Literary Collaboration in Late Victorian Britain

Tutor: Prof.ssa Lia Simonetta Guerra
      Dott.ssa Silvia Granata

Tesi di:

Annachiara Cozzi
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Collaboration marks the revolution that turns two people into one writer.

Violet Powell
Introduction

The last decades of the nineteenth century were disparagingly called by Conrad “the age of Besants, Authors’ Club and Literary Agent.” (Conrad 2015, 152-53) That a now-universally-forgotten writer like Walter Besant should have been summoned by a now-universally-celebrated writer like Joseph Conrad to personify a whole historical moment sounds ironic. And yet Besant did personify, in a sense, that moment. By the end of the Victorian age, his name had come to represent the new professional and popular understanding of literature. He had founded the first association of authors, and had been one of the first promoters of the literary agent as an indispensable figure for the professional writer – all signs that the profession of letters had changed, and that it had done so in a direction that an elitist like Conrad did not like at all. Interestingly, Besant had begun his ascent to the top of literary fame as a coauthor of novels during the 1870s; he and his collaborator, James Rice, were perhaps the most famous literary partnership of the time (though Rice, maybe due to his untimely death, received much less attention). Coauthorship was the means that had first given Besant fame and money. It had been his stepping stone, and he, in turn, had made the practice fashionable, so much so that in the 1880s and especially the 1890s virtually all popular novelists had tried their hands at it. In point of fact, literary collaboration and popular literature were strictly interwoven in that period. For this reason, before plunging into a discussion of coauthorship in late Victorian Britain, it seems apt to take a brief look at the literary market of the time – precisely, at the popular literary market – in order to sketch the context within which coauthors lived and wrote.

“A noisy, pushing, self-advertising trade;” the literary field, 1870-1900

Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the market; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income. (George Gissing, New Grub Street, 1891, 2016, 8)

This is how Jasper Milvain, Gissing’s fictional personification of the successful “literary man of 1882,” (Gissing 2016, 8) presents the marketplace at the end of the Victorian era. By the 1880s, the literary profession presented a crowded scene indeed. The series of Education Acts which were passed between 1870 and 1891 gradually led to a free, universal and compulsory elementary education, creating “a new culturally aspiring mass readership.” (McDonald 1997, 7) All through the nineteenth century, “the reading public had been widening, outwards and downwards through all
levels of society.” (Saunders 1964, 197) But educational initiatives coincided with wider changes in Victorian society.1

Firstly, population had been steadily growing: in 1801 population in Britain was 10,500,000; by 1901 the figure had more than trebled to 37,000,000. This is sufficient explanation for the steady increase in book production throughout the century, allowing for a reasonably proportional increase in the number of people who were by class and tradition educated and literate, without even counting the newly educated part of the population. Between 1816 and 1851, the number of new books published each year averaged about 1,250; in the course of about one hundred years, by 1913, the figure had risen, steadily and persistently, to 9,541. (Saunders 1964, 199-202) Then, one has to take into consideration the rise of the lower middle classes, the professional advancement of women, and the advent of the New Journalism. Furthermore, rapid technological progress in printing allowed for cheaper and faster methods of mass production. All this prompted an unprecedented expansion of the literary market. Literature became a commodity, and consequently the act of writing started to be redefined. “The professionalization of authorship during this period of time,” observes Ashton (2003, 2) “transformed and expanded the ways in which a writer could practice and conceptualize his or her work.” For the first time in history the writing of fiction “did not differ radically from any other form of commercial or industrial production.” (Bergonzi 1985, 9) In 1890, the Fortnightly Review published an essay entitled “Literature Then and Now,” penned by Mrs. Lynn Linton, who bitterly complained that “[literature] which was once a grave and honourable profession has now degenerated into a noisy, pushing, self-advertising trade.” (qtd. in Waller 2008, 328)

George Gissing apparently thought the same. New Grub Street, written at breakneck speed in the autumn of 1890 and published in 1891 while its author was in desperate need of money (Mullin 2016, xi), offers a faithful portrait of the literary microcosm of the last decades of the Victorian era. The title of the novel refers to Samuel Johnson’s picture of the disreputable London neighbourhood, where the concentration of publishing houses and garret lodgings drew a fleet of impoverished literary hacks.2 In the 1830s, Grub Street was gentrified and renamed Milton Street. Gissing’s choice of entitling his portrayal of London modern literary life ‘New Grub Street’ is evocative. The novel depicts the conflict of values that late-nineteenth-century writers had to face: when entering the profession of letters, one had to choose between being a ‘purist’ or a ‘profiteer,’ if we are to apply

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1 See also Patrick Brantlinger’s work on the Victorian reading public (The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction, 1988), and Kate Flint’s specific treatment of female readership (The Woman Reader 1937-1914, 1993).
2 Samuel Johnson’s An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage (1744) is a biography of the renegade poet and murderer and presents a graphic account of the trials of literary life in Grub Street. See Rogers 1972, 363-69.
the terminology proposed by McDonald. (1997, 14) The novel revolves around two authors: the already mentioned Jasper Milvain, and Edwin Reardon. The latter represents the purist, for whom the literary field existed in and for itself; trying to make a living for himself and his family out of literature, Reardon attempts to write what the market requires while desperately preserving some vestige of literary integrity. He struggles to produce what is “good enough for the market,” (Gissing 2016, 44) but never good enough for him. In trying to meet the demands of the three-volume novel convention,° Reardon forces his exhausted imagination; his failure culminates in a nervous breakdown and his subsequent disgust for the literary profession, leading him to prefer a job as a clerk to any further literary effort. His opposite is the energetic and ambitious Milvain, “Jasper of the facile pen,” (Gissing 2016, 403), the profiteer, for whom the literary field is an instrument for achieving purposes not directly connected to literature (financial security, social status, fame). Milvain accurately tailors his writing to meet the tastes of the greatest number of readers, and he embodies the new, exploitative view of the literary profession. Unlike Reardon, whom he calls “the unpractical artist,” (8) Milvain defines himself as a man of business, “however seedy.” (9) Since “writing is a business,” (12) Jasper sets out to “supply the mob with the food it likes,” (13) that is, “good, coarse, marketable stuff for the world’s vulgar.” (12) He knows he turns out mainly “commonplace stuff,” (13) and that he will never “do anything of solid literary value.” (66-67) His aim is to use his wits to write “so many pages a day,” (12) in order to earn as much money as he can. His wish to “produce novels out-trashing the trashiest that ever sold fifty-thousand copies,” (13) speaks volumes: “I shall always despise the people I write for. But my path will be that of success.” (67)

Around Reardon and Milvain other figures move, each embodying a different way to live the life of letters: Alfred Yule, a struggling and embittered middle-aged scholar, who ends up poor and blind, with his daughter forced to sacrifice youth and happiness to support him; Biffen, who, even more than Reardon, represents gentle and old-fashioned integrity, fighting for a noble ideal of literature, and who toils at a novel he knows will have no success before serenely committing suicide; and Whelpdale, a failed writer who in the course of the narrative becomes a well-off entrepreneur: being unable to write successful books, Whelpdale starts working as a ‘literary adviser,’ giving advice to aspiring novelists on the choice of subjects, reading manuscripts, and writing recommendation letters

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3 Publishers usually required the three-volume format so that they could sell the first edition to the circulating libraries (the most important were Mudie’s and W.H. Smith), which in return demanded the fixing of the price for first editions at 31s. 6d. This price, being exorbitant, was prohibitive to most readers, so that they would borrow the volumes from the circulating libraries (the annual subscription was 1 guinea). The three-decker format remained dominant well into the 1890s. (Mullin 2016, xiv; Bergonzi 1985, 23-4).
to publishers. As the business flourishes, he sets up an agency. He also writes an ‘Author’s Guide’ in which he proposes to teach how to write a novel in ten lessons: ‘how-to’ guides to the literary marketplace sold splendidly in the later decades of the century. For instance, Jay Way’s Adam and Eve’s Courtship, or How to Write a Novel (London: Tinsley, 1877) and Edgar Foster’s How to Write a Novel, by a Novelist (London: Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1887) both went into multiple editions. Walter Besant’s The Pen and The Book (London: Thomas Burleigh, 1899) – at which I will look closer in chapter two – was also a practical guide to the young author of novels. Whelpdale’s social and financial success becomes complete when he manages to establish a paper, called Chit-Chat, addressed to “the quarter-educated:”

the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention. People of this kind want something to occupy them in trains and on buses and trams. […] [W]hat they want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information – bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes, bits of statistics, bits of foolery. […] Everything must be very short, two inches at the utmost; their attention can’t sustain itself beyond two inches. Even chat is too solid for them: they want chit-chat. (Gissing 2016, 407-408)

At the end of the novel, Whelpdale and Milvain achieve economic stability, social recognition, and love (significantly, Milvain marries Reardon’s ex-wife), while Reardon, Biffen and Yule all die hopeless and poor.

Though fictional, Gissing’s story convincingly represented real life. Edwin Reardon’s moral struggle echoes Arnold Bennet’s – with different results, however. Bennet passed to the ‘dark side’ of literature in 1898, when he decided to take up fiction-writing for a living, abandoning his place as editor of a magazine. Since sensation fiction was the kind of literature that sold, Bennet, although reluctantly, turned to it: “[t]o write popular fiction is offensive for me, but is far more agreeable than being tied daily to an office.” (Bennett 1932-33, 80) Serial fiction was sold and bought just like any other fancy goods, and Bennet came to earn an enviable income. Like Milvain and Reardon, Bennet realised that, in order to live by his profession, he had to make his writing a mechanical, carefully planned activity. Reardon had to stick to a schedule of 4000 words a day; Bergonzi (1985, 10) points out that Gissing wrote New Grub Street in exactly two months, and since the book consists of 220,000 words, he must have been writing at a daily rate similar to that of his fictional character; Bennet noted that he had to write “2,500 words in half a day.” (Bennett 1932-33, 87) Following a schedule of ‘so many words a day’ was one of the points most insisted upon by Besant, and had been preached by Trollope before him, as we will see in detail in chapter two.
Cultural anxieties over the role authors were going to play in the new literary environment became “a recurrent topic of discussion among contemporary commentators.” (McDonald 1997, 7) In 1891, the *National Observer* declared that the true man of letters “writes not for the many-headed monster [the mass reading public]; it is enough for him if he pleases himself and his friends. If once he listens to the voice of the great public, or yield to the tinkling of its shillings, he is a traitor to his art, and henceforth a stranger to literature.” (11 April 1891, p. 528) In the same year, the *Contemporary Review* presented an essay by Edmund Gosse entitled “The Influence of Democracy on Literature.” Gosse gave voice to his anxieties as a renowned poet and man of letters. The essay began by stating that, at the present state of things, there were grounds for “grave apprehension;” the widening of the reading public meant “an increase of persons who, without ear, are admitted to the concert of literature;” publishers “seduced” authors “capable of doing better things” into writing simply “for the sake of money.” (April 1891) Henry James joined Gosse in his anxieties. His satirical story “The Death of the Lion,” first published in the *Yellow Book* in April 1894, described the death of an author, Neil Paraday, who falls victim to a paper called the *Empire* and its interviewers. The following year, the very *Yellow Book* presented an article signed by ‘The Yellow Dwarf’ (probably the literary editor of the paper, Henry Harland, see Beckson 1992, 243) which offered a dismal picture:

> [w]hat is obvious and indisputable is this: that with the dissemination of ignorance through the length and breadth of our island, by means of the Board School, a mighty and terrible change has been wrought in the characters both of the majority of readers and of the majority of writers. The ‘gentleman scholar’ who still flourished when I was young, has sunken into unimportance both as reader and writer. The bagman and the stockbroker’s clerk (and their lady wives and daughters) have usurped his place and his influence as readers; and the pressman has picked up his fallen pen, – the pressman, sir, or the presswoman! (*Yellow Book*, October 1895, p. 128, my emphases)

Women indeed made up an important share of the popular readership. In another essay, “The Tyranny of the Novel,” (1892) Gosse lamented that women, especially young married ones, formed “the main audience of the novelist,” thus leading to a lowering of the literary standards. But what exactly did this ever-present adjective, ‘popular,’ mean? The term is tricky and requires some explanation. McDonald links the emerging popular literature in the late nineteenth century to an entrepreneur in particular, the self-made Manchester publisher George Newnes (1851-1910). The

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4 Interestingly enough, the term ‘traitor,’ here used to refer to commercially successful writers, is often associated to literary collaboration as well, as we will see below.

5 Newnes was the son of a Congregationalist minister. At sixteen, he had embarked on a commercial career as a clerk apprenticed to a London-based haberdashery firm. In 1875 he became the firm’s local branch manager in Manchester. In 1881, however, he set out to try his luck in the publishing business. He invested a large sum of money in a new paper, *Tit-Bits*, and advertised it heavily. For instance, to make it clear that the paper was a suitable reading for everybody, including women, he organised a parade in Newcastle by a group of sandwichmen bearing placard on which was written
periodicals founded by Newnes, *Tit-Bits* (1881, penny weekly), the *Review of Reviews* (1890, monthly, sixpenny), and *The Strand* (1891, monthly, sixpenny) reshaped the literary market. *Tit-Bits from All the Most Interesting Books, Periodicals and Newspapers in the World*, as the full title recited, inaugurated a new class of mass-circulated popular weeklies. Like Gissing’s fictional *Chit-Chat*, *Tit-Bits* offered a scrapbook format, specialised in brief miscellaneous articles, sketches, and stories (often gleaned from other papers) and designed to appeal to commuters. Newnes’s aim was to create a popular paper that was “not dull” but at the same time “respectable:” “nothing that will bore, nothing that will pollute – only that which will brighten, amuse, and instruct.” (advertisement for *Tit-Bits*, 1891, qtd. in McDonald 1997, 146) *Tit-Bits*, and later *The Strand*, “made the established religious monthlies and the more scurrilous working-class weeklies appear outmoded, because they were either too pious, too immoral, or too class-specific for the new homogenous ‘mass culture’ of the 1890s.” (McDonald 1997, 16)

*The Strand* can be taken as an example of what a ‘popular’ magazine and ‘popular’ literature meant at the end of the Victorian age. In January 1891 Newnes, hiring the Cambridge man Herbert Greenough Smith as his literary editor, founded *The Strand* with the goal to produce “a model popular monthly that he hoped would capture the sixpenny market as *Tit-Bits* had the penny weeklies.” (McDonald 1997, 152) The magazine was primarily shaped around the tastes of the suburban middle-class family, which had emerged as the dominant social unit in the course of the Victorian age. The different needs of such a family group determined *The Strand*’s format. Prominent features were illustrations of quality, celebrity series (interviews and portraits), and the serialisation of short stories and novels. During the 1890s each issue – of usually about 50,000 words – normally included forty-five per cent of adult fiction, another forty-five of general articles and features, and the remaining ten per cent of children’s fiction. Scientific articles were also an increasingly regular feature, and the magazine usually had famous authors write on popular science or natural history (like Grant Allen’s contributions on botany). Fiction was *The Strand*’s strong point: its enormous yield of illustrated stories by a vast range of writers, among whom we find Kipling, Conan Doyle, Besant,

“*Tit-Bits*: I like it, my wife likes it, my daughter likes it, my mother likes it.” (McDonald 1997, 146) In 1885, he moved his flourishing enterprise from Manchester to London. At this time, *Tit-Bits* yielded an annual profit of £30,000.

6 However, the *Review of Reviews* was a short venture for Newnes. He co-founded it with W.T. Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*; soon, the different views of the two on what ‘popular literature’ should be (Stead wanted to insert more ‘high’ literary topics, while Newnes opted for light literature) led them to part, with Newnes proceeding to found *The Strand*.

7 For a full discussion of *Tit-Bits* and its impact on late nineteenth-century literary market, see Jackson 2001.

8 The serialisation of Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* stories, with illustrations by Sidney Paget, significantly influenced *The Strand*’s form as well as its cultural and commercial success. The first two series of short stories that appeared in the early 1890s gave Newnes’s magazine its first boom. Detective stories, or stories with scientist-heroes, became a well-established tradition of the magazine. See McDonald 1997, 118-171.
Wells, Clark Russell, Grant Allen, Hall Caine, and Anthony Hope, led the popular literary fashions of the moment. What made ‘popular’ literature so was its capacity to reach virtually everybody: “while displaying some continuity with the tastes of the mid-Victorian class – Dickens, for instance, was a regular Strand topic and standard” – popular literature distanced itself from “what were perceived to be the more morally questionable elements of established working-class culture, the pious austerity of the previous generation’s religious monthlies, and the radicalism of the avant-garde.” (McDonald 1997, 155) A magazine like The Strand and later on its imitators could be easily purchased for sixpence from any newsagent or railway bookstall, or by post thanks to an annual subscription of nine shillings. The price helped: sixpence, spread over a month, was still within the budget of many working-class houses (skilled labourers, clerks, typists, secretaries). The Strand had what can be called a popular readership: even if its intended target was the lower-middle and middle-class family, its readers ranged from the working classes to Queen Victoria (who was also an occasional contributor). (McDonald 1997, 147, 154-156) The Strand had met not only the new reading public – the one created by the 1870 Education Act – but also the ‘older’ public “which had hitherto sought fruitlessly for what it wanted. These ‘two masses’ constituted a market as gloriously dazzling to the commercial instinct as India was to the Lancashire industrialists.” (McDonald 1997, 91)

The Strand’s circulation figures became one of the publishing sensations of the 1890s. Within its first decade, it had reached 350,000 copies each month; a special New York edition was selling 200,000 copies; it also circulated widely in the colonies. (McDonald 1997, 156) Soon a brand new generation of imitators emerged, like the Idler (1892), Pall Mall (1893), and Pearson’s (1896). Imitators of Tit-Bits had made their appearance as well, most importantly Answers (1888) and Pearson’s Weekly (1890), edited by Newnes’s competitors, Alfred Harmsworth and C.A. Pearson, both of whom had started on the Tit-Bits staff in the mid-1880s.

