

What's in a 'Nym?

Pseudonyms, heteronyms and the remarkable case of Fernando Pessoa

By Alex McNeil

If there's one thing Oxfordians can agree on, it's that Edward de Vere used an alias as a professional writer. His most famous alias, of course, was William Shakespeare. It's highly likely that he used other aliases as well during his career (I suppose he'd probably cringe at the use of the word "career").

We may disagree about whether "William Shakespeare" was a name made up by de Vere, or whether de Vere's imagination was somehow sparked after meeting a man from Stratford-on-Avon with a remarkably similar name. In any event, the name "William Shakespeare," as used by de Vere, can be termed a pseudonym, literally a "false name" (from the Greek *pseudes*, false and *onoma*, name).

The use of pseudonyms, especially by those in the arts, is common. It may be worthwhile to catalog some of the reasons why persons use pseudonyms; perhaps the exercise will help us gain some insight on de Vere's reason or reasons for doing so. The list below is by no means inclusive, and in some cases the categories I've used may overlap with one another. Here's my highly arbitrary list of the Top Ten Reasons Why Artists Use Pseudonyms:

- The real name may be too hard to spell, pronounce or remember. Performers are especially likely to choose a pseudonym, or even change their names legally, for this reason. Let's face it – Doris Day is easier to remember than Doris Kappelhoff, and Chad Everett has a nicer ring to it than Raymond Cramton.

- The real name may be "too ethnic." The artist may want to appear as domestically mainstream as possible. Thus, in films Ramon Estevez becomes Martin Sheen, Raquel Tejada becomes Raquel Welch, and in literature Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski becomes Joseph Conrad by retaining and anglicizing his middle names.

- The artist may want to use the pseudonym to "make a statement." Whoever wrote the "Martin Mar-prelate" tracts (and there is reason to suspect Oxford here) chose that name for obvious reasons. In

modern times, would the Sex Pistols have been the Sex Pistols without Johnny Rotten (nee John Lydon) and Sid Vicious (nee John Simon Ritchie)?

- The artist may be making a joke.



Fernando Pessoa, 1888-1935

Edward Gorey used several anagrams of his name, thereby coming up with Dreary Wodge, Dogear Wryde, and Garrod Weedy.

- The artist may be saluting a personal hero. Bob Zimmerman chose the name Bob Dylan because of his infatuation with Welsh poet Dylan Thomas.

- Perhaps there are gender issues. Mary Ann Evans is far better known as George Eliot. Edward Stratemeyer considered the genders of his readers when he chose two pseudonyms – Franklin W. Dixon for the Hardy Boys stories and Carolyn Keene for the Nancy Drew mysteries. His daughter, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, continued the pseudonyms when she took over after her father's death.

- Two or more persons may be collaborating. Amandine Dupin Dudevant collaborated with Jules Sandeau on her first two novels, which were published under the name of Jules Sand; when she wrote on her own, it was a short step to the new

pseudonym of George Sand. More recently, the spicy novel *Naked Came the Stranger* was among the top ten most popular fiction works of 1969. Although it bore the name "Penelope Ashe" on the cover, it was actually the effort of a group of journalists, mostly from *Newsday*, each of whom took a turn writing a chapter.

- The artist may be embarrassed to have his or her name associated with the work, usually because the work has been altered by others. Sci fi author Harlan Ellison (who used at least 25 pseudonyms) created a syndicated television series, *Starlost*, in 1973; he was so disappointed with the finished product that he had his name removed from the credits, substituting the moniker Cordwainer Bird instead.¹ Another modern example is the name "Alan Smithee," coined by the Directors Guild of America in 1967 for use by a film director who can demonstrate to the Guild's satisfaction that a to-be-released motion picture is catastrophically inferior to the director's version. Over the past 35 years "Alan Smithee" has directed quite a few dramas, comedies and adventure films, all of them terrible. In one of showbiz's great ironies, Arthur Hiller (former DGA president) directed the 1997 comedy, *An Alan Smithee Film: Burn Hollywood Burn!* You guessed it—Hiller was so offended by the final cut that he successfully petitioned the Guild to remove his name and to give Alan Smithee yet another directing credit.

