Instructor: Robert Griffin  
Course: 481.904  
Title: Anonymity and Authorship

Description: Publishing one’s book anonymously was once a standard choice for the literary field from the introduction of print technology up through the late nineteenth century. For example, 80% of all novels published 1750-1830, the classic period of the rise of the novel as a modern genre, were published anonymously. What has been forgotten, or simply neglected as a significant fact, is that nearly all of the famous pre-1900 authors in our current canon originally published at least some of their works (if not all, such as Jane Austen) without their name on the title page.

This course claims that the history of authorship, is incomplete without an understanding of the history of anonymity as a literary and cultural practice. The importance assigned to anonymity within the culture can be gauged by John Wilkes in the 1760s fighting a duel rather than divulge his authorship of a controversial pamphlet, and by George Eliot in the 1860s charging that a person who exposed her as the author of a pseudonymous novel without her permission was the equivalent of a thief who breaks into one’s home. We will take into account the various motives of anonymity, as well the legal history of statutes regulating print, such as those defining copyright, seditious libel, obscenity and blasphemy.

Proposed Readings: Works originally published anonymously or pseudonymously; may include works by Defoe, Swift, Wilkes, Walter Scott, Austen, Eliot, James Weldon Johnson, Elana Ferrante, and 20th-century fake ethnic autobiographies.