As the literary market expanded (thanks also to the well-established circulating libraries) it created new opportunities for authors, in particular for writers of fiction, which was the form of literature most requested by magazines and publishers. Such an atmosphere “enabled a proliferation of authors of all abilities and types,” (Jamison 2016, 5) as more and more people wanted to be ‘an author.’ Ashton (2003, 2) remarks the sheer increase of “people who could and did identify themselves as ‘writers.’” The development of “the mass labour force of writers” (Ashton 2003, 3) had two key consequences. The first was to create a professional group identity, which led to the establishing of leagues of authors; such associations marked late Victorian writers’ sense of belonging to a professionalised class, and among their main concerns was the legitimisation of the commercial
position of the author. The second consequence, however, was the intensification of the pressure to break from the pack.

A highly competitive literary market could be one of the reasons for the abundance of ‘alliances’ of authors, that is, for the phenomenon of literary collaboration. McDonald’s (1997, 19) observation that “immediate commercial competitors are collaborators in the final analysis” proves true in the case of authors: by competing over the same market, aiming at the same goals, producing more or less similar products, and targeting the same kinds of audience, popular authors were economic rivals but could also be allies following a two-heads-are-better-than-one ethic. Ashton (2003, 18) observes that “the frenetic literary marketplace of the late nineteenth […] century was so complex that it is not at all remarkable that new ways to negotiate such terrain were explored.” In order to cope with the new, fast, and disconcerting cultural, social and financial environment, authors experimented innovative ways. As this study will hopefully show, by forming alliances some writers managed to find their voice, to feel less afraid of ‘the many-headed monster,’ to conquer the marketplace, or simply to profit from the ever hungry-for-novelties public. In any case, the benefits were many.

Whatever the reasons for the proliferation of literary collaborators, this work argues that it is not possible to fully understand the complexity and the intensely composite nature of the late nineteenth-century popular literary culture without acknowledging that, from the 1870s to the turn of the century, the practice of coauthorship constituted a significant feature of the marketplace.
Chapter One: Literary Collaboration – An Overview

Unhealthy alliances

The epigraph seems appropriate to convey the aspiration of the present research. Late Victorian literary collaborators and their outputs are now all dead in the public memory. So dead that most of us have never heard not only of any of their names, but not even of the existence of any such phenomenon. However, literary collaboration\(^9\) appears to have been a remarkably widespread practice in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. Most late-Victorian and Edwardian writers of fiction experimented with coauthorship at least once in their life. R.L. Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Bram Stoker, Henry James, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad – just to mention a few of the most renowned British and American names now studied in regular courses at school – all took part in collaborative ventures. Other popular Victorian writers who have been revalued only lately, like Henry Rider Haggard, Margaret Oliphant and Rhoda Broughton, also experimented with collaboration. Yet, all their collaborative texts have been generally ignored and pushed to the margins, not to mention the vast majority of coauthors: after their death, they have completely plunged into darkness. The fifth volume of *The English Catalogue of Books*, which lists all works published in the United Kingdom in the 1890s (except for private and limited editions), includes an enormous number of collaborative texts.\(^{10}\) Apart from some notable exceptions, they are all out of print, unread, and lost.

The term ‘collaboration’ is itself problematic. It can even sound quite negative. ‘Collaboration’ somehow still suggests the meaning it acquired during the Nazi occupation of France, where to collaborate meant to collude with the enemy. As Laird (2000, 6) points out: “[c]ollaboration has played the villain’s role in modern liberation movements […], and the term ‘collaboration’ has thus become sedimented in a highly political, unstable binary between free individualism and enslaving totalitarianism.” In wartime, “collaborators are traitors who join the enemy.” (Koestenbaum 1989, 8) The word has come to connote moral bankruptcy, treason, stratagems, and suspicious deals.

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\(^9\) As Laird (2000, 269) underlines, in the literary field ‘collaboration’ has become the term most commonly used to refer to coauthorship. In this work, ‘collaboration’ and ‘coauthorship’ will be used as synonyms.

\(^{10}\) Unfortunately, the catalogue omits authors’ full first names, so gender remains hard to determine.
Consequently, literary collaborators bear the stain of the term’s political meaning: “the sense lingers that they, like collaborators in Vichy France, have compromised themselves, have formed new and unhealthy alliances, and have betrayed trusts.” (Koestenbaum 1989, 8) However, while working on Victorian literary collaboration, it became apparent that the idea of collaboration as forming unhealthy alliances is not simply ascribable to Vichy France. It existed much longer before. From a certain time onwards, towards the end of the nineteenth century, literary collaboration was felt to be improper, even harmful, for the respectable man of letters. After a first wave of enthusiasm for the novelty of the practice, when papers and reviews recommended collaboration as a useful tool for young authors, Victorian imagination increasingly degraded it to an inferior and aberrant practice. “Collaborative works are promiscuous and unnatural,” notes Koestenbaum. (1989, 1) Indeed, coauthored texts have been frequently perceived so. Koestenbaum goes on reflecting that

[Like bastards in King Lear, these mongrel texts come from no centered position in a moral universe; they evoke uncertainty and condescension in a reader who demands to know at all moments a sentence’s source. Who, however, parses so puritanically? Most readers will be content to regard these texts as curiosities. (1989, 1)]

Dever (1995, 68) observes that collaboration has often been relegated to the ranks of the creative freak show: the collaborator was “the two-headed author.” Like anonymity, collaboration has usually been apprehended as an enigma. The question most frequently raised by it has been ‘which hand held the pen?’ – in other words, ‘who wrote what?’ The curiosity to sort out individual responsibilities in a coauthored text seems to be inevitable, and London aptly remarks that readers inexorably betray a fascination with the ‘mechanics’ of collaboration, with the nuts and bolts of ‘how they did it’. […] [Readers] labor to uncover the traces of individual handwritings and stylistic signatures – as if to insist that each writer stamp the work with her own personality. (London 1999, 73)

London also notes that the question ‘who wrote what?’ reflects both a fundamental disbelief in collaboration and a certain prurient interest – a desire to make collaboration rend up its bodily secrets. […] Collaborative writing […] has always invited the gaze even as it resists visualization; it has always invited attention to writing as something bodily. (1999, 26)

Collaboration has always “invited the gaze.” Indeed, all discourses surrounding literary collaboration almost appear as discourses of voyeurism. As this work will show, late Victorians expressed a particularly intense voyeurism concerning the dynamics behind the collaborative process. The reactions of coauthors were various. Some indignantly refused to have their coauthorship dissected and claimed that it was impossible to separate their personal contributions, while others (together
with their publishers) addressed – or actually, further spurred – the public’s curiosity by writing famous but nebulous accounts in which they ‘explained’ how collaboration worked, sometimes with surprising and contradictory results. Especially during and after the 1890s, many comments by popular authors on their experiences as collaborators appeared in print. Such accounts were often reflections of the process of writing itself. In point of fact, one of the things coauthorship indirectly achieved was to expose the physical act of writing:

[the very terms that governed public curiosity about these collaborations focused attention, in ways perhaps unprecedented, on the material of writing: on the hands of the author, the control of the pen, the possession of the page – not to mention the mechanics of character and plot construction, the components of a stylist signature, the art of producing dialogue, the process of revision. (London 1999, 107)]

The insistence on questions about ‘which hand holds the pen’ suggests that, as authorship became increasingly professionalised, writing itself – the act of putting pen and ink to paper – came to be seen as a last preserve of artistic integrity. Since coauthorship denies the ‘author/ity’ of a single holder of the pen – some coauthors even rejected the validity of the question – it was often perceived as denying the special claims of the literary. The difficulty or the sheer impossibility to attribute the parts of a text to a specific individual triggered far-reaching questions about how and where authorship could be located: the most pressing question was what constituted an author; does there exist an ‘author’ before the pen makes a mark on paper? And also, what happens to the idea of textual property when even coauthors themselves cannot tell their hands apart? The present work addresses these questions from two perspectives: the point(s) of view of collaborators (for they were many and diverse) and the perspective of the reading public.

One of the main points of this study will also be that late-nineteenth-century aesthetic discourses on what constituted first- and second-rate literature – and first- and second-rate authors – are to blame for the obscurity into which Victorian collaborations have sunk. They never passed through the door of immortality because they were dismissed at the very moment they were born, or some time afterwards. Instead, most scholars who have worked on collaboration ascribe the absence of coauthors from the canon to the fact that coauthorship presents challenges to accepted notions of authorship. This is true, but they do not consider that such discourses were already present at the time when collaborators lived and worked. Indeed, ever since the Romantic period the concept of the artist as a ‘solitary genius’ who creates original works of art in isolation in his garret (his, because traditionally the hero-artist is male) has imposed itself as a fundamental feature of the artistic process, excluding any other understanding of authorship. The myth of individual authorship has been kept enshrined and impenetrable in the collective conscience. Our traditional ideas of the author persist in ignoring
or displacing contribution from others as an important component of the artistic creation. Coauthorship breaks the “organic connection” between author and text, Ede and Lunsford point out. (1990, 85) Anne Jamison (2016, 81) remarks that “[t]he sharing of textual spaces, and the dispersal of authorial ownership and control, defies literary models of authorship that favour Romantic ideals of the solitary author;” similarly, Myriam Boucharenc (2000, 100) maintains that “whatever creative or editorial operations it results from, […] the plural author appears as a dissident in relation to the official figure of the Author.” Indeed, traditional criticism, argues Jeffrey Masten (1997, 16), has considered coauthorship “as a mere subset […] kind of authorship,” as “the collusion of two unique authors whom subsequent readers could discern and separate out by examining the traces of individuality and personality […] left in the collaborative text.” Masten maintains many people experience reading a coauthored text as decentring: when we question long-standing definitions of authorship as an inspired, isolated and isolating enterprise, we risk altering our understanding of the world and of our place at the centre of it.

Although these discourses provide valuable starting points, they remain abstract considerations. Most of the scholars mentioned above do not examine what were the practical consequences of the Romantic conception of authorship for Victorian readers, editors, publishers, agents, and, most importantly, for coauthors. As this study hopes to show, some prolific and successful coauthors astonishingly displayed a strong belief in the myth of the inspired solitary author and went as far as to deny collaborative texts – their texts – any serious artistic value. The present work argues that the exclusion of Victorian collaborators from contemporary critical attention is not simply ascribable to the unsettling implications of coauthorship itself; more concretely, such exclusion has its roots in their days, back in the nineteenth century, in the very context in which such collaborations developed, flourished, and perished.

Criteria and aims of the present study

Before proceeding any further, it may be useful to see where critical studies on collaboration have arrived so far, in order to clarify the context which frames this research. Critical studies have on the whole neglected coauthorship. Although a few interesting works have been published in the last thirty years, a comprehensive survey of Victorian literary collaboration does not exist. In 2000, Laird (2000, 2) wrote: “[u]ntil quite recently, collaborative texts were barely noticed by critics and, when noticed, were generally dismissed or dismantled.” This might as well have been written today. Early studies have explored primarily non-literary forms of collaboration, particularly the fields of rhetoric and composition. In 1990, composition theory specialists Andrea
Lunsford and Lisa Ede published *Singular Texts/Plural Authors. Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*, pioneering the legitimisation of collaboration studies. Lunsford and Ede focus mostly on coauthorship in the late twentieth century and explore how women and men can write collaboratively from a feminist perspective. They illustrate how the idea of the solitary author inherited from the study of literature has blinded us to the fact that writing is not generally a solitary practice; they also emphasise that, the higher the literary values associated with a work, the less coauthorship has generally been credited. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron’s 1993 collection of essays *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership* considers a range of twentieth-century British, American and French artistic or literary unions, and analyses the connection between creativity and intimate relationships. *Significant Others* takes as its defining unit ‘the couple,’ that is, people “who have shared a sexual as well as creative partnership.” (9) The kind of collaboration discussed here is unacknowledged, hidden collaboration, presenting an idea of the ‘writer’ and the ‘other.’ The emphasis is put on the ways in which intimate relationships shape artistic production, but the model of authors as solitary (though linked) creators remains predominant. In the interdisciplinary study *Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (1994), edited by Martha Woodmansee and Peter Jaszi, twenty-one scholars of law, the humanities and social sciences examine the creative process of authorship and the validity of original thought, and look at the cultural and legal impact of post-Romantic definitions of authorship. The essays cover a broad and loosely related range of topics such as plagiarism, the Right of Publicity, the work of Wordsworth, the rights of authors in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, international copyright, Spanish cinema, music sampling, and the teaching of writing.

In the first literary studies on collaboration, male writing partnerships have received special attention. The aim of these early studies was to show that collaboration often played a vital role in the careers of male authors celebrated for their individual genius. Wayne Koestenbaum’s groundbreaking 1989 study *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Collaboration* takes into consideration male writing relationships mostly between 1885 and 1922: Stevenson and Osborne, Lang and Haggard, Conrad and Ford, Freud and Breuer, John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis, and Pound and Eliot. Koestenbaum argues that collaboration provided a socially sanctioned space for men to express homoeroticism (regardless of their sexual preferences) which would not be otherwise accepted within the homosocial continuum of their lives. Koestenbaum sees the term ‘collaboration’ as burdened with transgressive and sexual associations, thus adopting eroticism as his main source of metaphors for collaborative writing. He believes that “double authorship attacks not primarily our dogmas of literary

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11 On the collaboration of Conrad and Ford, see also Bigliazzi and Wood 2006, 91-120.


property, but of sexual property.” (9) Beside Koestenbaum’s strong focus on sexuality, his suggestion that coauthors continually fall into dominant-submissive patterns results in a model of collaboration as divided and divisive – an idea the present research does not share, and which does not prove true in the case of many of the collaborators examined here. Like Koestenbaum, Jack Stillinger’s *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of the Solitary Genius*, published in 1991, focuses exclusively on prominent male authors and their personal and professional relationships with other male writers who, in various and often unacknowledged ways, had a share in the creation of their texts. In particular, Stillinger deals with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, J.S. Mill, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. He appends to his book a (quite inaccurate and incomplete) list of ninety-seven collaborators “from Homer to Ann Beattie” (203-213). Through close study of textual evidence, Stillinger argues that coauthorship is a common feature of most authorship that passes off as singular: his research demonstrates how widespread literary collaboration has been in men’s writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women appear only as subordinate figures to major male authors. Another fundamental problem with Stillinger’s work is that he does not speak of actual coauthorship but of ‘multiple authorship,’ for he aims at retaining a belief in genius and sees it as possible and acceptable to establish hierarchies within multiple authorship (for example, John Stuart Mill remains the genius even as he was aided in his work by the lesser talents of his wife and other relatives and editors). Also Jeffrey Masten’s *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (1997) only deals with men coauthors, though this time within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theatre. Masten illustrates how early modern drama was routinely conceived as a collaborative process, and how it slowly shifted from a model of homoerotic collaboration towards singular authorship on a patriarchal model. Susan Ashton’s *Collaborators in Literary America, 1870-1920* (2003) is limited to the study of the collaborative trend in the United States between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As a matter of fact, the trend for coauthorship was by no means exclusively British: within the English-speaking countries, the United States saw the success of this practice too, so much so that Ashton calls the last three decades of the nineteenth century in the USA ‘The Collaborative Age:’ she highlights that between 1870 and 1920 “a tremendous amount of collaborative fiction was published in the United States. […] America’s Gilded Age was truly a Collaborative Age.” (1) Ashton discusses four case studies representing different models of collaboration: *The Gilded Age* (1873) by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner; *The King’s Men. A Tale of Tomorrow* (1884) by Robert Grant, John T. Wheelright, John Boyle O’Reilly, and Frederic Jesup Stimson; James Brander Matthews and his collaborations in the 1890s, in particular his literary partnerships with H.C Bunner, W.H. Pollock, F. Anstey, and George Jessop; and *The Whole Family* (1907-8), written by twelve authors (including Henry James), commissioned and coordinated by the
editor of Harper’s Bazar, Elizabeth Jordan (who wrote herself a chapter) as part of her effort to generate excitement and publicity for the magazine.