- Legal or contractual reasons may prevent the artist from using his or her real name. John Wilson's teaching contract prohibited him from publishing fiction under his own name, so he put out his first novel using his two middle names – Anthony Burgess.² A more shameful example comes from America's "Red Scare" in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a number of actors, writers and directors were accused of being Communists; those who refused to "name names" were "black-listed," effectively prohibited from working in their respective professions. For actors and directors, who of course had to appear in person on the set, the blacklist was totally effective.³ Blacklisted writers,

however, could employ a variety of methods to remain in their craft. Some used pseudonyms, some collaborated with another writer (who would get the sole on-screen credit but would presumably share the paycheck), some worked anonymously (e.g., rewriting a script submitted by a first writer, who would get sole credit), and some used “front men” – real persons who held themselves out as the ostensible authors of material written by the blacklisted writers.⁴

•The writer may be writing outside of his or her milieu. When writing poetry, anthropologist Ruth Benedict used the name Anne Singleton; Ezra Pound wrote art criticism as B. H. Dias. Other examples exist.⁵

No doubt there are other reasons for the use of pseudonyms, but the ten listed above must be the most common. How many apply to de Vere / “Shakespeare”? It’s hard to say. A few reasons can be ruled out easily—Oxford wasn’t concerned that his own name was too hard to spell, or was too “ethnic,” nor was he concerned with gender issues. We do not know of anyone named “William” or “Shakespeare” who was a personal hero to Oxford. Likewise, it’s impossible to conceive that Oxford viewed the Shakespeare pseudonym as a joke. But there are aspects of the remaining five reasons that hold appeal in varying degrees for Oxfordians.

•Oxford chose the Shakespeare pseudonym to make a statement. This view was championed by Charlton Ogburn, Jr., who maintained in brief that Oxford chose the name because of its pregnant symbolism—the image of Pallas Athena, patron goddess of Athens, birthplace of the theatre, brandishing a spear, coupled with the image of the playwright wielding his pen as a sword. The existence of a real person with a strikingly similar name was coincidental, having nothing to do with the coining of the pseudonym.

•A collaboration—some Oxfordians see Oxford as the patron of a number of young Elizabethan writers, including Lyly, Lodge, Nashe, Kyd, and Marlowe. Perhaps Oxford functioned somewhat like a head writer on a contemporary TV show, inspiring and supervising his underlings, and polishing their efforts. They see evidence of multiple hands in a number of plays in the Canon, and consider “William Shakespeare” to be a pen name chosen for

this largely collaborative effort.

•The other three reasons (embarrassment, legal reasons, and writing outside one’s milieu) can best be discussed together, as none fits exactly and elements of each are present. In this scenario, social mores, rather than strictly legal reasons, prohibited Oxford from publishing under his own name. In Elizabethan times, it was unthinkable for a member of the nobility to publish plays (or almost any piece of

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complete individuality
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just as the
utterances of
some character
would be.”***

fiction) bearing his name; such an association would bring shame on his entire family. Thus, the “embarrassment” factor is present here, too, although the author is not embarrassed by the inferior quality of the finished work, but rather is embarrassed to be known as the author of anything in that genre. In that sense, the third factor—writing outside one’s milieu—is also present, for in Elizabeth’s day it was all right for a nobleman to write an English translation of another work, or even to write poetry as long as it circulated privately and was not published. In this scenario, William Shakspeare of Stratford is the analog of a front man—a real person who can deal with printers and who can appear as the true author if a need should arise. (One assumes that Shakspeare lacked the pangs of guilt that led twentieth century front man Seymour Kern to back out. See footnote 4.)

