

*'Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man'.*

Do male pseudonyms represent repression or liberation when used by female writers? You should discuss at least two writers in your answer.

This year marks 25 years since the birth of the Women's Prize for Fiction. To celebrate this milestone, the organisation launched the catchily-named 'Reclaim Her Name' campaign which, and I quote, was created to 'honour... [female writers'] achievements and give them the credit they deserve'.<sup>1</sup> All too often, leaders of the campaign claim, female authors have been forced to hide their accomplishments behind an assumed name, publishing under male pseudonyms and thus concealing their gender from readers. So, armed with good intentions and a list of 25 such writers, they set about trying to put things to rights, reissuing books with their authors' real names on the cover. The issue was a seemingly clear-cut one: very few people, one hopes, would dispute the fact that women deserve full recognition for their writings. Why, then, did the campaign spark such outcry? For spark outcry it did; Catherine Taylor of the *Times Literary Supplement* described the initiative as embodying a 'one-size-fits-all approach [that] overlooks the complexities of publishing history, in which pseudonyms aren't always about conforming to patriarchal or other obvious standards'.<sup>2</sup> It is this response that gets to the crux of my essay's subject matter: the topic of male pseudonyms is a nuanced one, for each example is wholly individual, and it would be foolish to assume that every female writer who has taken a *nom de plume* has done so as a way of succumbing to patriarchal pressure. That said, there are very few cases in which taking a male pseudonym has been representative of true liberation for, whilst the act itself might be an empowering way of exercising agency, it has still been made necessary by oppressive societal structures.

Before grappling with more complex matters, it is important to come to terms with the reason most commonly cited for the use of male pen names: namely, in eschewing their feminine identity, writers open up their novels to a wider audience. Such was the case with the likes of the Brontë sisters; in an 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë explained the decision she and her siblings had made to publish their works under the names Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, writing that it had been 'dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine' on the basis that they 'had a vague impression that

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<sup>1</sup> "Reclaim Her Name." *Women's Prize for Fiction*, 13 Aug. 2020, [www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/reading-room/for-readers/reclaim-her-name](http://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/reading-room/for-readers/reclaim-her-name).

<sup>2</sup> "The Story of a New Name - Essay - Literary Criticism." *TLS*, [www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-story-of-a-new-name/](http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/the-story-of-a-new-name/).

authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice'.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, however, that this trend has transcended the barriers of time; contemporary authors such as J.K. Rowling and E.L. James are still subject to editorial recommendations to mask their gender. In an interview with Christiane Amanpour, Rowling was asked to explain the rationale behind concealing her first name. Her reply made it clear that literary gender bias has, regrettably, not been left behind in the nineteenth century: "My publisher, who published Harry Potter, they said to me, we think this is a book that will appeal to boys and girls. And I said, oh, great. And they said, so could we use your initials? Because, basically they were trying to disguise my gender."<sup>4</sup> It would be futile to deny that such decisions have paid off. Jane Austen, of course, never veiled her femininity; indeed, the covers of her books were proudly emblazoned with the words 'By a Lady'. Whilst, nowadays, her name resides alongside the Brontë sisters' in the metaphorical literary hall of fame, she indubitably felt the financial effects of this decision. Austen published four novels in her lifetime, which made her a total of £613.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, it is estimated that Charlotte Brontë made nearly this amount from *Jane Eyre* alone and, as both novelists' incomes were made from selling the copyrights to their works, we can safely assume that publishers were willing to spend significantly more on books with a male name on their cover.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps, then, the adoption of male pseudonyms constitutes a gateway to financial independence for female novelists – in this way, surely, it is a form of emancipation. Not so. For how can the fact that female authors have been forced to resort to hiding their gender to achieve literary success be dubbed a 'liberation'? In such instances, it seems obvious that the assumption of male pseudonyms is not an active choice, but rather one necessitated by repression and systemic gender inequality.