It has taken some time for women’s collaborations to be the focus of some remarkable studies. In particular, London (1999) and Laird (2000) have inaugurated a restorative trend aimed at reinstating lesser-known female writers who worked with each other. Bette London’s brilliant volume, Writing Double. Women’s Literary Partnerships (1999), looks at some women’s literary partnerships in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries: the Brontë sisters, Michael Field, Somerville and Ross, the Gerard sisters, the Findlater sisters, and M. Barnard Eldershaw. Although an undeniably illuminating study, the second part of Writing Double considers automatic writing (like that of Georgie Yeats) and mediumship as forms of collaboration, and the final chapters are devoted to the activity of influential mediums such as Geraldine Cummins, Hester Dowden (who in the 1920s made a sensation by claiming of being in contact with Oscar Wilde), Mrs. Holland (Kipling’s sister Alice), Shirley Carson Jenney, and Mrs. Leonard. London links mediumship to feminine empowerment, but, in my opinion, it can scarcely be considered a form of coauthorship. Holly Laird in Women Coauthors (2000) takes into consideration British, American and Canadian women who, in some way or another, collaborated with other women or with men, from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century. She explores an incredibly wide array of literary partnerships: to name some, the collaboration of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor (even if her name never appeared with his on a book), Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Somerville and Ross, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, Peter Redgrove and Penelope Shuttle, Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland, and Jael B. Juba (pseudonym for Lydia Fakundiny and Joyce Elbercht). Laird devotes a lot of attention to collaborations between Afro-American and white women, e.g. the Delany sisters with Amy Hill Hearth. Women Coauthors provides seminal departure points, but it lacks a focus and does not outline any clear pattern; besides, it considers both actual collaborations, partial or hidden ones, and contributions of editors. Lorraine York’s Rethinking Women’s Collaborative Writing (2002) analyses the power dynamics and ideological polyvalences of contemporary women’s collaborations. York’s study is focused on twentieth-century women in Britain, Italy, France and the United States who wrote drama, poetry and novels. Like Laird, York’s research is still quite dispersive. Linda K. Karell’s Writing Together/Writing Apart (2008) considers collaboration (very loosely intended) within Western American literature: she draws on a composite corpus of collaborative texts in order to demonstrate the persistence of coauthorship across a wide variety of writing forms. She first examines the controversial and much advertised creative partnership of Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris, authors of The Crown of Columbus (1991); then, she considers the collaboration of the Native American Mourning Dove with her white male mentor, Lucullus
McWhorter, which resulted in the 1927 novel *Cogewea, the Half-Blood*; also, a chapter is devoted to the collaboration of Wallace Stegner and Mary Hollock Foote on *Angle of Repose* (1971); however, Karell’s loose understanding of collaboration becomes improbable as she considers Mary Austin’s 1932 autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, as a collaboration between Austin’s multiple personae. In the same year of Karell’s book, a study focused exclusively on late Victorian women’s collaborations came out: Jill Ehnenn’s *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*. Beside dealing with Michael Field and Somerville and Ross, Ehnenn discusses the partnership of Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and that of Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell. Ehnenn maintains that the lives and works of these women collaborators “embody provocative strategies for resistance to, or at least negotiation of, social norms,” “with queer and/or feminist implications.” (2008, 10, 12) One of her main points – which are shared here and developed in chapter three when discussing Somerville and Ross – is that late nineteenth century women, by entering into an exclusive creative writing relationship with another female partner, “not only invented texts, they invented themselves in ways that society otherwise did not permit.” (2008, 12) Collaboration is seen by Ehnenn as a space where women come together to defy notions of “solitary authorship, creativity, labor, textuality, love and desire.” (174) Ehnenn’s study is deeply concerned with the construction of lesbian identity and the expansion of queer history (all the coauthors she considers were – supposedly or openly – lesbians), and she sometimes sacrifices attention on collaboration in order to focus on other issues. More recently, Anne Jamison has investigated some aspects of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration in her *E. OE. Somerville & Martin Ross. Female Authorship and Literary Collaboration* (2016).13 Like Ehnenn, Jamison argues for women’s literary collaborations as “a defiant cultural position within Irish and Victorian literary society.” (2) In her insightful and compelling work,

12 Interestingly, Robins wrote two novels on the topic of collaboration: *The Florentine Frame* (1909) and *White Violets*, (unpublished). In the former, Robins represents an unsuccessful male-female literary partnership between a talented young woman, Isabella Roscoe, and a playwright, Chester Keith. Their collaboration is one-sided, with Isabella supporting and heavily editing Keith’s plays; he does not encourage her in writing, but selfishly absorbs all her energies and is increasingly dependent upon her help. As the collaboration goes on, Isabella becomes more and more a shadow of her former self. Keith’s successes “are at the expenses of Isabella’s own writing career, her romantic happiness, and eventually, her life.” (Ehnenn 2008, 39) On the contrary, Robins’s unpublished novel *White Violets* (written in the same year) presents an example of supportive and rewarding – if rather bizarre – female collaboration. The story revolves around Selina Patching, an aspiring novelist who finds in Charlotte Brontë a literary model; she is then introduced to (and later takes in to live with her) Barbara, a wild young girl who is a medium and who puts Selina in contact with Charlotte. Through her, Selina recurs to seances and automatic writing in order to write a novel ‘in collaboration’ with her deceased heroine. Eventually, however, Barbara confesses that it has always been a trick, but instead of being upset, Selina welcomes the news and she and Barbara begin to collaborate in earnest, building a loyal and fruitful relationship. (Ehnenn 2008, 39) See also Weber 2011.

Jamison rightly laments that previous studies have generally regarded Somerville and Ross as a significant case study in the development of wide-ranging approaches to women’s collaborative life and work, and have often included them within an ahistorical grouping of other female collaborators; the overall effect of such attitudes, argues Jamison, “has been to disembody the duo’s collaborative practice from both its historical roots and the cultural politics of the texts that it engendered” (9). The aim of her volume is to widen the privileged discourses within which Somerville and Ross’s partnership have been usually understood, first of all rethinking the duo’s collaboration beyond a purely feminist/sexual perspective.

From this survey of critical works on collaboration, it becomes clear that there has been a tendency to group several different cases of coauthorship in order to prove the importance of the phenomenon. This was something that had to be done; attention had to be called to the significance of this too neglected practice through history. However, the results have been, if compelling, somewhat confusing. Only recently research on collaboration has tended to focus on more specific time-ranges or kinds of coauthorship. This project hopes to continue in this direction in order to identify the patterns and features of collaboration within a specific historical moment, a precise geographical area, and a given genre. Indeed, this study is limited to some aspects of the collaborative scene. Most importantly, it has involved a series of key methodological considerations.

The first one has been to decide what counts as coauthorship. As we have seen, sustained scholarship on collaboration started in the 1990s, but there is as yet confusion on the proper parameters of the subject. In point of fact, determining what is coauthorship is still a very pressing problem. “[C]ollaboration itself,” notes London (1999, 18) is “still an unstable category.” The term ‘collaboration’ has been subject to diverse interpretations. I agree with Ede and Lunsford (1990), Koestenbaum (1989) and Laird (2000) in maintaining that collaboration refers to acts of writing in which two or more individuals consciously work together, at every stage, to produce a common text, and (sooner or later) acknowledge it. A double signature makes a coauthored text “most precisely and satisfyingly collaborative,” (Koestenbaum 1989, 2) but not all coauthors opted for this solution; many adopted singular, often composite, pen names (e.g. E.D. Gerard, Michael Field, M. Barnard Eldershaw). This does not mean that they did not acknowledge the collaboration: the choice of a pseudonym could have marketing, personal or many other reasons. For a collaboration to be called so, I believe mutual acknowledgment and intentionality to be fundamental; in a nutshell, the authors must sit down with the will to create a text together, fully recognising each other’s contribution. On the contrary, for some critics (among others, Stillinger 1991, Masten 1997, and London 1999) collaboration is to be intended in a broader sense: according to them, it also exists in a range of...
Stillinger claims that “every work is necessarily the product of multiple authorship.” (1991, 96) London fully includes in her survey of women’s literary partnerships the Brontë sisters, not just their juvenilia (where, she admits, collaboration was a constitutive feature), but also the novels they published separately but which were written in close contact with each other. Karell’s (2002) perspective is even more radical, as she argues that collaboration includes “acts of writing in which one or even all of the writing subjects may not be aware of the other writers, being separated by distance, era, or even death.” (2002, xx) Thus, she considers acts of rewriting or completing others’ texts as collaboration. Karell goes as far as to claim that every act of writing is collaborative, and that “absolute individual authority is ultimately impossible:” (xxxiii) she argues that even a writer’s reliance on a previous text or a passing conversation – typically described as influence or inspiration – are instead to be included under the category of collaboration. In Karell’s view, collaboration is “a multivoiced, multi-layered process intrinsic to the writing virtually all writers do regardless of their conscious intentions or aspirations.” (xxxiii) “Even when individual writers sit down to create a text together, with a conscious awareness of that intention,” Karell goes on, “they bring with them narratives that are already collaborations and intentions beyond those they can identify or articulate.” (xxxix) She does have a point, in a sense: if we look at authorship as the product of social context, all literary production is collaborative. However, this is not the point advanced here. Ashton (2003, 4) points out that Karell’s too inclusive understanding of coauthorship “eventually evacuates collaboration of much specific meaning.” The present research does not want to prove that every act of writing is collaborative. The case here is only with explicit acts of collaboration, cases in which the collaboration is fully acknowledged, when the coauthors name themselves as such, when each recognises the other as his or her coauthor – that is, when there is a deliberate decision to collaborate. The reason for this choice is twofold. Firstly, because explicit collaborations have received much less attention than unacknowledged ones: cases of plagiarism, ghost-writing, editorial alterations, unfinished novels completed by someone else, and other forms of hidden ‘collaboration,’ have been thoroughly examined; “unearthing unacknowledged collaborators,” remarks Ashton (2003, 13) “is a tremendously popular activity for literary scholars.” Secondly, because however compelling and intriguing hidden collaborations might be, they do not challenge traditional understandings of authorship as openly as collaborative texts do – as will be explored in depth later in this study. Another restriction of the present project is that it looks only at acknowledged collaboration in fiction, more specifically in novels. The choice of a chronological span was the direct consequence of the choice of the genre: collaboration in novel-writing reached an unprecedented (and never repeated) peak at the end of the Victorian era. Although a relevant number of other fiction and some poetry
were written collaboratively,\textsuperscript{14} novels were the genre most exploited by coauthorship at that moment.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, like Ashton, Ehrenn and Jamison, this research is limited to a very specific chronological frame, when the practice of collaboration on fiction assumed the proportions of a literary fashion. In point of fact, as Ashton (2003, 8) maintains, despite earlier and more recent occurrences of collaborative fiction, “the propensity for writers of the late nineteenth century to write together was a distinct phenomenon.”

Anyway, it is imperative to point out that the impulse to collaborate was by no means specific to the late Victorian period. As it is now widely acknowledged, in Renaissance drama collaboration was a regular practice. As for collaboration in fiction, there had been some instances during the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries. The first coauthored novel was \textit{Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus}, a malicious satire on intellectual pretensions co-written by Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell and John Arbuthnot, and published in 1741 as a part of Alexander Pope's \textit{Works}. Later on, during the second half of the eighteenth century, some pairs of women writers collaborated on a number of novels: Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier, \textit{The Cry: A New Dramatic Fable} (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1754); Susanna Gunning and her sister Margaret Gunning, \textit{The Histories of Ladies Frances S- and Lady Caroline S- Written by the Miss Minfie} (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1763) and \textit{The Picture. A Novel} (London: J. Johnson, 1766); Miss Nugent and Miss Taylor, \textit{The Indiscreet Marriage; or, Henry and Sophia Sommerville. In a Series of Letters} (London: J. Dodsley, 1779); and Elizabeth and Jane Purbeck, who co-authored four novels: \textit{Honoria Sommerville, A Novel} (London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789); \textit{Raynsford Park, A Novel} (London: G. Kearsley, 1790); \textit{William Thornborough, The Benevolent Quixote} (Robinsons, 1791); \textit{Matilda and Elizabeth, A Novel} (London: Sampson Low, 1796).\textsuperscript{16} The literary partnerships of these women anticipate some key features of women collaborators of the late Victorian period, in particular the practice of collaborating with a female relative within the domestic space, and to experience collaboration as a stepping stone to ‘practise’ before writing on one’s own.

Another remarkable case of female coauthorship on novel writing is that of the American sisters Susan and Anna Warner, who published together a number of highly popular novels. Susan (1819-1885) and Anna (1827-1915) Warner spent their lives on Constitution Island in genteel poverty as Sunday School teachers and novelists. Beginning as individual authors, they first achieved success

\textsuperscript{14} Among the coauthors of the present corpus, many regularly co-wrote short stories as well as novels, e.g. Besant and Rice, Somerville and Ross. As for poetry, the most well-known and controversial Victorian coauthors were Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the aunt-and-nice duo who published under the collective pseudonym Michael Field.

\textsuperscript{15} If one excludes drama; however, collaboration had a long tradition at play-writing and would require a whole different study.

\textsuperscript{16} For more information see Turner 1992.
separately: Susan's first book, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) was second in sales and popularity only to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She soon began turning out a novel a year, and Anna followed suit. In the 1860s and 1870s, they co-wrote semi-religious novels which were extremely successful in their day, including *Say and Seal*, *Christmas Stocking*, *Books of Blessing*, and *The Law and the Testimony*. Though it took place during the time span considered here, the Warner sisters’ partnership is not part of the present study, as it deals only with works published within the United Kingdom. The choice to stick to British collaborators by no means implies that the phenomenon was exclusively British: as we have seen, the United States witnessed a similar boom; in France too a large number of collaborative novels was published. During the 1860s and 1870s, Emile Erckmann and Alexander Chatrian published a long series of best-selling novels, most of which were translated into English; their partnership was quite famous at the time and the British periodical press dealt extensively with them. The epistolary novel *La Croix de Berny* (1857) by Theophile Gautier, Madame Emile de Girardin, Jules Sandeau, and Joseph Mery is another example.

One last point. The present research does not lead to authors or texts of canonical stature. Or, more precisely: the authors of canonical prominence of my corpus are so for their solo work, while the fiction they wrote collaboratively has been generally ignored or considered unimportant side-production. The present study will not directly engage with them (Dickens, Kipling, Stevenson, etc.), even if they were part of the ranks of Victorian collaborators. This is because such partnerships have already received at least some critical attention, and their names do not need to be unburied. This project looks at more or less forgotten coauthors. And yet, although most names discussed here are virtually lost, this study is not an egg hunt for the most obscure collaborators one may find buried in archives. Publication and success in the coeval literary market are conditions to enter the corpus. The writers considered here were acclaimed by readers and critics alike in their day. Somerville and Ross’s fame was enormous around the turn of the century and the first decades of the twentieth century – so much so that their texts were distributed to soldiers in the First World War to cheer them up and a tv series based on their books was made in the 1980s. Pronounced by Cahalan (1999, 73) “the most successful close coauthorship in Irish literature – arguably, in fact, the most successful among writers in English since the Middle Ages,” they are the only ones to have received attention, mostly within the context of Irish or feminist studies (still, they would deserve much more). The other collaborators of the corpus either plunged into darkness or are remembered for other reasons. Walter Besant and James Rice enjoyed international fame and considerable income; later on, Rice was erased from public memory and Besant is sometimes remembered for his critical essay “The Art of Fiction” – which led Henry James to write his much more renowned answer – and his key role in the Society of Authors. Andrew Lang and H. Rider Haggard were both notorious writers, but few now know of
their collaboration. The same has happened to Rhoda Broughton, who collaborated with an American reporter, Elizabeth Bisland, who in 1890 had become the centre of a sensation for having competed on the first race around the world inspired by Jules Verne’s story.

At the end of the introduction to her study, London states that her book “is not a bid for canonizing any of its writers.” (1999, 29) The present study follows London’s premises, as it does not plead to insert into the canon the coauthors and the texts discussed here. Indeed, some writers like Somerville and Ross have been the subject of certain if insufficient recovery efforts. Other works in the corpus are perfectly conventional – sometimes even forgettable. However, the necessity to recognise their existence and give them due credit was the spur behind this research. To recover the work of a group of late-Victorian writers is indeed one of the goals of the present project.

And still, as the research developed it became clear that more than a history of some authors and their texts was being written: actually, what was being traced was the history of a peculiar practice at a moment of particular efflorescence. What was emerging was an actual cultural phenomenon and the impact it had on the late Victorian discourses of writing and authorship, on how people imagined ‘the author’ and his/her activity. The cases discussed here offer a unique window on the history of authorship, the literary market and the culture of the late Victorian era.

This study therefore aims at providing an insightful, wide-ranging survey of literary collaboration in novel writing in the United Kingdom from about 1870 to 1900. The final part of this chapter tries to identify the trends of this practice, giving some general information derived from a discussion of the corpus. The following chapters examine different models of collaboration and various Victorian theories of ‘how to collaborate,’ including how coauthors perceived themselves and their activity. Chapters two and three look closely at two significant long-term literary partnerships, the two most famous ones at the time: that of the London-based friends and men of letters Besant and Rice, and that of the Anglo-Irish cousins and feminists Somerville and Ross. It is important now to point out that, as Ashton (2003, 13) rightly emphasises, “[c]ollaborative fiction is necessarily the product of relationships.” For this reason, special attention will be paid to the relationship between the collaborators, as it constituted the fertile ground for the partnership to take place and to last over the years (both partnerships were broken by the death of one of the two). This is especially true in the case of Somerville and Ross. A central issue will also be how each literary couple privately and publicly defined the authorial experience and the writing process: although the two partnerships shared a few points, their understanding of collaboration was extremely different.

