

# *ANON*

## **The Myth Behind The Legend**

© 1983 by Donald E. Simanek

Few literary puzzles have inspired such universal apathy as the question: "Who was Anon?" Books of quotations are cluttered with sayings attributed to Anon, and these scraps of truth and wisdom have earned Anon universal recognition and immortality. Innumerable biographies have been written about lesser authors, even authors so obscure that their works are seldom read. But Anon, though widely read and widely quoted, has been accorded only widespread indifference by the literary community.

Even the most astute literary scholar would be perplexed if asked to identify the central themes of Anon's work. If a historian were asked how Anon's work was influenced by the culture and events of his times, he would be at a total loss for a sensible answer.

So complete has been the scholarly neglect of Anon that his name has become a synonym for "unknown." In spite of this, his works have stood the test of time, and he continues to be one of the most often quoted authors. (Ibid may be more frequently cited, but his works were derivative.)

What little we know of Anon's life is of doubtful validity. We have no authentic picture of Anon, nor any first hand description of him by anyone who would admit to having known him. Not one scrap of original manuscript in his own hand has survived the ravages of time. Scholars have given up hope of ever discovering an autobiography of Anon in some dusty attic.

Yet, from the available dearth of evidence, we can piece together a sketch (albeit apocryphal) of this prolific genius. We know that Anon's wisdom appeared very early in history. When references to him are traced backward in time, in



**Anon, the Greek.  
(Artist's conception  
based on various  
unreliable sources.**

the general direction towards the emergence of civilization, they lead us to a blank wall. This suggests that Anon must be placed in historical times so ancient as to predate the emergence of intelligent thought. He was certainly ahead of his time, which may be the reason why none of his contemporaries knew of him.

If that argument seems specious, consider this independent and equally convincing evidence which leads to the same conclusion. Anon's work was considered immortal in all historical ages, and it is generally quite difficult for an author to achieve immortality in his own time.

Perhaps Anon inspired an ancient "school" of thinkers who later traveled far and wide disseminating his ideas. This may be true. Nobody knows. But then, he would, since Nobody knew Anon personally. Indeed, Nobody knew a lot of things which baffled everyone else. But the hypothesis that Nobody was a pupil of Anon is dubious, if true.

The historical problem is compounded by the timeless quality of Anon's work. His wisdom seems too old-fashioned for modern times, yet too advanced for ancient times. Either Anon was in the habit of living in the past, or anticipating the future. If so, it follows that he was probably neglected and unappreciated in his own age, and that could explain a lot.

Leaving these irrelevant questions aside, let us look at Anon's career. It can be divided into three distinct phases: the first, the second, and the third. That leaves only the problem of deciding into which phase to place each of Anon's works. This is especially troublesome for his posthumous works. Since we have no idea when Anon died, it's even a bit difficult to determine which of his works were posthumous.

We might at least hope to extract Anon's philosophy from those fragments of his genius which have trickled down to us through the sieve of history. It is a vain hope. While Anon wrote (or perhaps spoke) on many subjects, he had the infuriating habit of speaking on every side of every question. No consistent pattern emerges, but this is itself consistent with Anon's own observation that "Consistency is the curse of small minds." On yet another occasion he said, "Sticking consistently to any one position sooner or later leads to logical difficulties." Perhaps Anon merely wanted to ensure that all sides of every question be heard. Yet he expressed reservations about this approach, saying, "One who can see both sides of a question doesn't understand the question." Such remarks strongly suggest that Anon may be the true father of the disciplines of logic and philosophy.

To achieve a true appreciation of Anon's work we must first recognize that the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent or implied in his work do, in fact, represent the central, unifying theme of his philosophy.

Anon's fragmentary output has become so diffused throughout many cultures that it is nearly impossible to specify his country of origin. Some have suggested that Anon was German, his full name being Till Anon--a ridiculous notion at best. Another improbable theory has it that Anon was Spanish with a German surname: Anon y' Maus. Or could this be a nickname describing Anon's timidity: "Anon, the mouse"?

One historian even goes so far as to suggest that all of Anon's works are forgeries of recent (19th century) origin, perpetrated by author Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) writing under the pseudonym: E. M. Anon. When this name is read backwards it is seen to be an anagram of the kind Carroll loved to devise. This outrageous theory deserves to be rejected on its merits.

Lest we be overawed by Anon's versatility, we should look at what he didn't do, for that demonstrates his discrimination and good taste. He never wrote an epic poem, a play, or an opera. He never wrote a best selling work of fiction, never wrote a textbook, and never edited an anthology. He left such enterprises to hacks and lesser intellects.

No painting or drawing bears the signature "Anon." No sculpture has "Anon" chiseled on its base. If he ever tried his hand at art, he apparently never signed his works.

For all of his output of serious sagacity, homely homilies, and profound pronouncements, Anon had a lighter side. In fact his output of jokes far exceeded the rest of his literary work. It is true that many of these jokes are off-color, but that has only enhanced their popularity. They are remembered and quoted verbatim by people who couldn't recite one line of "The Ancient Mariner." Anon knew that art is of no value without an audience, or as he put it so well, "'Tis better to be obscene than unheard."



**Anon, from an old print  
of questionable authenticity.**

So, a picture of Anon emerges: a witty, slightly cynical, philosopher of the people. He could sum up the essence of an idea in one pithy sentence. Though many others plagiarized his works, he never complained. He must have cared little for money, for there is no record that he was ever paid for any of his work.

Anon demonstrated that the best way to achieve recognition is by not seeking it. He was unconcerned about the judgment of posterity, for he said, "Be not obligated to posterity. What has posterity ever done for you? The critical judgment of posterity comes too late to be useful."

Of course any conclusions about Anon, the man, might have to be modified if it were shown that Anon was a woman. The true sex of Anon may be a matter of dispute among scholars, yet we have no reason to believe that Anon ever had the slightest concern about this question.

As usual, Anon had the first word on such speculations when he (or she) said, "Nothing stimulates outrageous theories so effectively as an absence of evidence."

---

## **APPENDIX: SCHOLARLY NOTES**

1. The name "Anon" is virtually unknown in any language, which suggests that Anon had no descendants. Perhaps Anon's family suffered from hereditary infertility. It's a well-known biological fact that if your parents had no children, it's very likely that you won't either.
2. Recently Anon's works have been subjected to stylistic analysis with the aid of a computer. The tentative conclusion is that Anon plagiarized all of his works from others.
3. Those who fault Anon's style should remember that his sayings would probably sound better in Anon's native tongue, if we only knew what language that was.
4. We may safely assume that Anon never had the advantage of higher education, for no Ph.D. thesis bears his name.



5. Though Anon's life is shrouded in obscurity, his works have far greater merit than those of authors whose meaning is shrouded in obscurity.

*This document first appeared in **The Vector**, 7, 2 (May 1983).*

---

This material is © 2001 by [The Institute of Physics Publishing](#) and appears in the forthcoming book of science humor by Donald E. Simanek and John C. Holden, *Science Askew*,