Of course, this theory cannot be applied to every example; there are some women who, at least at surface level, appear to have taken pen names as a way of exerting personal power. Their decision was not forced by any editorial pressure. For why is 'George Eliot' still a name oft-banded around secondary school classrooms? Such is not the case for 'Currer Bell'; nor 'Isak Dinesen' – these pseudonyms have been worn away by time. The answer is simple: Eliot relished her pseudonym in a way the Brontës did not. The same pen that gave us *Middlemarch* committed to paper a

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<sup>3</sup> Brontë Emily, *Wuthering Heights*. W. W. Norton, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Amanpour, Christiane. "J.K. Rowling Wrote a Secret Manuscript on a Party Dress." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 10 July 2017, [edition.cnn.com/2017/07/10/world/amanpour-j-k-rowling-interview/index.html](http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/10/world/amanpour-j-k-rowling-interview/index.html).

<sup>5</sup> BankUnderground. "Jane Austen's Income: Insights from the Bank of England Archives." *Bank Underground*, 31 July 2019, [bankunderground.co.uk/2019/08/02/jane-austens-income-insights-from-the-bank-of-england-archives/](http://bankunderground.co.uk/2019/08/02/jane-austens-income-insights-from-the-bank-of-england-archives/).

<sup>6</sup> Gaskell Elizabeth, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Green World Classics, 2019.

desire to be indefinitely masked by a pseudonym: in a letter to James AH Murray in 1879, Mary Ann Evans wrote, 'I wish always to be quoted as George Eliot'.<sup>7</sup> The irony of that sentence aside, it is fascinating that she has managed to posthumously cling to the name she held so dear. Further writings of hers detail more specific reasoning: she believed that 'a *nom de plume* secures all the advantages [of writing] without the disagreeables of reputation'. In accordance with his long-term partner, George Lewes is quoted as saying that 'the object of anonymity was to get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman'.<sup>8</sup> In Eliot's case, then, her pseudonym was not just a veil with which to obscure her gender, but also an escape from the scandal that plagued her personal life. As Mary Ann Evans, she was known as a woman who had embarked on several dalliances with married men; a social outcast. As George Eliot, however, she was not subject to gossip; she was able to live a life completely divorced from her own, unbridled by societal disapproval. In this respect, it is easy to see how the adoption of a pseudonym proved freeing. Perhaps, though, the choice was not as straightforwardly empowering as it appears at first glance. If this is a liberation, it is an assuredly feeble one, for how many male authors' careers have survived – perhaps even been bolstered by – a salacious personal history? From Lord Byron to F. Scott Fitzgerald, the list is a lengthy one, and to enumerate it would surely lead to an overflow in the word count of this essay. It was not Eliot's reputation as a scandalous figure, but rather that as a scandalous *woman*, that forced her to masquerade as a man. As before, male pen names seem to repress rather than unshackle; as before, they are forced upon women rather than adopted voluntarily.

Virginia Woolf, whose ponderings form the basis for this entire question, was also interested in muddying gender divisions: in her *Orlando*, characters flit between male and female with as much ease as these women who write under a man's name. She explores the subject of pseudonyms more specifically in *A Room of One's Own*, opining that it was a 'relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century'.<sup>9</sup> The link between chastity and anonymity is a fascinating one, for it operates on many levels. Physically, both concepts are associated with the obscuring of the female face: just as someone concealing their identity dons a veil, so does the traditionally 'untouched' bride on her wedding day. As Woolf posits, the two often go hand in hand, and both are maintained by the taking of a male pseudonym. In publishing under a man's name, she muses, writers 'did homage to the convention... that publicity in women is

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<sup>7</sup> Eliot, George, and Gordon S. Haight. *The George Eliot Letters*. Yale University Press, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Ciuraru, Carmela. *Nom De Plume: a (Secret) History of Pseudonyms*. Harper Perennial, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Penguin Books, 2004.

detestable'.<sup>10</sup> Again, it seems that male pseudonyms are neither adopted freely nor freeing to adopt; women have been bound to them by the notional fetters of propriety.

