their publishing and royalty agreements, though, as Irr has shown, some husbands were not up to the task, as evidenced by the disadvantageous agreement that Calvin Stowe struck with John P. Jewett, the publisher of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (30). As Homestead has noted, some husbands insisted on the prerogatives of coverture and served as legal contractual owners of their wives' copyright, as was the case in Sara Jane Lippincott's marriage as well as that of Mary A. Denison, Mary Jane Holmes, and Ann Sophia Stephens (11, 34).

12. She used this moniker in her letters to Alfred Whitman, a close friend on whom she based the character Laurie in *Little Women*.

13. Sarah Wentworth Morton, for instance, used the pen name Philenia, and Judith Sargent Murray favored Constantia.

14. For a comprehensive history and bibliography of the series, see Stern and Shealy.

15. In *Women and Economics*, Gilman insisted that the "creative impulse, the desire to make . . . is the distinguishing character of humanity. 'I want to mark!' cries the child, demanding the pencil" (116–17).

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