Chapter four discusses three cases of one-time, popular, fashionable collaborations of the 1890s, when the practice was at its peak: the bizarre alliance of the Scottish scholar and folklorist Andrew Lang with the king of popular fantasy fiction Henry Rider Haggard; the short-lived intersection in
Oxford of Rhoda Broughton, then a well-known, middle-aged writer of slightly scandalous novels and the young and daring Elizabeth Bisland; and the union of twenty-four novelists to produce a crazy, highly advertised sensation novel serialised in a women’s magazine, called The Fate of Fenella. All these cases illustrate how collaboration was conceived and how these conceptions mirrored different understandings of (co)authorship.

This research also attempts to understand how coauthorship was perceived and how it affected an historical period when huge changes were taking place in society and in the literary market: chapter five explores how collaboration was variously imagined by the Victorian public, drawing on the periodical press of the time.

Chapter six examines the implications collaboration had on late Victorian ideas such as the figure of the author. After a brief history of authorship, it proceeds to identify how the Romantic notion of the solitary genius developed, and to examine its main features. The Romantic cult of the (hypertrophic) persona of the writer was further intensified during the Victorian age, when the biographical individual was strictly intertwined with the literary text. Crucially, then, chapter six investigates how a part of the trend of collaboration questioned, even if only temporarily, the rigid Victorian regime of the solitary author, somewhat anticipating twentieth-century attitudes towards the invisibility of the author.

Survey of Victorian coauthors

From more or less 1870 to the turn of the century, more than a hundred coauthored novels were published in the United Kingdom.17 The present corpus includes also novels published after 1900, because they were the later output of couples who had begun publishing in the last years of the Victorian age and simply continued their production, as happened in the case of Somerville and Ross, or Agnes and Egerton Castle.

In 1867, Charles Dickens famously collaborated with Wilkie Collins on a story entitled No Thoroughfare, which featured in the Extra Christmas Number of Dickens’s paper All the Year Round. Some years later, in 1871, Walter Besant and the editor of Once a Week, Rice, started their literary alliance and made collaboration in novel writing a popular practice. Coauthored novels began to appear more or less regularly after the second half of the 1870s; the years between 1889 and 1892 witnessed a dramatic increase in the production of collaborative novels, with a peak in the year 1890.

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17 See infra Bibliography, list of British coauthored novels. The data reported are by no means definitive. Further archival digging may – and most likely will – increase the size of the present corpus.
Collaboration then became a trend and a commercial enterprise: in the 1890s, best-selling authors got together to produce collaborative novels.

Late Victorian coauthored novels were the products of the joint efforts of about forty literary couples and some multiple collaborations. Each writer was, of course, motivated by a different set of reasons, and the phenomenon was not homogeneous. Substantial differences – in their sex, social background, geographical origins, artistic aims, and professional status – existed between people who took part in collaborative ventures.

Most couples were made up by men; much less were made up by women, and a few were mixed-sex couples. The strong predominance of male coauthorship might come as a surprise in a period when publishers’ catalogues presented almost as many women authors as men. However, the reason for this may not lie in the incompatibility of the fair sex with writing with someone else (as it was believed at the time) but instead in very practical details: men collaborated more than women because they had more occasions and more time to meet. Confined to the domestic hearth and to their usual coterie, Victorian women had far less opportunities to become acquainted with a variety of people and therefore to find a suitable partner to write with. Indeed, it is not by chance that, when women collaborated, they often did so with a relative, and generally a female one. In addition, even if they did find a partner with whom they decided to write, women had to face further practical difficulties: a woman was not supposed to stay away from home all day long and to neglect her household duties and her family in favour of staying closed up in a room scribbling a novel with somebody else. While writing on one’s own could be done safely and appropriately in one’s drawing room while being able to keep an eye on domestic affairs, coauthoring a novel required spending long hours away from home (at least for one of the partners), unless they lived under the same roof – here again the opportunity of choosing a sister or another female relative as a partner. Disruptions of all kinds, from housekeeping tasks to family matters and social commitments, have always made it challenging for women to find the space and time to sit down to write; but, when two women are involved, the practical problems are doubled: when one is free, the other may not; making their schedules coincide was certainly not easy. This was something only well-off women, with housekeepers, servants and nannies available, could afford to do. It is no chance that most female collaborators were members of the upper-classes, and relatives. Let us see some cases.

In the corpus, we can find a few sister teams. We have Emily and Dorothea Gerard, who between 1880 and 1891 published four romantic novels, all signed ‘E.D. Gerard’ except their last one, which reads ‘E. and D. Gerard,’ thus underlining the collaborative authorship. This little change in the signature testifies to the fact that, by 1891, the position of coauthorship in the literary marketplace had altered: differently from the previous novels, this time the publisher decided to ride the wave of
the popularity of double authorship by emphasising it rather than concealing it. Indeed, after the publication of their first novel, critics assumed that ‘E.D. Gerard’ was an individual person; it took some time for the press to find out the truth. Emily (1849-1905) and Dorothea (1855-1915) Gerard were Scottish by birth, but travelled all their adult lives in Eastern Europe and introduced British readers to scenes and people of what was a still relatively unknown area, gaining a reputation as “purveyor of the exotic.” (Laird 2000, 5) Their first work, Reata. What’s in a Name (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Son, 1880), featuring a rebellious half-German, half-Mexican heroine and her love triangle with two Polish brothers, enjoyed a certain success and encouraged the sisters to coauthor three other novels: Beggar My Neighbour (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Son, 1882), which takes place in Poland; The Waters of Hercules (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Son, 1885), set on the boundaries of Hungary and Romania; and A Sensitive Plant (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1891), whose heroine travels between Scotland and Venice. Born in a rich and well-connected Catholic family, the sisters were sent in their teens to a convent school in the Austrian empire. Both married Austrian army officers (Emily in 1869, Dorothea in 1887) and consequently spent the rest of their lives on the Continent: Emily mainly in Vienna, when her husband retired from active service with the rank of Lieutenant-General, while Dorothea in Galicia. However, they kept personal links with Great Britain and the Edinburgh-based publishing house Blackwood & Son, which serialised in its renowned magazine and published in volume their first three coauthored novels18 and most of Emily’s solo work. Since Blackwood traditionally dealt with books aimed at the middle and upper-middle classes, we may guess the kind of readership of the Gerards’ novels. The Gerard sisters were particularly concerned to alert the public to the prestigious social milieu they mixed with during their lives abroad. To this purpose, A Sensitive Plant is dedicated to Princess Marguerite De Bourbon, one of the ‘famous’ friends of Emily Gerard, among whom she counted also Mark Twain, whom she met in Vienna. (Sutherland 2009, 243-244) In the convent school where they spent their youth, the Convent of the Sacré Coeur in Riedenburg near Lake Constance, Emily and Dorothea had become acquainted with the daughters of an aristocratic childhood friend of their mother’s, Princess Luoise de Bourbon. The noblewoman had settled there and had advised Emily and Dorothea’s mother, who was looking for a suitable place where her daughters could learn Continental languages, to pick the boarding school where also her two daughters were being educated. In her biography of Emily and Dorothea Gerard, Helen Black (1896) stresses the close connection between the Scottish sisters and the aristocrats they met: “[i]n Riedenburg they found a lively and happy home, as well as two kind

18 Reata was serialised in Blackwood’s Magazine from April 1879 to May 1880; Beggar My Neighbour was not serialised but published directly in volume, at least I found no evidence of its serialisation; The Waters of Hercules ran in Blackwood’s Magazine from August 1884 to August 1885.
and devoted friends in the Princess Marguerite and Alix, who were about their own ages.” (148)
When it became necessary to remove Emily to a warmer climate, Princess Louise suggested that
Emily and her own daughter, Marguerite, should go together to Venice during the winter and continue
their studies there; therefore, from 1863 to 1866, “Venice became their winter home.” (Black 1896,
149) Later on Princess Marguerite got engaged to her cousin Don Carlos and moved to Spain. Emily
and Marguerite remained in close contact until the latter’s death in 1893. Black reports that the
Princess was interested in Emily and Dorothea’s literary works, and had begun a French translation
of Beggar My Neighbour, which remained uncompleted. Apparently, Emily and Marguerite were
planning to coauthor a novel, a project never realised due to the aristocrat’s early death:

In dedicating A Sensitive Plant to Princess Marguerite, Emily Gerard enters the long-standing
tradition of the dedication as a tribute to an illustrious and powerful protector. The use of three royal
titles in a row – “her royal highness,” “princesse” and “duchesse” – puts emphasis on the high social
position of the dedicatee; “in memory of old times” proclaims their relationship and makes the reader
aware of the personal connection between the two women, of the fact that they spent time together
and share memories; hence, Emily Gerard (and subsequently her sister too), by associating her name
with that of the Princess, is ‘borrowing’ the prestige that comes from her position. Since every
dedication is always intended for at least two dedicatees (the ‘official’ dedicatee, but also the reader,
as dedicating a work “is a public act that the reader is […] called on to witness,” Genette 1997, 134)
Emily Gerard is exploiting the prestige of such a friendship to raise her position in the eyes of the
public. She is not only telling Princess Marguerite that she is dedicating the novel to her: she is telling
the reader that she is dedicating the novel to the princess, thus linking herself to the noblewoman.
This dedication is – as all paratextual elements are – at the service of the promotion of the text: by
elevating the authors’ prestige, it elevates the novel’s standing as well.

Emily and Dorothea Gerard’s partnership, although it lasted some years, was just a phase. The
collaboration helped the sisters earn a name as brilliant writers, but it did not survive its tenth birthday.
Dorothea’s marriage in 1887 coincides with the end of the collaboration with her sister. Now that
they were both married to army officers who travelled extensively, they had to spend long periods
apart. Dorothea could no longer live with her sister and her brother-in-law, as she had done during
the years of their literary alliance: she had to follow her own husband in his travels. The domestic
dimension that had constituted the ideal background for the sisters’ collaborative relationship was
now broken. However, coeval author Helen Black ignores such practical circumstances, and presents
the dissolution of the partnership as a perfectly natural consequence of Dorothea’s new status as a
married woman: the biographer remarks that, from the moment Dorothea got married, the partnership
with her sister was bound to come to an end, as she entered “into a partnership of quite another kind.”
(Black 1896, 165) Dorothea’s husband is depicted as her new ‘exclusive’ partner: “[s]he loves to talk
over her ideas with one person, though never with more than one, and since her marriage the ‘one’
has always been her husband.” (Black 1896, 10) According to Black, Dorothea’s new ‘love’
partnership could not possibly allow for the old literary one with her sister to survive. Black’s
biography clearly reflects the typically Victorian values of the married woman as the angel of the
hearth whose paramount duty was a selfless devotion to her husband and children, thus shutting out
any other relationship. Besides, after ten years of collaborative authorship, both sisters were probably
eager to spread their wings independently. Coauthorship thus seems to have acted for the sisters as a
stepping-stone, a means to try their hands at writing while gaining the confidence to do so alone.
Indeed, Black reports that the Gerards ascribed the discovery of their literary talent to their
collaboration: “they [Emily and Dorothea] are both of the opinion that, had they not happened to be
together during those years, neither would have thought of touching a pen except for the purpose of
letter-writing.” (Black 1896, 155) On the dissolution of the literary partnership, “a division of the
literary stock-in-trade became necessary:” (Black 1896, 157) Dorothea took the skeleton plot for a
novel that would be published under her single name in 1890, Lady Baby (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1890),
while Emily took charge of the revision of A Sensitive Plant, written by the sisters ten years earlier
but laid aside. This was to be the last novel published under their joint names. Starting from the late
1880s, both began to write on their own and pursued their careers separately through the 1890s and
the first decade of the twentieth century. Independently, Emily wrote six novels, two collections of
short stories, contributed critical essays to a number of periodicals, and reviewed German literature
for the London Times thanks to her mastery of the language. (Black 1896, 151) Her essay
“Transylvanian Superstitions,” published in The Nineteenth Century and later included in her
travelsogue of Transylvania, The Land Beyond the Forest (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons,
1888) deeply influenced Bram Stoker and provided him with precious information about this area, as
he never visited Transylvania. (Crişan 2016, 63) Dorothea, however, is generally regarded as the
better novelist of the sisters. From 1888 to her death, she independently wrote voluminous romantic
fiction, almost all of which published by Tauchnitz, the leading Leipzig-based publishing house
specialised in works in English. The fact that she published with Tauchnitz means that her readers were most likely English speakers travelling abroad or living on the Continent.\(^{19}\)

From a very different social background there came another pair of Scottish sisters-coauthors: the Findlater sisters. Mary (1865-1963) and Jane (1866-1946) were born in a rather poor and remote Scottish parsonage, “the Scottish answer to the Brontë sisters,” as London defines them. (1999, 120) Widely-read and respectfully reviewed in their days, the Findlater sisters “wrote what was generally agreed to be accomplished fiction before, in the 1920s, retreating from the literary scene in the wake of modernism.” (London 1999, 5) Differently from the Gerard sisters and many other women collaborators, Jane and Mary Findlater started to collaborate after establishing themselves as independent novelists: before their first joint novel, Crossriggs (1908), they had published a number of novels separately, which had earned them admiring notice; they had also written together a collection of stories in 1901, and a lighthearted novel with two friends of theirs, Kate Douglas Wiggin and Allan McAulay, entitled The Affair at the Inn (1904). The story is told by the four different points of view of the characters involved in it, each character being assigned to one coauthor.\(^{20}\) The sisters’ decision to write with each other was “the culmination of their professional practice – the ultimate achievement as novelists,” comments London. (1999, 94) They did not abandon collaboration until they abandoned novel writing altogether, lived a rather secluded life and never married, attributing their choice to the impossibility of separation (“[w]e could only marry a Mormon,” qtd. in Mackenzie 1964, 24).

At the turn of the nineteenth century, we also find a literary partnership between two sisters of a much-celebrated family: Helen and Olivia Rossetti, nieces of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti. They were also, on their mother’s side, cousins of Ford Madox Ford. Under the collective pseudonym Isabel Meredith, the Rossetti sisters co-wrote the Bildungsroman A Girl Among the Anarchists (1903). The novel is based on their own experiences, as the girls, still in their teens, had edited an

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19 The series of literary works known as The Tauchnitz Collection of British Authors started in 1842 and continued for the next one hundred years. Even before Britain's first international copyright agreement with Prussia, Tauchnitz was remarkable for offering to pay for the exclusive rights to reprint English books for sale on the Continent. Over the years, inclusion in the series was increasingly prized as a mark of commercial success. (Todd and Bowden, 1988) Tauchnitz published three works by Emily Gerard and twenty-seven by Dorothea. Surprisingly, it did not publish any of Emily and Dorothea’s coauthored novels. By the time the sisters’ relations with Tauchnitz began in 1890, their collaboration had come to an end, but Tauchnitz could have made reprints, as it did in the case of Besant and Rice. Why did not Tauchnitz do the same for the Gerard sisters’ novels? Why did not Dorothea, who published so many works with Tauchnitz, suggest to reprint her coauthored ones? Maybe she was not so happy with them, and wanted to leave the collaborative experience in the past. Or maybe she did suggest to reprint them, but the publisher refused. It might be that Tauchnitz thought they would not sell well anymore.

20 The multiple collaboration was repeated in 1911 with Robinetta. Jane and Mary’s collaborative novels are: Crossriggs (1908), Penny Moneypenny (1911), and Beneath the Visiting Moon (1923).
anarchist journal in the family basement called *The Torch*. The story is narrated in the first person by the protagonist – Isabel – who, left with no parents and some wealth, devotes her time and money to the anarchist cause. She offers herself to work for the journal *The Bomb* (later on *The Tocsin*), thus coming in touch with a wide range of people: propagandists, incendiaries and political exiles. *A Girl Among the Anarchists* presents a rich account of the anarchic network in late Victorian London, and is the only coauthored novels by the Rossetti sisters. The connection of the sisters with the London anarchic movement, and its touching and extremely detailed portrayal in the novel, contrasts with the Gerard sisters’ desire to show off their connections with the aristocracy, and to provide their readers with escapist, entertaining literature.

Another team of female relatives – this time cousins – attracted the public’s attention. They were the Anglo-Irish Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, who wrote fiction collaboratively under the signature, ‘Somerville and Ross’ for thirty years. Like the Gerard sisters, Somerville and Ross came from an upper-class background, although their families had money issues and they had to earn their living by their pens, marriage being not an option for neither cousin.