There is another form of pseudonym, employed more rarely than the above ten, which brings us to the remarkable case of the Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). Pessoa wrote under his own name, but also used many pseudonyms throughout his life (some estimates run as high as 75). He is best known for three: Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Alvaro de Campos. Pessoa took pains to explain that these alter egos were not simply pseudonyms, but—to use Pessoa’s term—*heteronyms*. “A pseudonymic work,” he explained in a 1928 article, “is, except for the name with which it is signed, the work of an author writing as himself; a heteronymic work is by an author writing outside his own personality: it is the work of a complete individuality made up by him, just as the utterances of some character would be.”⁶

Caeiro, Reis and Campos were poets, each with his own distinctive style. Caeiro, “the Master,” embraced “pastoral and philosophical themes.” Reis and Campos were disciples of Caeiro, but Reis wrote “exquisitely formal verses” while Campos was “a ranting experimentalist.”⁷ As Pessoa himself explained, in a preface to a never-issued compilation of his heteronymic works, Caeiro rediscovered paganism, Reis “intensified” it “and made it artistically orthodox,” while Campos, “basing himself on another part of Caeiro’s work, developed an entirely different system, founded exclusively on sensations.”⁸ Reis and Campos also wrote prose, and occasionally disagreed with each other on how to interpret “the Master,” Caeiro’s, works.

In a letter to magazine editor Adolfo Casais Monteiro in 1935, Pessoa offered an explanation of the genesis of the three heteronyms:

. . . It one day occurred to me to play a joke on [fellow poet Mario] Sa-Carneiro – to invent a rather complicated bucolic poet whom I would present in some guise of reality that I’ve since forgotten. I spent a few days trying in vain to envision this poet. One day when I’d finally given up – it was March 8, 1914 – I walked over to a high chest of drawers, took a piece of paper, and began to write standing up, as I do whenever I can. And I wrote thirty-some poems at once, in a kind of ecstasy I’m unable to describe. It was the triumphal day of my

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life, and I can never have another one like it. I began with a title, The Keeper of Sheep. This was followed by the appearance in me of someone whom I instantly named Alberto Caeiro. Excuse the absurdity of this statement: my master had appeared in me. That was what I immediately felt, and so strong was the feeling that, as soon as those thirty-odd poems were written, I grabbed a fresh sheet of paper and wrote, again all at once, the six poems that constitute "Slanting Rain," by Fernando Pessoa. All at once and with total concentration. . . . It was the return of Fernando Pessoa as Alberto Caeiro to Fernando Pessoa himself. Or rather, it was the reaction of Fernando Pessoa against his nonexistence as Alberto Caeiro.

Once Alberto Caeiro had appeared, I instinctively and subconsciously tried to find disciples for him. From Caeiro's false paganism I extracted the latent Ricardo Reis, at last discovering his name and adjusting him to his true self, for now I actually saw him. And then a new individual, quite the opposite of Ricardo Reis, suddenly and impetuously came to me. In an unbroken stream, without interruptions or corrections, the ode whose name is "Triumphal Ode," by the man whose name is none other than Alvaro de Campos, issued from my typewriter.⁹

Pessoa invented biographies and physical descriptions of his main heteronyms. Caeiro was born in Lisbon in 1889 and committed suicide in 1915; Reis was born in 1887 in Oporto, became a physician, and moved to Brazil in 1919; Campos was born in 1890, studied to be a naval engineer in Glasgow, and met Caeiro by chance while visiting Lisbon.¹⁰ Pessoa even claimed to have met Campos.

Although Pessoa readily admitted creating his heteronyms, he refused to concede that they didn't actually exist. As he noted in the preface to the never-issued collection of his heteronymic works, "The author of these books cannot affirm that all these different and well-defined personalities who have incorporeally passed through his soul don't exist, for he does not know what it means to exist, nor whether Hamlet or Shakespeare is more real, or truly real."¹¹

It is interesting that Pessoa mentioned "Shakespeare" in this context. Pessoa's own

life resembled Oxford's in several ways. Both men lost their fathers at an early age—Pessoa was five when his father died. Indeed, Pessoa later reported that the first of his heteronyms appeared shortly afterward, "a certain Chevalier de Pas, when I was six years of age, from whom I wrote letters to myself, and whose figure, not completely vague, still dominates that part of my affection confined to longing."¹² Both Oxford and Pessoa were fluent in