It is, of course, worth examining the writings of the women themselves, for their attitudes towards self-identity and patriarchal pressure are very telling. The fact that *Jane Eyre*, a novel written by a woman whose name was hidden from her readers, places so much emphasis on identity and independence has fascinated critics for centuries – indeed, Janet Freeman has written that the phrase “I am Jane Eyre” is said so often in this novel it comes to resemble a refrain'.<sup>11</sup> Jane herself takes a pseudonym during her sojourn at Moor House: in order to mask her identity from the Rivers family, she introduces herself as ‘Jane Elliott’. Brontë’s presentation of this action is striking: she does not glorify Jane’s adoption of a false name – far from it. She presents it, rather, as a hindrance, and it is only after Jane reveals her true identity that she is able to come into her inheritance: “Briggs wrote to me of a Jane Eyre,” St John Rivers says to her; “the advertisements demanded a Jane Eyre: I knew a Jane Elliott. [...] You own the name and renounce the alias?”<sup>12</sup> In *Jane Eyre*, disguise become a byword for confusion – Rochester’s gypsy costume causes nothing but tension; Jane’s assumed name is counterproductive in her journey towards financial independence. How interesting, then, that Charlotte Brontë herself was writing under a kind of disguise. Could her negative presentation of all things concealment-related be indicative of the fact that she herself longed to be freed from the mask of ‘Currer Bell’? Consciously or otherwise, Brontë seems to have allowed some of her discomfort with her pen name to leak into her writings. So too does her anger at patriarchal oppression permeate her *magnum opus*: in her 2012 introduction to *Jane Eyre*, Welsh novelist Stevie Davies described the book as ‘a burning testament of impermissible rage’.<sup>13</sup> Jane is engaged in a constant struggle against the patriarchy; she hits the bullying John Reed, despises Mr Brocklehurst and, during a heated proposal scene, delivers to Rochester her famous line: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you.”<sup>14</sup> This feature is common to the works of several pseudonym-ed authors: George Sand’s *Indiana*, for example, boasts a similarly defiant protagonist, who says to her austere husband, “You can tie my body, bind my hands, govern my actions. You have the right of the strongest, and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Freeman, Janet H. “Speech and Silence in Jane Eyre.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Books, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

society confirms it to you; but on my will, sir, you can do nothing, God alone can bend and reduce it.”<sup>15</sup> Clearly, proto-feminism is not a trend exclusive to female authors with pen names, but one cannot avoid the fact that many of them have written extensively on the subject. In so much as authors’ writing provides insight into their personal sentiments, the preoccupation with male subjugation in both novels betrays strong female anger on the parts of their writers. This, too, indicates that, in taking a pseudonym, women are in some way oppressed: perhaps, unable to free themselves from societal repression, Brontë and Sand found freedom in their quills, penning fictional tirades against patriarchal power and thereby living vicariously through their free-willed protagonists.

To conclude, whilst the Women’s Prize for Fiction’s ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ did not do justice to the numerous layers on which this question operates, it is fair to say that, on the whole, male pseudonyms *do* represent repression when used by female writers. There are, of course, notable exceptions. Some critics have written about the assumption of a pen name as a form of refashioning – as Michal Ginsburg puts it, “The author who chooses to use a pseudonym wants to upset the "normal" relationship according to which he is the "father" of his works; he wants to be himself an offspring of his own imagination.”<sup>16</sup> The Bloomsbury group’s Violet Paget, now better known by her pseudonym Vernon Lee, was one such author: she used an assumed name in order to make her sexuality more ambiguous – clearly, this cannot be classified as a repression, for it allowed Lee to embark upon a road of self-exploration with greater ease. On the flip side, many female authors have been faced with a choice between taking a pseudonym and relinquishing all chances of a successful career. J.K. Rowling masked her gender so young boys would not be put off her novels; Charlotte Brontë did so because she felt that her audience was prejudiced against female authors; George Eliot faced so much shame for her love life that she was forced to retreat into anonymity. Whilst, in such cases, the adoption of a male name served to ease a woman’s journey to literary fame, it is still not a form of emancipation, for it was made necessary by societal repression. It is not a liberation, but a levelling: it does not set women free in any way; merely reduces the inequality that they are subjected to at every turn in their careers. The fact that they are forced to take on a male persona in order to make money and avoid scandal is clear evidence of the double standards that have pervaded society for centuries, and cannot represent anything other than systemic misogyny. This is not to say that all women should be stripped of their pseudonyms, merely that it is regrettable that their existence is necessary in the first place.

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<sup>15</sup> Sand, George. *Indiana*. Gallimard. 2020. N.B. translation into English is my own.

<sup>16</sup> Ginsburg, Michal Peled. “Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: Middlemarch and the Problem of Authorship.” *ELH*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1980.

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