It must be noted that the couples made up by women – even if they were inferior in number to those by men – were generally more lasting than those made up by men: the examples reported so far confirm this. The reason may be that such relationships were grounded on a strong emotional bond, which in all cases preceded the writing partnership. When women collaborated, they tended to do so for a long time, with one partner, in an exclusive relationship. Besides, Somerville and Ross and Mary and Jane Findlater produced, in my opinion, some of the most noteworthy coauthored novels of this corpus.21

Among the literary couples made up by men, very few involved relatives: only Stevenson with his step-son, and Walter H. Pollock with his son. The others were either friends or simply colleagues who – out of fun and/or profit – engaged in collaborations. However, only the partnership of Besant and Rice lasted a decade. The majority were one- or two-time collaborations, or occasional ones, spread throughout the years while the writers were engaged in individual projects or in collaborations with other people. Apart from one case (Walter H. Pollock and Alexander J. Duffield, 1877), the occasional collaborations all took place between 1889 and 1899 – the decade when coauthorship had become a trend. Moreover, they were made up of authors already popular and prolific, sometimes (forcefully?) ‘coupled’ by publishers or magazines’ editors. Many men collaborators of the 1890s (and later) were the representatives of the new ‘professionalised authorship’ (e.g. Haggard, Francis

21 Although the Findlater sisters’ work is indeed notable, this study does not analyse their partnership as they worked at the beginning of the twentieth century, out of the time span considered here. Their understudied partnership may provide interesting material for future study.
Charles Philips, Walter H. Pollock). Arnold Bennet (profitably) collaborated with his colleague and friend Eden Phillpotts on the detective story *The Sinews of War* (1906) and *The Statue* (1908). Their agent, the ever-present Pinker, sold the story to T.P. ’s *Weekly* for £450; between serial rights, the British and the American volume rights, and the Tauchnitz edition, Bennet and his collaborator made in total over £1,550. To give an idea of the amount of money, we should consider that the average annual income of an urban lower-middle class man was between £90 and £150.\(^{22}\)

In the present corpus, we also find some husband-and-wife teams, like Agnes and Egerton Castle. In 1883 the Irish Agnes Sweetman (1860-1922) married the London-based author, antiquarian and swordsman Egerton Castle (1858-1920) and started to coauthor novels towards the turn of the century, beginning with *The Pride of Jennico* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1898). It was quite successful and was adapted into a play. (Bolton 2000, 115) The Castles’ novels were mostly set in the eighteenth century, and their romances continued to sell well into the first decades of the twentieth century. Significantly, on the title pages of their novels their names are always put on separate sides of the page (“Agnes Castle” on the left, and “Egerton Castle” on the right), so that the double authorship was immediately understandable. Instead of putting the names together (“Agnes and Egerton Castle”), they chose to emphasise the collaborative nature of the work. (figure 1)

This duo’s second novel, *The Bath Comedy* (London: Macmillan & Co.) appeared in 1900, and its preface ends with the following sentence: “Love gilds the scene, and woman guides the plot!” (figure 2) The quote is from the epilogue of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* (1775): “Through all the drama – whether damned or not – Love gilds the scene/ and women guide the plot.” The fact that the Castles used the singular form “woman guides the plot” instead of “women” leads us to a fascinating hypothesis: the misquotation might be a playful hint at their collaborative method. Since they were husband and wife, “love gilds the scene”, and Agnes – the woman – planned the plot they were to develop together. Anyway, this is only a guess.

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\(^{22}\) On the collaboration between Bennett and Phillpotts, see McDonald 1997, 85.
Figure 1 Title page of *The Pride of Jennico* by Agnes and Egerton Castle (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1898).

Figure 2 End of the Preface (xvi) to *The Bath Comedy* by Agnes and Egerton Castle (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900).
Another prolific couple of husband-and-wife coauthors was made up by the journalist Charles Norris Williamson (1859-1920) and his wife Alice Muriel (1858-1933) who, before the collaboration, had gained some fame thanks to sensationalist serial stories published by Harmsworth in his popular penny magazines. Signing their novels ‘C.N. and A.M. Williamson,’ the two coauthored a long series of successful motor travel romances starting in 1902 with *The Lightning Conductor*.

Another aspect to underline is the great difference between the professional status of the coauthors of the corpus. Among late Victorian collaborators, we find both famous and rich writers by profession living in fashionable London, and obscure young women from the margins of the country (like the Gerard sisters, or Mary and Jane Findlater). Some coauthors achieved a professional status thanks to their collaboration – as in the case of Besant and Rice, or, partly, by Somerville and Ross. Others had already obtained a stable position within the literary market when they tried collaboration: Mrs. Oliphant, Andrew Lang, or Rider Haggard, for instance. Most of the times, established authors collaborated with other established authors. But there are cases when a popular writer engaged in a collaboration with an unknown, much younger partner, as in the case of Broughton with Bisland.

Surely, writing together strengthened the authors’ sense of themselves as professionals. As Ashton (2003, 171) reflects, coauthorship “gave them community and it gave them clout.”

In the light of what I have illustrated so far, we can assume that at first coauthorship tended to occur mainly between friends or relatives in a less professionalised context, and the partnerships lasted many years; in some cases the alliance was interrupted only by the death of one of the two. Around the end of the 1880s, one-time collaborations between already professional authors took over the field and attracted attention for about a decade.

Writing for the popular market, coauthors usually exploited the most popular genres of the time – sensation novels, fantasy novels, romances and sentimental novels. They inserted themselves in the trendiest subgenres of the period, which, however, were not generally considered high literature (apart from some notable exceptions, like Conan Doyle’s detective stories or Stoker’s *Dracula*). The absence of coauthored novels from the canon, thus, might be partly ascribed to the fact that they belonged to the genres liable to be read and put aside the week after. The fact that they were written in collaboration further demeaned them – due to coeval discourses on the pros and cons of coauthorship, which will be explored in the course of this work.

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23 Another case of a husband and wife collaboration is that of the American feminist Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) and her husband – seventeen years her junior – Herbert D. Ward. In the early 1890s, they published three coauthored novels: *Come Forth*, *A Lost Hero*, and *The Master of the Magicians*.  

32
Chapter Two: Walter Besant and James Rice

Walter Besant (1836-1901) and James Rice (1843-1882) made literary collaboration fashionable. When their partnership began in 1871, coauthorship in novel writing was only an eccentric writing practice rarely heard of; when Rice died in 1882, it had become the literary fashion of the time, and hundreds of aspiring authors were begging Besant to take them on as his new co-authors, as he remembered in his Autobiography. In ten years, Besant and Rice coauthored nine successful novels and a lot of periodical literature, and their works were reprinted all over the English-speaking world. Years after his collaborative phase had ended, Besant, by then a prominent single literary figure, was still seen as the master of the art of collaborating; his opinions on the subject were continuously looked for and much quoted. His 1892 essay “On Literary Collaboration” sparked a vigorous debate in the press of the time, probably the largest wave of articles on collaboration ever. In the prefaces to the uninterrupted flow of re-editions of his coauthored works and in various commentaries and interviews, he remembered Rice with sentimental nostalgia and recalled their collaborative years in idyllic terms. He was often heavily criticised, but that did not mean that his opinions were any less famous. On the contrary, Besant’s views on collaboration had a great impact on late Victorian imagination. Strangely enough, with the passing of the years Besant became increasingly colder on the issue of taking a collaborator, and before his death he ended up strongly advising against it. He repeatedly came to affirm that collaboration was good for storytelling, but “to touch the deeper things one must be alone.” (Lit. Col., 203) In his 285-page-long Autobiography, only seven pages are assigned to his collaboration with Rice, and he concluded that “after all, an artist must necessarily stand alone.” (188) How could it be that a man who devoted ten years of his life to collaboration, whose fame derived entirely from it, who made it a fashionable practice, and who (publicly) declared a heavenly relationship with his collaborator – how could it be that such man expressed negative views on coauthorship? Actually, this is not a contradiction. Once examined in detail, Besant and Rice’s collaboration was already based on the principles Besant would declare later in his life, as I will show later in this chapter.

Another mystery surrounds the figure of Walter Besant. In one of the few critical works on the novelist, critic Fred Boege (1956, 249) remarks that, when Besant declared that his name was “known

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24 For references in the present work, the first edition of Besant’s Autobiography (London: Hutchinson & Co. 1902) has been used. From now on, it will be referred to by Autobiography. Besant died before finishing it; he left only a hand-written draft, which was completed and typed by some friends of his, and appeared in print the year after his death.
25 “On Literary Collaboration” appeared in the New Review 6, no. 33 (February 1892): 200-209. From now on, it will be referred to by ‘Lit. Col.’
all over the English-speaking world,” (Autobiography, 215) “he was stating an obvious truth that any of his readers would have assented to.” His novels, both those written in collaboration and those written alone, sold by thousands of hundreds; he founded and basically directed the Society of Authors, the first successful association for writers which greatly changed the status of authors in the United Kingdom; he was the key figure in the building of the first institution – the Palace of Delight – aimed at offering education and recreation to the inhabitants of the London East End, now a part of Queen’s University;26 his activities brought him in close connection, both personal and professional, with the most important men of letters of the period, and they all – Tennyson, Collins,27 Kipling, Stevenson, Hardy, James – talked of him with respect; in 1895 he was knighted by Queen Victoria. Doubtlessly Besant had an impact on his age. He was probably more in the public eye than any other author of his time. And yet, a few decades after his death he was forgotten. Besant finds no place in the common reference works; at best, he is mentioned and dismissed in a few lines or in a footnote.28 “Even popular novelists,” notes Boege, “are seldom so utterly neglected; yet Besant was so much more than a popular novelist.” (1956, 249) As celebrated and widely-known as he was during his lifetime, it may seem puzzling that shortly after his death he descended into oblivion. “What cause moved him,” provocatively asks Boege, “to fall off his towering eminence and plummet to the murkiest depths of Limbo?” (1956, 250)

Boege ascribes the spectacular fall to the overwork Besant did in his last twenty years, leading him to do too many things at the same time – and no one well. From the end of his partnership with Rice, Besant kept writing an average of one novel per year; he was daily engaged with the Society of Authors and its journal, The Author, which he edited; his commitment to a series of philanthropic causes is impressive; he carried on researches for and the writing of a colossal project called A Survey

26 The Palace of Delight, or the People’s Palace, was originally a recreation hall in the East End, and was built by subscription in 1887 as a direct result of Besant’s novel All Sorts and Conditions of Men, which had first projected it in 1882.

27 In 1889 Besant was asked by Wilkie Collins, then in his last illness, to complete his novel Blind Love. The story was already basically planned, and Besant had to finish the writing “without any obvious break in the style,” (Lit. Col., 202) by following Collins’s notes. The novel was published in 1890. Collins’s choice fell on Besant not only because of mutual esteem, but also because Besant was used to dealing with someone else’s work: it was common knowledge that the first chapters of Besant and Rice’s first novel had been written by the latter, with Besant intervening to develop and write the rest of the book; thanks to his ten years of literary collaboration, Besant would not be daunted by the challenging task.

28 Just to list a few examples, in The Oxford Companion to English Literature (7th edition, ed. by Dinah Birch) Besant is quickly dismissed and his various activities are indistinctly listed; the main focus is put on his activity for the Society of Authors. In The Dictionary of National Biography, Besant is not even mentioned; surprisingly, James Rice is mentioned, and in his entry the partnership with Besant is briefly discussed, but it basically consists of a list of their joint novels. (vol. XVI, 988-989) In The English Novel: An Introduction (ed. by Terry Eagleton), neither Besant nor Rice are mentioned. In the Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism (ed. by Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcom Kesall, et al., 2000) Besant is only mentioned in connection with Henry James’s essay “The Art of Fiction,” which, by the way, took its title from Besant’s homonymous work. (603) Rice is not mentioned.
of London, which ambitiously aimed at reconstructing the history and topography of the capital from prehistoric times to the end of the nineteenth century (but he died before completing it). With so many things at hand, the quality of his literary work inevitably fell. In the 1880s he had been in high repute as a novelist: only Meredith and Hardy were ranked above him; (Boege 1956, 250) then, an unceasing flow of inferior novels characterised by machine-like dreariness led to his devaluation, and his fame as a novelist started to wane. When he died, his reputation was based more on his philanthropic and social activities than on his creative writing. He had come to be seen more as a public figure than as a novelist.

Boege’s explanation is undoubtedly accurate. Yet this chapter suggests two more reasons for Besant’s fall from the tops of Parnassus into oblivion. Firstly, Besant’s attitude towards writing openly contradicted widespread assumptions of his time: in the last eighteen years of his life, he published several commentaries on the craft of fiction writing,29 and they all plainly exposed his practical and commercial views. His Autobiography, in particular, did much harm to his reputation. There, but also in the previous commentaries, Besant stated that fiction was an art like any other and that it could be practised as a job like any other. “Besant was clear-headed and unabashed in his conception of writing as a profession,” justly observes Koestenbaum. (1989, 161) He gave details of his working method, declaring for instance that he worked on his novels every morning from nine to half-past-twelve; he set down several extremely precise, almost pedantic rules, which according to him would enable aspiring authors to write good novels; he even advocated for schools of fiction. Although at times still clinging to the concept of the literary genius, Besant frankly admitted that his novels were wares of commerce, and he did not apologise for it. Buying and selling dominated his conception of writing. His engagement with the Society of Authors, whose main aim was the recognition and the protection of literary property, thus permitting writers to live on their work, was not perceived positively by many of his contemporaries. The association of literature and money was widely disliked. His attitude lowered him in the eyes of the public, who liked to think of their favourite writers as geniuses who worked for art’s sake following mysterious inspiration. Therefore, this chapter argues that Besant’s too sincere commentaries on novel writing and his direct engagement with the Society of Authors contributed to lower his reputation perhaps even more than his later, mediocre novels.

Secondly, this work suggests that Besant’s association with literary partnership further contributed to his debasement. In the Victorian imagination, collaboration in novel writing did not enjoy a high reputation: as we will see, it was perceived as a funny or stimulating experimental writing method or as a useful stepping stone to gain the confidence necessary to write alone; in any case, it was not considered good for producing valuable literary work. Besant himself contributed to feed such views in his commentaries. His opinions had a great impact on his contemporaries. Paradoxically, Besant contributed to his own ruin.

**Before the collaboration: the goblins**

When Walter Besant and James Rice started to collaborate, the former was thirty-five years old and the latter twenty-eight. Both had already tried their hands at novel writing. Both had been unsuccessful: Rice had dashed off a novel in the magazine he owned, *Once a Week*, which was never printed in book form; Besant had worked for years on a novel and had sent it to a publishing house: it “was read and refused” and consequently “consigned, while still in manuscript, to the flames” by its author. (*MFB*, 3-4) The two evidently had literary ambitions but seemed unable to realise them. Besant was a Cambridge graduate, and had just spent six years teaching mathematics at the Royal College in Mauritius. In his *Autobiography*, which begins in Robinson Crusoe style praising the benefits of being born into the middle class, Besant extensively accounts for his childhood in Portsmouth, the same town where Dickens was born some twenty years earlier. In 1855 he entered Christ College, Cambridge, with a view to become a clergyman. However, he was never really convinced about taking the orders: since his childhood, he dreamed of being a writer. In his solo novel *All In a Garden Fair* (1882), Besant portrayed himself in one of the protagonists, a boy with literary aspirations. This novel would later inspire Kipling to leave India and follow his dream to make a

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30 No comment on their collaboration and how it worked was made by either Besant or Rice while it was still on. After his partner’s death, Besant waited five years before revealing some details and expressing his opinion on their collaboration. We do not have any written comment on the collaboration by James Rice. Also, very little information is available about Rice’s life.

31 About seventy pages of the *Autobiography* are devoted to Besant’s childhood, narrating with exasperating details anecdotes of his youth, of his family, of the people in his neighbourhood, and of his teachers.
career as a writer. However, during Cambridge years, Besant became absorbed in Mathematics, and he “ceased to think of poetry, and for three years almost ceased to think of writing at all.” (Autobiography, 78) After a university career “not greatly distinguished,” (Autobiography, 88) Besant was just about to enter the clergy with little conviction, when a chance to escape presented itself: a friend told him of an opportunity to work as a professor of Mathematics at the Royal College, in Mauritius; he applied and got the job, and in 1861 a young Besant left England to spend six years in Port Louis, then a British colony. Since his job left him with a lot of free time, he devoted himself to a series of a “voracious and indiscriminate” reading, (Autobiography, 150) in order to “fill up many important gaps.”