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several languages. Though he was born in Portugal, Pessoa lived in Durban, South Africa (or Natal, as the British colony was then known), from age seven to seventeen, as his mother had married a Portuguese diplomat who was stationed there. In Durban he attended an English school and began to write poetry in English. He also became fluent in French, and would write prose and poetry in all three languages. Both men were exceptionally well read and were interested in many subjects. Pessoa not only wrote poems (including 35 sonnets in English), plays (most of them unfinished), and short stories, but also epigrams, translations, political tracts, and essays on subjects as diverse as alchemy, Rosicrucianism, and Mahatma Gandhi. One of his heteronyms, Bernardo Soares, "defended prose as the highest art form."¹³ Both men befriended and encouraged other young writers.¹⁴

Only a small portion of Pessoa's copious literary output was published during his lifetime. After his death (from cirrhosis of the liver) in 1935, his literary executors found a steamer trunk full of papers—some 25,000 documents, in English, French and Portuguese, some finished, many not.¹⁵ His complete works have yet to be published.

Among the many writers whose works Pessoa had read, and among the many topics about which he wrote, was Shakespeare. If Pessoa was aware of the authorship controversy, he did not address it, at least in those of his writings which have so far been published.¹⁶ One translator notes that he "left many passages for a projected essay on Shakespeare."¹⁷ Of those that have surfaced, several are fascinating because of their insight into the creative process.

Unquestionably, Pessoa appreciated Shakespeare's greatness. In a 1930 essay titled "The Levels of Lyric Poetry," Pessoa identified four levels of consciousness expressed by the lyric poet. Those at the first level (the "most common" and "least estimable") expressed their emotions, but did so in a "monotonic" way, expressing a relatively small number of emotions. Those at the second level were "more intellectual or imaginative or even simply more cultured," and were not "monotonic." Pessoa did not identify any specific poets as level one or level two. At the third level "the poet, more intellectual still, begins to depersonalize, not just because he feels, but because he thinks he feels—feels states of the soul that he really does not possess, simply because he understands them. We are on the threshold of dramatic poetry in its innermost essence." As exemplars of this level, Pessoa named Tennyson (specifically, "Ulysses" and "The Lady of Shalott") and Browning's so-called "dramatic poems." At the fourth ("much rarer") level, "the poet, more intellectual still but equally imaginative, fully undergoes depersonalization. He not only feels but lives the states of soul that he does not possess directly." At this supreme level Pessoa placed Shakespeare and also Browning. "Now, not even the style defines the unity of the man; only what is intellectual in the style denotes it. Thus in Shakespeare, in whom the unexpected prominence of phrase, the subtlety and complexity of expression, are the only things that make the

speech of Hamlet approximate to that of King Lear, of Falstaff, of Lady Macbeth.”¹⁸

Elsewhere, Pessoa again recognized Shakespeare’s genius, but qualified his adulation because of his concern for the writer’s state of mind:

He had, in a degree never surpassed, the intuition of character and the broad-hearted comprehension of humanity; he had, in a degree never surpassed, the arts of diction and of expression. But he lacked one thing: balance, sanity, discipline. The fact that he entered into states of mind as far apart as the abstract spirituality of Ariel and the coarse humanity of Falstaff did to some extent create a balance in his unbalance. But at bottom he is not sane or balanced.¹⁹

In the same essay Pessoa asserted that Shakespeare’s lack of sanity and balance made his plays and poems “from the pure artistic standpoint, the greatest failure that the world has ever looked on.” More specifically, he attributed that failure to “the fundamental defects of the Christian attitude towards life.”²⁰

Pessoa’s longest discourse on Shakespeare was probably written in 1928. In it he offers remarkable observations about the man who was Shakespeare. Because Pessoa apparently accepted the Stratford man as the poet/playwright, not all of his insights are accurate as far as Oxfordians are concerned, but many seem to fit what we know of Oxford to an uncanny degree. First, Pessoa characterized Shakespeare, like all great lyric poets, as “hysteric,” i.e., given to outbursts of emotion. He deduced that Shakespeare was “a hysteric” in his youth and early adulthood, “a hystero-neurasthenic” in manhood, and “a hystero-neurasthenic in a lesser degree” toward the end of his life.²¹ Pessoa does not define “hystero-neurasthenic,” but presumably he means one whose emotional condition brings about feelings of debility, fatigue and inadequacy. Pessoa continues:

Great as his tragedies are, none of them is greater than the tragedy of his own life. The gods gave him all great gifts but one: the one they gave not was the power to use those gifts greatly. He stands forth as the greatest example of genius, pure genius, genius immortal and unavailing. His creative power was shattered into a thousand

fragments by the stress and oppression of [such things.] It is but the shreds of itself. *Disjecta membra*, said Carlyle, are what we have of any poet, or of any man. Of no poet or man is this truer than of Shakespeare.

He stands before us, melancholy, witty, at times half insane, never losing his hold on the objective world, ever knowing what he wants, dreaming ever higher purposes and impossible greatnesses, and waking ever to mean ends and low triumphs. This,

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this was his great experience of life; for there is no great experience of life that is not, finally, the calm experience of disillusion.²²

Pessoa believed that Shakespeare’s two long narrative poems were “highly imperfect as narrative wholes, and that is the beginning of his secret.”²³ He was certain that Shakespeare was unappreciated during his lifetime, mainly because he was ahead of his time, or, as Pessoa put it, “above his age.”²⁴ Shakespeare’s awareness of his unappreciation, coupled with appreciation shown to lesser writers and Shakespeare’s “knowing himself (for this he must have done) the greatest genius of his age,” must have shaken or destroyed his vanity and brought about depression. And yet, Pessoa concludes, Shakespeare was able to rise above depression by continuing to write, and in so doing Pessoa sees

Shakespeare grappling with the spectre of insanity:

Depression leads to inaction: the writing of plays is, however, action. It may have been born of three things: (1) the need to write them – the practical need, we mean; (2) the recuperative power of a temperament not organically (only) depressed, reacting in the intervals of depression against depression itself; (3) the stress of extreme suffering – not depression, but suffering – acting like a lash on a cowering sadness, driving it into expression as into a lair, into objectivity as into an outlet from self, for, as Goethe said, “Action consoles of all.”

... The need to write these plays shows in the intensity and bitterness of the phrases that voice depression – not quiet, half-peaceful, and somewhat indifferent, as in *The Tempest*, but restless, somber, dully forceful. Nothing depresses more than the necessity to act when there is no desire to act. The recuperative power of the temperament, the great boon to Shakespeare’s hysteria, shows in the fact that there is no lowering, but a heightening, of his genius. The part of that due to natural growth need not and cannot be denied. But the overcuriousness of expression, the overintelligence that sometimes dulls the edge of dramatic intuition (as in Laertes’ phrases before mad Ophelia) cannot be explained on that line, because these are not peculiarities [in the] growth of genius but [are] more natural to its youth than to its virile age. They are patently the effort of the intellect to crush out emotion, to cover depression, to oust preoccupation of distress by preoccupation of thought. But the lash of outward mischance (no one can now say what, or how brought about, and to what degree by the man himself) is very evident in the constant choice of abnormal mental states for the basis of these tragedies. Only the dramatic mind wincing under the strain of outer evil thus projects itself instinctively into figures which must utter wholly the derangement that is partly its own.²⁵

Has anyone come closer, in just two paragraphs, to getting inside the mind of the man who was Shakespeare?

To be sure, much of what Pessoa saw in Shakespeare—or projected onto Shake-

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What's in a Nym (Continued from page 19) speare—was exhibited in Pessoa himself. Pessoa described himself as a “neuras-thenic hysteric,” questioned his own sanity, and certainly felt unappreciated. He was ahead of his time—only in recent years has his talent come to be recognized widely.²⁶

What is significant is that this extraordinary insight into the mind of Shakespeare comes not from a critic, an academic or a historian, but from a person with remarkably similar creative impulses and talents. Even more significant is that this writer used self-created distinctive personalities – heteronyms – to channel his creative powers. For Pessoa to create fully, he had to lose himself fully within his heteronyms.