I was writing all the time. I wrote essays for the most part, which have long since been torn up. In truth I was not in the least precocious, and I spent these years in getting control over my pen, which at first ran along of its own accord, discursive, rambling, and losing its original purpose. No one would believe the trouble I had in making the pen a servant instead of a master; in other words, in forcing the brain to concentration. (Autobiography, 141)

The fact that he showed no natural talent for writing did not hinder him. On the contrary, Besant wrote “all the time.” In his late-life commentaries, he insisted on the importance of practice, as he distinguished between what he called ‘facility of writing’ and ‘writing well:’

32 In Something of Myself (Kipling 1987), Kipling thanked Besant’s novel All in a Garden Fair for the encouragement it had given him at a time of deep crisis, and called it “a pivot experience.” (71) In 1886, he was about twenty years old and living in India, working as a journalist. He had reached a point of blank discouragement: “I had come to the edge of all endurance. As I entered the empty house in the dusk there was no more in me except the horror of a great darkness […] Late at night I picked up a book by Walter Besant which was called All in a Garden Fair. It dealt with a young man who desired to write; who came to realize the possibilities of common things seen, and who eventually succeed in his desire. What its merits may be from today’s ‘literary’ standpoint I do not know. But I do know that the book was my salvation in sore personal need, and with the reading and re-reading it became to me a revelation, a hope and strength.” (71) Inspired by the novel, Kipling started to make plans: “I built up in my head – always with the book to fall back upon – a dream of the future that sustained me. To Walter Besant singly and solely do I owe this – as I told him when we met, and he laughed, rolled in his chair, and seemed pleased.” (71) Some pages later, Kipling records that he started to write fiction: “I was ripe for change and, thanks always to All in a Garden Fair, had a notion now of where I was heading.” (76)

33 Besant’s Autobiography contains an informative account of life at Cambridge in the 1850s (79-102). Besant remembers the literary taste of the students of the time: according to his memories, among the contemporary writers Dickens was the most read novelist, while Tennyson was the most appreciated poet (91). He writes also that the profession of letters was “regarded with pity and contempt;” (92) journalism was not held in good consideration as well, except writing for The Times.

34 Besant insisted a lot on the importance of reading for the aspiring novelist: according to him, one has to read as much as possible in order to form a solid basis before attempting to write: “the first duty of the young writer is to read.” (PB, 40) Besant also gave a list of the authors to be read “absolutely:” “it is indispensable that he should read and know Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Fielding, Smollett, Johnson, Cowper, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, Charles Lamb, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne.” (PB, 41) As for foreign books, Besant recommended Voltaire, Goethe, Cervantes, Dante, Victor Hugo and Tolstoy. “A young writer who has read all these authors is […] well-equipped.” (PB, 42) Besant does not include Latin or Greek authors, because, according to him, their knowledge is not absolutely necessary, even if the reading of some classics can be useful.
As a first rule, I advise the student to write something every day. This rule does not mean that he should write in order to acquire facility of writing. Mere facility is nothing [...]. Indeed, it is a dangerous and suspicious gift. The writer who has facility of the pen finds that his pen is his master: it runs away with him: it will not stick to the subject; in other words, the writer’s brain is not under his control. (PB, 49)

In *The Pen and The Book*, a practical guide to the profession of letters in which Besant offered his ‘recipe’ to become a successful writer, the rule ‘write something every day’ was given pride of place. The section “Preparation for the Literary Life” explains that daily exercise is not aimed at writing fast, but rather at “master[ing] and subdue[ing] the brain,” that is, at being able to write about “one thing, and one thing only,” without digressions. (PB, 49) The greater the gift of imagination, the harder it is to acquire mastery over one’s pen: “[t]he brain must be trained to obey, and the will must be taught to command.” (PB, 50) Therefore, the aspiring author has to direct his efforts at the writing of “a dialogue on a given subject: an essay on a given subject: the description of a piece of country: a portrait: something that will restrain the pen; prevent the style from becoming slipshod; and will make the […] narrative or argument direct and straightforward.” (PB, 98)

Besant made no mystery that he lacked what was commonly known as ‘genius.’ He repeatedly said that he acquired his capacity for writing well through “painstaking practice.” (Autobiography, xvii) He also reported in each one of his commentaries that his first novel had been a failure. For two years during his time in Mauritius, he devoted all his free time to the writing of a novel that was rejected by publishers. The returned manuscript, and the failure it represented, at first became a source of anxiety to Besant:

> the papers lay in my chambers for a long time afterwards in a corner covered with dust. They got upon my nerves. I used to see a goblin sitting on the pile; an amorphous goblin, with tearful eyes, big head, shapeless body, long arms and short legs. He would wag his head mournfully. “Don’t make another like me,” he said. “Not like me. I couldn’t bear to meet another like me.” At last I plucked up courage and burned the whole pile. Then my goblin vanished and I saw him no more. (Autobiography, 141-42)

However, years later, Besant turned the rejection of his first novel into an anecdote that corroborated his theories on fiction writing, in order to prove the importance of insisting, and of not being daunted by refusal. He even said he was grateful for the lesson learned: “after the first pangs of

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35 Almost identical accounts of this episode are present in *The Art of Fiction*, 91-93; RMM 1887, vii; MFB, 2-3. This is not a strange occurrence: Besant liked to recycle his writing. His opinion on topics connected with writing was often requested, and he made economies by re-using the same bits.
disappointment, [I] plucked up heart, and began to ponder over the lessons contained in that opinion.”

(The Art of Fiction, 93)

After the rejection of the work of two years, however, Besant began to feel burdened by “an increased tendency to a form of melancholia.” (Autobiography, 142) He therefore took a vacation and went to visit the Island of Réunion in 1864. The written account of his sojourn on the island was what would put Besant in contact with his future collaborator: once back in England in 1867, Besant sent an account of this trip to a London paper, Once a Week. He heard nothing in reply, and did not receive the manuscript back; after some time, he found out by chance that it had been already published without him being informed. Moreover, the article was full of misspelt names and other mistakes. Indignant at the treatment of his work, Besant wrote to demand an explanation. He “received a note in reply, signed James Rice, begging that [he] would call upon him.” (RMM, vi) The explanation was simple: Rice had just taken over the magazine, and, on finding Besant’s paper with no indication as to the name of the author or anything to show that it had not been corrected, he published it.

I found my Editor a pleasant and friendly creature, anxious of set himself right with me, and desirous of hearing again from me. I departed with a promise on my part to send him sketches, notes of travel, notes on literature, essays – anything that I chose; and on his, to receive and consider everything that I should send.

Very soon I got into the habit of dropping into the little back office in Tavistock street, generally with some small contributions, and of staying for a talk. (RMM 1887, vi)

For the next two years, Besant worked as a regular contributor to the paper, and a friendship developed between Besant and the editor of Once a Week.

Like Besant, Rice was a Cambridge man (but he went to Queen’s College). He studied Law and for a short time practised at the Temple. Soon his literary ambitions led him to abandon his job and seize the opportunity of buying Once a Week. At first, Rice contented himself with editing, but he wanted more: he wrote a serial called The Mortimers that was published in Once a Week from February to October 1870. The novel had a promising plot, but there was one problem: Rice could not write. “The result was not satisfactory,” comments Besant, “and he wisely resolved not to republish it until he
could find time to rewrite it. That time never came.” (RMM 1887, vii).

The story of *The Mortimers* is indeed hopelessly crude, devoid of the slightest ability, and mechanically written.

On his return to England, Besant had resolved to become a writer, one way or another: “I would not go back to the Royal College of Mauritius, nor would I take a mastership in any English school. I was never a teacher to the manner born [...] I understood that my opening was to be made – somehow or other, as yet I knew not how – by literature.” (*Autobiography*, 150) Since he did not like the thought of living in privation, he got a job as a secretary of the Society for the Systematic and Scientific Exploration of Palestine, a place he kept for the following eighteen years. Only in 1885, at the peak of his fame as a novelist, he would resign from the job: “my office was continually with editors and publishers and visitors, who came to me not on account of their interest in Palestine. I therefore left off drawing the salary.” (*Autobiography*, 179) He remained an honorary secretary until his death. So, Besant turned to literature as his only profession only at fifty, when his fame was more than solid, and his novels “gave [him] an income which would be called handsome even at the bar.” (*Autobiography*, 180)

This job allowed Besant to live comfortably (the annual salary was £300), and left him with a lot of free time to pursue his literary career:

although my office hours were supposed to be from ten to four, [...] there was not enough work to occupy a quarter of the time. [...] After the letters had been answered I could carry on my work in a

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36 The only other work by Rice alone is a two-volume *History of the Turf*. It was noticed in *The Times* (21 November 1879) as a very unmethoical work. The *Dictionary of National Biography* (vol. XVI, 988) comments that “it rather merits commendation as a lively contribution to the subject than a serious history, Rice being more inclined to gossip pleasantly about the events of his own time than to retrieve the recollections of the past.” The second volume, in particular, consists mainly on entertaining, desultory essays. “The book, as a whole, is creditable to his abilities, but can only be regarded as a stopgap” (*Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XVI, 988)

37 *RMM* 1887 is written in a sentimental tone, and after that Besant tries to save Rice from a bad reputation by adding that “it was not a work of which he had any reason to be ashamed.” (vii)

38 The Palestine Association (PA) was first established in London in 1805 “for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of the Geography, Natural History, & Antiquities of Palestine and its vicinity, with a view to the illustration of the Holy Writings,” as declared in their inauguration meeting. (qtd. in Kark and Goren 2011, 268) However, it did not have permanent quarters (meeting were held at the house of William Hamilton, its founder), the choice of the emissaries to be sent to the Holy Land was unsuccessful, and it suffered heavy money losses. In 1834, it was formally dissolved and incorporated into the newly established Royal Geographical Society (RGS), but had ceased to be active many years before. Scholarly work in Palestine was favoured by the opening of the first British consulate in Jerusalem in 1838, and by the establishment there of the Anglican-German Bishopric in 1840. The PA was the forerunner of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), established in 1865, which carried out impressive comprehensive research, exploration and mapping projects of Palestine. See Kark and Goren 2011.

39 Besant’s *Autobiography*, like all his writings, has an extremely practical and precise attitude towards every subject, including money matters. It reports minutely the cost of everything at the time, thus becoming an interesting source of information about the cost of life in London in the late 1860s and the early 1870s. For instance, a rent for a lower-middle class apartment was £40 a year; laundry, lights, coals, and breakfast £70 a year; dinners cost him 30 shillings a week.
perfectly quiet office, I could give the afternoons to visitors, and from four till seven I was again free to carry on my work without interruption in my chambers. (Autobiography, 168)

A point much insisted upon in all Besant’s commentaries is not to rely exclusively on literature to earn a living: that would mean poverty and starvation, thus degrading one to hack writing. Besant always showed contempt for the figure of the hack, because, being obliged to live on his writing, he would care more for the quantity than for the quality of his work. A hack would worry about the money and not worry about the work: “I was resolved that I would not become a publisher’s hack; that I would not hang about publishers’ offices and beg for work; nor write introductions and edit new editions at five guineas the job with a preface, an introductory life, notes, and an index thrown in. I meant to […] live an independent life.” (Autobiography, 151-52) Besant was proud that “never at any time I was dependent on my pen for subsistence,” (Autobiography, 167) and that he was not “compelled to go pot-boiling.” (Autobiography, 172) He would advise “everybody who proposes to make a bid for literary success to do so with some backing,” like “a mastership in a school, a Civil service clerkship, a post as a secretary to some institution or society; anything, anything, rather than dependence on the pen, and the pen alone.” (Autobiography, 168) Such insistence on this issue reveals Besant’s preoccupation with the financial position of writers, a cause for which he fought through his later Society of Authors. Also, Besant lamented the solitude of this period: he started to notice that writers usually stood alone, and that they lacked the possibilities to make connections with one another. This would be another reason for his founding of the Society.

With a lot of time on his hands and no pressing need for money, he pondered what to do. Not feeling confident enough to try with another novel, the first big work he completed and published was a lengthy book on early French poetry, derived from his readings during his stay in Mauritius. His Studies on Early French Poetry (1868) gained him a reputation as a scholar, and it opened for him the doors of magazines;40 thanks to it, Besant came to be “regarded benevolently by certain editors as a man of some promise.” (Autobiography, 169) He thus started to write articles and essays on motely subjects for various periodicals, of which the Autobiography gives a detailed account. Yet, Besant had great ambitions: he wanted to write fiction, not to make comments on it. He disliked the idea of being a critic and a reviewer – and he made no mystery of it. So, he tried with short stories for the Christmas numbers of Once a Week. One of these stories, a fantasy work called “Titania’s Farewell” (Once a Week, Christmas number 1869), impressed Rice. This apparently insignificant short story – and indeed insignificant it is – proved to be a turning point in Besant’s life, as Rice, struck with the story, began to think about writing a novel in collaboration with him: “[t]o me this

flimsy trifle became of the utmost importance, because it changed the whole current of my life. In place of a writer of ‘studies,’ ‘appreciations,’ and the lighter kind of criticism, I became a novelist.” (Autobiography, 182) Here Besant’s Autobiography interrupts the account of the collaboration to launch into a long and bitter attack on the figure of the literary critic:

[n]othing could have been more fortunate. I now understand that there is no branch of the literary life more barren and dreary than that of writing notes upon poets and other writers dead and gone. I have seen the effect of this left upon so many. First, everybody can do it, well or ill; therefore there is a striving for something distinctive, resulting in extravagance, exaggerations, studied obscurity, the pretence of seeing more than other people can see in an author, the parade of an inferior writer as a great genius; so we have the revival of a poet deservedly forgotten – all pour l’effet, and all leading directly to habitual dishonesty, sham, and the estimation of form above matter. […] I am continually grateful for the accident which took me out of the ranks of reviewers and criticasters and placed me in the company of the story-tellers. (Autobiography, 182, 184)

Besant mainly reproached critics for giving more importance to style than to the content – a point he insisted upon in The Art of Fiction as well. He complained that most critics, after a few years in the business, “fail to understand matter or to look for anything but form. It is this they look for and this alone that they talked about.” (Autobiography, 182) Comparing fiction to paintings, Besant maintained that the first thing to strike observers is always the story, the subject; only later they notice the form in which the story is told:

[c]onsider, for instance, the way of the world in a picture gallery. The crowd go round the rooms from picture to picture; they stop before any canvas that tells a story; they study the story; they do not greatly care for, nor do they inquire too closely into, the method of telling a story – most of them never ask at all how the story is told. (Autobiography, 183)

In The Art of Fiction, he reported the same example:

[i]f you go to the Academy any day, and listen to the comments of the crowd – which is a very instructive thing to do, and one recommended to young novelists – you will presently become aware that the only thing they look for in a picture is the story which it tells. […] Most of the other qualities of the picture, and of the novel as well, all that has to do with the technique, escape the general observer. (The Art of Fiction, 38-39)

On the contrary, he lamented that most critics devoted their attention to language and style, which are, according to him, a matter of fashion. This category was labelled by Besant “sham critics,” whom he distinguished from the “true critics.” (Autobiography, 183-84) “True critics” show the reader how to look first for the intention of the book, and only next how to examine the method employed in carrying out that intention: “the true critic considers the story which the author has attempted to tell,
as the first point; the sham critic considers the language and the style (which is, with him, a fashion of the day), and goes no further.” (Autobiography, 184)

Another problem with critics underlined by Besant was the fact that they were usually overworked. “[S]our, poor, […] and bitter,” (186) reviewers had to review a huge quantity of books in too little time and for too low a pay. “There are many such unfortunates about. They pretend to be leaders; they give themselves airs of superiority; […] their lot is still the lot of Grub Street; they are […] children on Gibeon who hew wood and draw water and do hack work for their employers, for the pay of a solicitor’s clerk.”⁴¹ (186) Here Besant blamed the editors of papers, who expected reviewers to pronounce a judgement upon a dozen novels per week; consequently, under such conditions books were not properly read, and judgements were “either miserably inadequate or dishonest.” (Autobiography, 193) Inevitably the reviewer “loses the power of judgement; he scamps the reading so persistently that he becomes unable to read; […] appreciation is impossible where there has been no real reading.” (194) As a result, the reviewer almost never dared to greatly praise a novel, “because praise is a definite thing, unless it is general and meaningless;” (194) real, valuable praise had to be based on actual, attentive reading; so the only kind of praise such “miserable little paragraphs” could offer “carried no conviction” (195) and were written in general terms. Conversely, to criticise was faster, easier and safer. Besant denounced the many mistakes made by reviewers, all due to hasty reading:

[s]ometimes, […] in his haste, he [the reviewer] makes dire blunders. […] Thus, a novel praised to the skies one week was slated pitilessly, a few weeks later, in the same weekly! I remember once in the Athenaeum a notice of a novel of my own. The book was dismissed in eight or ten lines, every one of which contained a separate misstatement concerning the story. It was […] stated that the whole action of the book took place in a banker’s office. There was no mention of such a thing as a bank or a banker in the whole book. (Autobiography, 194)

Moreover, in the crowd of new novels, “one novel becomes as much worth mentioning as another; George Meredith – as actually happened once in a ‘literary’ journal – may be dismissed in a paragraph between the works of two schoolgirls.” (Autobiography, 194) Besant, in the autumn of his life, vividly expressed his frustration and amazement at the ways of the coeval literary market; the picture that emerges is that of a frenetic and hectic business. Such hasty and superficial line of conduct is called by Besant “a suicidal policy:”

[it] is to me, I confess, a continual subject of wonder that an editor who allows books to be noticed in batches – ten or a dozen every week – does not understand that by doing so he actually throws away

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⁴¹ Low pays in the literary business were an issue that Besant took to heart, and he denounced the injustice of the “poverty-stricken literary men” (RMM 1887, 8) in many of his writings.
the whole weight of his paper as a critical organ – the whole weight of his authority. […] Yet, in one paper after another, the suicidal policy is preserved. (*Autobiography*, 195)

Such policy was also carried out for the sake of pleasing publishers, who paid papers to have their novels reviewed in order to obtain a line of praise that they could quote for marketing purposes. Besant advocated a calmer, more thoughtful system of reviews, which would lead to a fair, dispassionate, and competent criticism: “why should not a responsible paper select one or two novels a week, as worthy, not of a paragraph among a batch of other paragraphs, but of a serious review by some one who is competent to speak of a work of art.” (196) This would benefit not only authors, but also the public and the papers. The public, “who has for the most part studied no canons of criticism and formed consciously no literary standards,” (196) would profit from the instruction of a proper guide; the papers, on their part, would recover credibility and authority. Indeed, according to Besant, reviews were so many and so notoriously unreliable and inconsistent that they had no influence on readers’ choices. Even bad reviews could not stop a bad novel, because “condemnation” produced “no effect upon the mind of the reader.” (195) Being able neither to orient readers towards the best novels, nor to prevent them from reading trashy ones, reviewers and critics had lost their purpose.