And just perhaps, so did Edward de Vere. Though we have seen that there were eminently pragmatic reasons for de Vere to use the Shakespeare pseudonym – to avoid shame and embarrassment while maintaining some control over the publication process – perhaps there were purely artistic reasons as well. Perhaps the existence of the Shakespeare pseudonym freed de Vere to be someone who was not himself. As Pessoa put it, “To feign is to know oneself.”²⁷

Editor's Note:

Always Astonished: Selected Prose by Fernando Pessoa is an introductory collection of Fernando Pessoa's prose work (including his fascinating essay, “On Shakespeare”) that is available from the Fellowship. See the ad on page 28.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Alex McNeil, *Total Television* (4th ed., Penguin, 1996), 788.
- ² Kevin Jackson, *Invisible Forms: Literary Curiosities* (Macmillan, 1999), 18.
- ³ For example, Jeff Corey did not appear in a movie between 1951 and 1963, and became a well-respected acting teacher during the forced hiatus. Lionel Stander also had no film credits between 1951 and 1963; he moved to New York and became a successful stockbroker. Patrick McGilligan & Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (St. Martin's Press, 1997), at 177-198, 607-625.
- ⁴ See generally *Tender Comrades*, op.cit. For example, blacklisted writer John Berry recalled revising another writer's script, but leaving out the characters' names in the revision; the first writer merely added them back in to get the credit. Id. at 71. Writer Ernest Kinoy served as the “front” for

blacklisted writer Millard Lampell while both wrote for the 1954 TV series *The Marriage*. Id. at 398. Blacklisted writer Robert Lees wrote scripts for *Lassie* using as a front a non-writer friend, Seymour Kern, and letting the front keep ten per cent of the fees. Kern backed out after a year because he “couldn't take being complimented by his family and friends for work he didn't do.” Lees then coined a pseudonym, J. E. Selby. Id. at 436-437.

- ⁵ *Invisible Forms*, op. cit., 29-31.
- ⁶ Id. at 41-42.
- ⁷ Id. at 38.
- ⁸ Richard Zenith (ed. & trans.), *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa* (Grove Press, 2001), 3. A fourth heteronym, Antonio Mora, was a “philosophical follower” of Caero, though not a poet, and Pessoa foresaw a fifth (unnamed) heteronymic philosopher who would write “an apology for paganism based on entirely different arguments.” Ibid.
- ⁹ Id. at 256. A slightly different translation may be found in Edwin Honig (ed. & trans.), *Always Astonished: Selected Prose by Fernando Pessoa* (City Lights Books, 1988), 9-10. Some Pessoa scholars doubt Pessoa's account. See <http://home.earthlink.net/kunos/Pessoa/interview.html>, where translator Chris Daniels observes, “That's the myth he propagated. You have to take Pessoa's statements about the genesis of heteronymy with a grain of salt. He prevaricated a lot.”
- ¹⁰ Honig at 10-11, 23.
- ¹¹ Zenith at 2.
- ¹² Honig at 8.
- ¹³ Zenith at xiv.
- ¹⁴ Honig at v.
- ¹⁵ Pessoa lamented that he hated to begin a new work, and, having begun, hated to finish it. Honig at vii.
- ¹⁶ In an essay dated 1910, Pessoa refers to “the ‘Shakespeare Problem,’” but does not explain further. In another writing he used the term “anti-Stratfordians,” but the context does not seem concerned with the authorship question. See Honig at 4 & 46.
- ¹⁷ Zenith at 335-336.
- ¹⁸ Honig at 65-66.
- ¹⁹ Zenith at 215.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ He also believed that Shakespeare was of frail constitution and deficient vitality, but not unhealthy. Honig at 56.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Id. at 57.
- ²⁴ Id. at 59.
- ²⁵ Id. at 62-63.
- ²⁶ Though Pessoa is hardly a household name in English speaking countries, he is idolized in Portugal. Harold Bloom cites him as “one of the twenty-six authors essential to the Western canon.” Jackson, op. cit. at 41.
- ²⁷ Honig at 124.

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