The last point in Besant’s argument against critics was that they often did not keep “the personal element” out of their judgement, so that they praised their own friends and abused their enemies (195): in a burst of anger, he wrote that a critic was often “a hack who rolls the log for his friend and slates his enemy.” (196) Editors were in this matter equally blameworthy, because they allowed critics to review their acquaintances, mostly out of carelessness. In this way, “one knows beforehand, when certain books appear, the organs in which they will be praised or assailed.” (195) He proposed the model of the *New York Critic*, where apparently every reviewer was “on his honour,” not to undertake a criticism of the work of a personal friend or a personal enemy. (195) Following this rule would allow papers to “maintain their honour.” (196)

Besant devoted to his polemical critique a whole chapter of his *Autobiography*, which he entitled “Critics and Criticasters.” (ch. X)42 However, the friends who edited the manuscript found that Besant’s extreme bitterness could compromise his reputation, and a long section of the preface tries to tone it down:

[i]n another place in his autobiography Sir Walter Besant’s words are more insistent that they need have been to give a fair representation of his feelings. I refer to the repeated allusions to the short

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42 Besant’s long and bitter attack on critics and reviewers in his *Autobiography* clashes with moved thanks in some of his previous writings. For instance, in *RMM* 1887 (xii) Besant wrote: “I especially thank the reviewers of our books, who have always been most generous and appreciative.”
comings of a certain class of literary critic. Here again, I am convinced, the appearance of acerbity is out of proportion to the real state of his sentiments.” (xiii)

The preface tries to justify Besant’s sourness ascribing it to the fact that “Besant was hurt and annoyed […] because, as he conceived their duty, they had no proper qualifications to perform it.” (xiii) Indeed, Besant had denounced that a large number of critics had not enough learning to be able to correctly direct the public’s taste: “the reviewer must be serious and educated. He must know what the canons of criticism mean; he must be trustworthy.” (196) Having little knowledge of literature, they had no right to stand between the writer and the public, or to tell authors what was good or bad in their novels. The writer of the preface says that Besant “scented in the sayings of these ill-equipped judges the savour of charlatanism that always offended him.” (xiv) However, the same ascribed this conviction of Besant’s to the fact that he ignored how “modern knowledge” is acquired: in the 1880s and the 1890s, it was much easier “to get a working knowledge of an author without deep reading” (xiv) than it was in the 1850s and the 1860s, when Besant was a Cambridge student:

[i]n the ‘fifties and ‘sixties,’ if a man wanted to know about – for example – Rabelais or Balzac, he would have to read their works. And he would have to read them all, if he had no well-informed friend to guide him in making a selection; otherwise he could come to no judgement that would be worth quoting […] To-day, thanks to Besant, among other men of letters, there are monographs and exact treaties which deal with all accepted classics, so that it is possible for the critic to speak and write as though his reading had been vastly wider than is the case, and at the same time to be fairly correct. I think Besant hardly realised this fact when he put down the men […] as necessarily wrong in what they said. (xiv)

The authors of “Ready-Money Mortiboy”

It was not until the autumn of 1871 that Rice first made a serious proposition to me which changed the whole of my work for life. He proposed that I should join him in writing a novel. (RMM 1887, vii)

One day […] [Rice] told me that he had an idea […] which seemed to him not only possible, but hopeful. He proposed that we should take up this idea together, work it out, if it approved itself to me as it did to him, and write a novel upon it together. (MFB, 10)

After the appearance of ‘Titania’s Farewell,’ Rice came to me with a proposal. It was that I would collaborate with him in writing a novel. (Autobiography, 186)

All Besant’s accounts of the beginning of his literary partnership with Rice are more or less the same. After the disastrous serialisation of The Mortimers (1870), Rice had thought of another story. He had planned the plot and had drawn the main character. He had written the first chapters, but, once again, he must have realised that the work would not come out well. He needed an ally, someone who would
help him in the writing. He had been impressed by Besant’s short stories, in particular by “Titania’s Farewell.” So he thought of joining forces with his paper’s contributor, who could write with facility and with whom he was becoming increasingly familiar. The perception of coauthorship as an alliance in order to succeed in what, if done independently, would be a failure, recurs in a number of other sources of the time. For example, in Robert Hichens’s short story “The Collaborators,” (1896) a struggling writer tries to convince a friend to collaborate with him on a novel using the following argument: “I don’t wish to force the proposition on you. Only we are both ambitious devils. We are both poor. We are both determined to try a book. Have we more chance of succeeding if we try one together? I believe so”, to which his friend replies: “Yes. Either of us might fail alone; together we should succeed.” (Hitchens 1896, 140)

A similar conversation could have taken place between Besant and Rice in the autumn of 1871. Besant narrates that Rice made his proposal, and that he took a few days to consider it; then he agreed, and their prolific enterprise began. Besant only put as a condition that “the thing, whether good or bad, was to be anonymous.” (RMM 1887, viii) As a matter of fact, Besant and Rice’s first five novels were published anonymously, both in the instalments and in book form. The first one was *Ready-Money Mortiboy*: it was originally serialised in *Once a Week* from January to June 1872, and soon after that it was published in three-volume format by Tinsley. The novel had no authorial identification at all, as can be seen from its title page. (figure 3)

43 Robert Hichens’s “The Collaborators” belongs to a collection of short stories entitled “The Folly of Eustace and Other Stories” (New York: Appleton, 1896, 138-175). It tells the story of two striving journalists who dream of becoming novelists, Jack Henley and his Oxford friend Andrew Trenchard. When Hichens wrote the story, coauthorship was a widespread phenomenon, and the text reflects this: “[w]hy shouldn’t we collaborate? […] Everybody does it nowadays.” (138) Henley thinks that collaboration may prove a useful strategy for them both to reach “popular success”, (139) because each will correct the other’s shortcomings: “[y]our head is a deuced good one, Andrew; but […] you are too excitable and too intense to be left quite to yourself […]. You can give me everything I lack, and I can give you a little sense of humour, and act as a drag upon the wheel.” (138) Henley is the matter-of-fact, commonsense writer, while Trenchard is the stereotypical unreliable artist, the ‘genius’: “[y]ou have the imagination, the grip, the stern power to evolve the story, to make it seem inevitable […]. I can lighten the way. […] I can […] check you when you wish to make the story impossibly horrible or fantastic to the verge of the insane. […] Cheer up, old fellow, and be thankful that you possess a corrective in me.” (140) Trenchard agrees to the experiment: “I need a collaborator, an opposite, who is yet in sympathy with me.” (140) The idea of sympathy as a necessary ingredient for literary partnership is a very important one, and it will be discussed in chapter five. Henley and Trenchard’s collaboration, however promising, proves unsuccessful, as the latter keeps writing on his own during the night, without paying attention to his friend’s opinions; at last, Henley decides to quit, since he feels that the book is not his at all. But a final surprise awaits him and the reader: Trenchard has been writing day by day what is actually happening to him (drug addiction and the love/hate for the woman who introduced him to it); in the end, he leaves the manuscript unfinished for Henley to complete it, as he proceeds to murder his lover and drowns himself into the Thames.
Despite the choice to remain anonymous, a visual element was devised to subtly provide hints about the authors’ identities. (figure 4)
The emblem consisted of a circle, within which the initials of the authors’ names were drawn. The letters R (for Rice) on the left, and B (for Besant) on the right, though separate and distinguishable, are intertwined; the ampersand between their initials makes the involvement of two persons plain. The artist was F. Waddy, illustrator of *Once a Week* (however, the emblem is not present in any instalment of their works).

That *Ready-Money Mortiboy* was an immediate success is an ascertained fact. The year after its first publication in three volumes by Tinsley, another edition, in one volume, came out by Henry St. King & Co within “The Cornhill Library of Fiction,” a series of “books of such merit that readers will care to preserve them on their shelves […]”, well printed on good paper, handsomely bound, with a Frontispiece and […] sold at the price of 3s. 6d. each,” as the catalogue at the end of the volume reads. At the beginning a number of blurbs report opinions of the press about the novel from fourteen different papers. The reviewers (from *Pall Mall Gazette*, *Athenaeum*, *Figaro*, *Bell’s Weekly Messenger*, *Echo*, etc.) all talk about “the author” of *Ready-Money Mortiboy*: the use of the singular reveals that the public was not aware of the double authorship when the novel first came out – since it was published anonymously, people did not even think of that option. In 1872, coauthorship in novel-writing was still an exceptional case. Besides, apart from the emblem, no other hint had been given as to the collaborative nature of the work. The public’s assumption of a single authorship is also a proof of the compact and coherent style of the novel, where the two hands are not visible (the “textual unity” Besant would talk about in “On Literary Collaboration,” as will be discussed later).

The double authorship (but not the identities of the coauthors) was revealed by the end of the year, precisely on December 7, 1872, with the publication in *Once a Week* of the first instalment of their second novel, *My Little Girl*, which presented the formula “by the authors of *Ready-Money Mortiboy*.” The formula “by the author of”, whose use was nothing new in the publishing business, was adapted to the dual authorship and turned into the plural form. This shows that the two authors had no intention to conceal the collaborative nature of their novels: this constituted a double mystery for the reader, as their works were surrounded not only by anonymity, but by double anonymity. By looking at some reviews of *My Little Girl*, it emerges that the double authorship struck the critics, and many reflected on the originality of this practice. The *Standard* remarked that

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44 This visual element appeared for the first time on the title page of the book edition of *Ready-Money Mortiboy* and would be reprinted also on the title pages of their second and third novels, both published by Tinsley. Then, starting from their fourth novel, *The Golden Butterfly*, by the same publisher, it disappeared.

45 Published in volume by Tinsley Brothers in 1873.

46 Reviews reported at the end of the first edition of *By Celia’s Arbour* (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1878), volume 3. From now on it will be referred to by *CA*.
[a]n English novel by two authors, working conjointly, is a phenomenon of rare occurrence, and deserves notice, if only on that account. But the book before us needs no such recommendation; as, for vigour, conception, brightness, freshness of style, and general originality, it altogether stands apart from and above the ordinary run of recent fiction.

The novelty of double authorship alone sufficed to make the novel stand out, a fact that, within less than two decades, with the expansion of the practice, would no longer be enough. The review in the *Athenaeum* highly praised literary partnership, and reasoned on the benefits of collaboration:

> [t]he principle of co-operation seems to be extending itself to every branch of life. Scientific research has long been indebted to it, and now our novelists are making the experiment of its use. The authors of *Ready-Money Mortiboy* have, we think, reason to be satisfied with the result. A joint capital of experience of life, the friction of separate modes of thinking, with the advantage of mutual criticism, and something of conversational emulation, should have much influence in maintaining the authors’ energy, and eliminating those lapses into weakness, from which the single muse is seldom absolutely exempt. (CA)

Coauthorship is here considered as an experimental practice inspired by the great results it brought in the scientific field. The advantages of coauthorship are listed, in a true ‘two is better than one’ spirit; in particular, the arguments that collaboration implies are seen in a positive light: the “friction of separate modes of thinking” and the “mutual criticism”, according to the critic, purify the novel from the taints a solitary work is inevitably subject to.

Besant and Rice’s next three novels (*With Harp and Crown* 1875, *The Golden Butterfly*, 1876 and *This Son of Vulcan*, 1876), though still anonymous, all present the formula “by the authors of” on their title page, with a list, every time longer, of their previous publications (figure 5).

Reviews of their third novel, *With Harp and Crown* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1875), differently from those of *My Little Girl*, did not focus too much on collaboration itself, but generally praised the quality of the work. *The Hour* commented that “[i]t is a phenomenon really worth notice that we should have in England two authors who work so wonderfully well together as the ‘eminent hands’ which have given us *Ready-Money Mortiboy*, [etc.].” Building on their realism and ironic treatment of humanity’s common faults, the *Examiner* compared Besant and Rice to Dickens and Thackeray, advocating for the novel’s place among the classics:

> our authors supply with dignity the gap in current literature hitherto left by the loss of Thackeray and Dickens. *With Harp and Crown* merits more than the most brilliant ephemeral success – namely, a permanent and honourable place in the classical literature of the country. We find therein liveliness of

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47 See the preface to *The Fate of Fenella* (1982), infra p. 209.
manner united with seriousness of purpose, keen discernment of the rottenness of society evinced without either coarseness or cynicism. (CA)
When Besant and Rice started to collaborate, Thackeray had been dead eight years, and Dickens had
died the year before. By 1875, Besant and Rice’s fame was widespread, and the comparison made by
the press with Dickens in particular was more than a common one.\textsuperscript{48}

By the publication of \textit{The Golden Butterfly} (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1876), the (still anonymous)
‘eminent hands’ had become a guarantee of success, and \textit{The Spectator} makes a comment about the
financial outcome that the production of novels like their latest one brought to them: “[a]s long as
they can draw Phillises and Gilead P. Becks [characters of \textit{The Golden Butterfly}], they will not want
readers, or an adequate popularity at the circulating library, with the pecuniary reward thereto
appertaining.” (CA) This is indeed a confirmation of the huge success of this literary dyad; Besant
and Rice’s novels were not only praised by critics: they bore pecuniary fruits. Further evidence of
this can be found in the preface to the fifth and last anonymous novel, \textit{This Son of Vulcan} (London:
Sampson Low & Co., 1876). This is the only preface written when both authors were alive. It does
not make any explicit comment on coauthorship, yet it is worth looking at for two reasons: the
presence of a telling visual element, and the information it provides about the reception of their
novels. Though \textit{This Son of Vulcan} came out without their names, the preface is signed “W.B.” and
“J.R.” with a curly bracket that ‘embraces’ both initials (figure 6). The bracket unites the two names,
so that a connection is established between them even if they are separate; thus, this apparently
insignificant visual element perfectly expresses the collaborative nature of their work.\textsuperscript{49} As for the
content of the preface, it mainly consists of a strong attack on pirate editions of their works in
America, Canada, India and Australia. From this preface we learn that, by 1876, Besant and Rice’s
works circulated widely also outside Europe.

With bitter irony Besant and Rice thanked “[their] friends the pirates” for the notoriety they
contributed to give them by paying them “the honour of unlicensed reproduction;” the duo also
reminded publishers that “the eight commandment is still supposed to be binding,” thus indirectly
calling them thieves. (preface to \textit{This Son of Vulcan}, iv) The Preface also informed readers that \textit{The
Toronto Globe} was the only colonial paper with which they had made arrangements.

\textsuperscript{48} Similarities between Dickens and Besant are indeed many, partly from accident, partly from shared interests, and the
coeval press did not fail to notice them. Both authors were born in Portsmouth and came from the middle class; both
wrote extensively about the London poor, and were famous for being able to deeply move their readers; both became
personally engaged, despite their extremely busy lives, in philanthropic work; Besant’s Society of Authors recalls
Dickens’s abortive efforts in the same direction. Besant loved and assimilated Dickens’s works: in his second year at
Cambridge, he won a contest organised by the poet Calverley based on a set of (absurdly precise) questions on \textit{The
Pickwick Papers}, from which he gained great distinction (the whole text of the exam is reported in Besant’s
\textit{Autobiography}, 99-102)

\textsuperscript{49} The bracketed names of coauthors was not at all an invention of Besant and Rice’s publishers: the tradition goes back
to the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio, which reads in its title-page \textit{Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis
Beaumont and John Fletcher, Gentlemen}, with Beaumont’s and Fletcher’s names bracketed together.
The first novel to be finally published under their names was their sixth one, *By Celia’s Arbour* (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1878). However, even after Besant and Rice started to sign their works, their names do not appear as often as the “by the authors of Ready-Money Mortiboy” formula. A look at the spines of their novels is illuminating (figure 7): the spine of *By Celia’s Arbour* still presents the usual formula and not their names; the spines of *The Monks of Thelema* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878) and *The Chaplain of the Fleet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1881) bear “Besant & Rice,” but their names are immediately followed by the “authors of Ready-Money Mortiboy” formula.

In short, six spines out of nine show this formula. The spine was a particularly strategic place as it was the only surface visible in a library and in a bookstore, and so it had to contain all the information useful to make the potential reader notice – and buy – the book: exhibiting the title of their first and very successful novel was thought a more effective strategy than displaying their names.

In many reviews and blurbs of the time, the duo’s *oeuvre* was referred to as “The ‘Ready-Money Mortiboy’ Novels.” (figure 8) The fact that their first novel came to indicate a whole category (including also non-novels, like the collection of short stories *The Case of Mr. Lucraft*) is a further proof to its huge success and to the fact that, at the time of their collaboration, Besant and Rice were “the authors of Ready-Money Mortiboy” and their names were not considered important selling factors.
Figure 7 Spines of Walter Besant and James Rice's novels.

Figure 8 Blurb at the beginning of *By Celia's Arbour* by Walter Besant and James Rice (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1878).
As a matter of fact, Ready-Money Mortiboy is perhaps the best novel by Besant and Rice. The title introduces the main theme of the book: money, and the influence it has on people. The coauthors analyse the role money played in contemporary society: how it deeply affected social relationships, how it could corrupt people and make them worse (as in the case of the old protagonist) or how it could make them better (as in the case of his son). The basic idea is taken from the parable of the Prodigal Son, only that in the novel the son comes home ten times worse than he was when he went away. It is the story of a father, an extremely rich, hardened banker called Richard Mortiboy – nicknamed by his fellow citizens Old Ready-Money Mortiboy – and his only son, Dick. The narration begins when Dick, after an absence of twelve years (his father had thrown him out of the house for having forged a cheque when he was nineteen) suddenly comes home. He professes to have reformed, to have become respectable, and – most important of all in the eyes of his materialist father – to have accumulated a fortune in America. Actually, Dick has lived by various expedients, including slave trade, and is a gambler with a plan of robbing his father. Little by little, he gains the old man’s trust, who decides to leave him the bank and all his estates, only to find out, the very moment after the passing of property, that Dick had been lying all the time. Shocked, he is stricken with paralysis. Dick has had his revenge: his father had brought him up without love, only teaching him the love of money, and received what he gave. However, from now on, Dick unexpectedly undergoes a slow change, so that he does not appear as a villain anymore: now the richest man in town, free from worries, he behaves generously and is beloved by the country people; he falls in love with a naive, honest girl, Grace, who does not love him back but who, thanks to her influence, teaches him the values of a simple life (the influence of a good woman is one of Besant and Rice’s most recurrent motifs); he adopts a poor child and decides to raise him as his son. He even repents of what he did to his father. Nevertheless, his process of reforming is put a stop to by a fight with his former partner in gambling, an evil Frenchman, who shoots him. The novel also follows a secondary subplot, the story of Frank Melliship, Dick’s cousin and his opposite. Frank is left to survive by his own means after the suicide of his father, an affectionate but weak man who committed suicide because of debts, leaving his family in a state of destitution. Brought up as a gentleman, and too proud to ask for help, Frank unsuccessfully tries to make a living first by painting, then by singing. He is engaged with Grace, but cannot marry her until he has paid his father’s debts. Frank’s situation seems without solution (and it becomes rather boring); it is solved only by Dick who decides, in an act of generosity, just before his death, to make him a partner of the Mortiboy bank, so that Grace and the man she loves could be

50 The vivid picture of life for the London poor, especially for destitute children, would become a characteristic trait of Besant’s solo fiction.
happy. The story ends with the inauguration of a statue in memory of Dick Mortiboy in the centre of his native town.

Although the novel already presents some of Besant and Rice’s flaws (which will be discussed below), like too many digressions, a very intrusive narrator’s voice, and a touch of misogyny, it has none of the improbable events and the shallow sentimentality that partly characterise their later novels – let alone Besant’s last ones. All in all, the novel is remarkable for the realistic handling of the characters, the many acute observations on nineteenth-century life and the slyly satiric humour. In particular, Dick’s critique to the Victorian hypocrisy of teaching to be contented with the position one is born into, but at the same time putting so much importance on money and social status, is an interesting part of the novel (vol. II, ch. 8) Also the comments on the dullness and passiveness of middle-class women’s life are noteworthy.51

From Ready-Money Mortiboy onwards, Besant and Rice’s fame grew steadily. Their second to last novel, The Chaplain of the Fleet (1880) ran simultaneously in England (Graphic), in the United States (American Queen), in Canada (Toronto Globe) and in Australia (Melbourne Argus); it was almost immediately translated into German and serialised in a Berlin paper (the translator was Paul Jungling, who had translated also their previous novels); it also came out in an Italian magazine, La Frusta (Naples), translated by Marta Saffratti, their usual Italian translator. (London Daily News, 12 Nov. 1880, no. 10.787, p. 2)

During the 1880s and the 1890s, Chatto & Windus, who had published their last novels, made arrangements with Besant to re-issue all their previous works. It was decided their names should read on the title pages, and in some cases on the covers as well. Previously, none of the original covers of Besant and Rice’s works had had their names on, independently of who was the publisher. At the time of their collaboration in the 1870s, neither their names nor their physical aspect was considered relevant: none of the original editions has a frontispiece representing the authors, either together or separately. It was only in the Chatto & Windus 1887 edition of Ready-Money Mortiboy that a portrait of Rice appeared, with the words “yours faithfully, James Rice” inscribed below in an etched facsimile of the writer’s handwriting. This frontispiece fulfilled a commemorative intent, as by 1887 Rice had been dead five years. Such intent was reinforced by the content of the preface, in which Besant went through the various steps of their collaboration. The frontispiece explicitly follows the

51 Referring to Grace’s life, Besant and Rice wrote: “[i]t is the way of things. A man works and hopes, and is sure to be disappointed. A woman waits and hopes, generally getting disappointed too. […] they [the women of Grace’s family] talked, and made each other unhappy. This, I believe, is not uncommon in English households – the sweet domesticity on which we pride ourselves covering an infinite amount of petty miseries, tiny bullyings, nagging, and prickings with tongues as sharp as needles. […] The lower classes of England […] are much superior to the middle classes in this respect. I have found out the reason why. They don’t sit at home so much.” (Ready-Money Mortiboy, vol. II, 303-304)
model established by Charles Dickens in 1839 for the final double number of *Nicholas Nickleby*,
painted by Daniel Maclise and engraved by William Finden. (figure 9)

![Image of Charles Dickens and James Rice](image)

Figure 9 From left to right: portrait of Charles Dickens, frontispiece of numbers 19 and 20 of *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839; portrait of James Rice, Frontispiece of *Ready-Money Mortiboy*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1887.

Dickens’s frontispiece presented a picture with a text: below the portrait the phrase “Faithfully yours” is added with the well-flourished signature ‘Charles Dickens.’ The ‘faithful’ that used to be meant as a comment to the content of the novel (‘a faithful account’), had now come to describe the relationship between the author and his readers, establishing a connection of trust between them. The author’s face and signature, rather than his prose, became the guarantors of identity, “a seal of authenticity,” (Curtis 1995, 241) as if visuality had replaced the uncertainty of a mere name, or of mere words, with a recognizable and authentic image. Thus, Dickens complicated the very concept of authorial identity: to know the writer we must see his face – see it, that is, formally portrayed by a major contemporary painter. The iconography of Dickens’s portrait became the canonical way of representing the bourgeois writer. (Patten 2001, 31) By associating Rice with Dickens, Chatto & Windus was trying
to enter Rice (and consequently his partner) into that realm of middle-class, respectable household authors that Dickens had inaugurated. The publisher, however, was acting on rather safe grounds, since Besant and Rice had been universally compared to Dickens by coeval critics. Seven years later, in *My First Book* (published again by Chatto & Windus and edited by Jerome K. Jerome), two portraits in the same style representing Besant appeared. (figure 10)

![Two portraits of Walter Besant, both in *My First Book*, ed. by Jerome K. Jerome (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), 2, 9.](image)

The full-length drawing of the author in his study, with a meditative expression, seated by his writing table and surrounded by a setting showing comfortable middle-class status evokes once again the portrait of Dickens by Maclise. No individual illustration of Rice is present in the book. The only drawing in which Rice appears is a scene of the two of them together, which, however, depicts them in a very different context (figure 11): they are having dinner in a restaurant, in a relaxed and non-professional setting; their eyes are focused on the waiter in the foreground: they are neither looking at nor speaking with each other, and there is no sign of any interaction between them. This detail is
significant: the literary partners are not pictured as engaged in any stage of their collaboration (talking, arguing or writing) or in the office of *Once A Week* where they used to sit together and work.

![Figure 11](image)

Besant was the only one represented while sitting at a writing desk, holding a pen. Thus, all the images bespeak a conception of the author as a solitary genius in his room – embodied by Besant. Even though *My First Book* gave an account of the beginning of Besant’s collaboration with Rice – and in a very positive light too – the illustrations suggest an individualised understanding of authorship.

The fact that Besant was the only one depicted with a pen in his hand could derive from the fact that, by 1894, it was common knowledge that he was the one who did the actual writing. Indeed, from a series of accounts by Besant himself and by other sources, it appears that it was Besant who wrote, while Rice helped plotting the stories and took care of more practical tasks such as securing publication and negotiating with publishers, as we shall see in the next section.
Literature and Business

A week after Besant’s death, an article appeared in The Times by a Percy Fitzgerald, which claimed to explain in detail how the late novelist and his long-deceased collaborator had worked together for ten years. Fitzgerald said that Rice had described to him how the team had been carrying on its work:

Besant was the skilled writing partner – he did the description, dialogues, characters; but Rice thought out the plot and construction. They met at each other’s rooms, over a pipe and glass of grog, and debated the story chapter by chapter. Rice, having read his friend’s daily portion of the work, would arrive furnished with many ingenious expedients for unravelling or complicating the situation [...] Most of these were put aside, and the most striking and eligible were chosen. Besant had a gift for seizing on and developing what was thus put before him. Rice, too, often told some of his commercial efforts to exploit the stories – what elaborate treaties he entered into with the colonial booksellers, etc. In all these things Rice was the business manager and worked the ‘show’ thoroughly well [...]. (The Times, 17 June 1901, p.16)

There is no reason to doubt that Fitzgerald’s account is more or less accurate: all the other evidence supports it. In 1890, James Brander Matthews, a personal friend of Besant’s and a coauthor himself, had written in his successful essay “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration” the following declaration:52

52 The essay “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration” was originally published in Longman’s Magazine un 1890. It was reprinted the following year as a preface to Matthews’s collection of short stories written in collaboration With My Friends. Tales Told in Partnership, 1-29 (New York, Longmans, Green & Co.) The present study draws on the version that appeared in With My Friends, which from now will be referred to by ‘Matthews 1891.’Although American and co-author of short stories and plays, Matthews has an important role in this research, mainly for the impact on the coeval periodical press of “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration.” Brought up in New York’s high society, James Brander Matthews (1852-1929) was the only son of a millionaire; his father, however, lost his fortune when Matthews was twenty, but enough money remained so that he had never to earn a living to support himself. Matthews’s cultural influence during his lifetime has often neglected by scholars. He counted among his friends many writers, critics, and politicians (he was an intimate friend of Theodore Roosevelt); he became Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University from 1892 to 1924 (the professorship was created especially for him) and was generally acknowledged to be the foremost expert on dramatic theory and criticism in the United States. Like Besant, Matthews was indefatigable in his cultural and literary efforts: beside his academic career, he wrote 65 books, which included three novels, many collections of short stories and a number of plays, some of which written in collaboration with different male partners (like H.C. Bunner, Walter H. Pollock, George H. Jessop, and F. Anstey.) Ashton (2003, 96) reads Matthews’s collaborations as the spontaneous outcome of his fondness for clubs and social activities: he was a member of several – the most prestigious and expensive – gentlemen’s and authors’ clubs. He actually contributed to found the Author’s Club in 1882. His clubs were the most exclusive intellectual ones, based upon shared interests in arts and letters (like the Century Club.) He strongly believed that “friendly association has power for mutual inspiration.” (Ashton 2003, 107) “For Matthews, the ability to socialize was part of his identity as a specific kind of cultural figure, that of a professional man of letters. [...] Matthews came to embody a phenomenon that assigned cultural prestige to the practice of authorship as an activity most suited to men who could ‘mix’.” (91) Significantly, according to Ashton, Matthews’s life and work “epitomized the last stand of writers who sought the cultural status of ‘the artist’ even as they participated in the marketplace.” (92) Ashton refers to the 1890s in the USA as years of “a sociability of authorship,” “promoted to reap the advantages of a collective identity without sacrificing the patrician identity of the nineteenth-century writer.” (92) For a complete discussion of
I have heard […] that of the long series of stories bearing the names of Besant and Rice, all that the late James Rice actually wrote with his own pen was the first chapter or two of their first book […]. This assertion, whether well founded or not, gains color of truth from the striking similarity of style, not to call it identity, of the Besant and Rice novels with the novels of the surviving member of the partnership. […] (Matthews 1891, 8-9)

Besant’s own remarks on the collaboration confirm this hypothesis. He never plainly declared that he took care of the writing and his collaborateur basically worked as his assistant, but he dropped sufficient hints. During his life, he made short comments in a number of texts, such as the preface to the 1887 Chatto & Windus edition of Ready-Money Mortiboy, the 1892 essay “On Literary Collaboration,” which he wrote as a reaction to Brander Matthew’s commentary, and the chapter in Jerome K. Jerome’s My First Book (1894). Besant’s posthumous Autobiography seemed to promise a description of how he and Rice had actually produced fiction together, only to disappoint readers by dismissing the subject in a few sentences and confirming existing opinions:

I have often been asked to explain the method of collaboration adopted by Rice and myself. The results were certainly satisfactorily so far as popularity was concerned, a fact which goes a long way to explaining this curiosity, no other literary collaboration having been comparable, in this country, with ours for success. My answer to the question was always the same. It is impossible that I should offer any explanation or give any account of this method […] It is enough to state that we worked without disagreement; that there was never any partnership between us in the ordinary sense of the word; but that the collaboration went on from one story to another always without any binding conditions, always liable to be discontinued; while each man carried on his own independent literary work, and was free to write fiction, if he pleased, by himself. […] The collaboration had its advantages; among others, that of freeing me, for my part, from the worry of business arrangements. I am, and always have been, extremely averse from making terms and arrangements for myself. (Autobiography, 187-88)\(^5\)

The casual, non-binding nature of collaboration seems to be a point of importance for Besant. He seems anxious to let readers know that he was never bound by any contract to Rice, but that the partnership had gone one spontaneously from novel to novel. He had already stressed this point in “On Literary Collaboration,” when he affirmed that “a literary partnership, though it may result in many volumes when the partners are happily able to work together evenly and harmoniously, without jealousy, without measuring each other’s share, can only […] be one from book to book.” (Lit. Col.,

Matthews’s life and work, see Ashton 2003, 91-126. For the young moderns of the 1920s, Brander Matthews embodied all that was conservative: mocked as “an outdated Victorian” (Ashton 2003, 124), he has since then fallen into oblivion. Yet, as this work shall demonstrate (especially chapter six), in his collaborative efforts Matthews promoted an innovative and in many respects subversive understanding of authorship. Although he never explicitly theorised it, the importance he placed on conversation, dialogue, sociability, and friendship seems to suggest an idea of authorship at its best as a collaborative effort.

\(^5\) For further comments on the topic, see infra p. 84.
Indeed, there had been a gap year in the collaboration after their second novel. By mid-1873, *Once a Week* was no longer profitable for Rice, who had to give it up: “Rice had found that it was absolutely useless to carry on *Once a Week* any longer; its time had gone by; no new subscribers could be caught, and the old steady readers were dying off. He parted with it, therefore, having lost more heavily by the business than he could well afford.” (RMM 1887, viii) Since the earnings from their novels were not yet enough to live upon, and with no job left, Rice went back to the Temple, working as an attorney for some time: “[t]he question then arose whether he should not seriously address himself to the Bar. For a while he did this, conducted several cases […] and talked of giving up all attempts at literature.” (RMM 1887, ix) However, Rice soon returned to “his old love” and accepted the post of a London correspondent for the *Toronto Globe*, “and the Bar knew him no more.” (RMM 1887, ix) Meanwhile, Besant was busy in journalist work, and for a year they did nothing together. “Then Rice came to me again. He had found an opening – two openings – and was ready, if I would join him, to try again.” (RMM 1887, ix) Rice secured the sale of the serial rights for a new novel with *Tinsely’s Magazine*, where *With Harp and Crown* appeared from January to December 1875. In this case, Rice acted as a manager: it was he who looked for and obtained a contract; it was he who, once again, looked for Besant; it was he who kept the collaboration going. Ashton (2003, 108-109) maintains that Besant depended upon Rice to handle business transactions, as he “never enjoyed dealing with publishers himself and spent much of his life avoiding what he considered a vital, but annoying, part of authoring.” The literary marketplace of the late nineteenth-century, indeed, was so complex and antagonistic to authors that Besant felt that “outside help was needed in order to retain the artistic integrity necessary to write.” (108) According to him, the artist should not be tainted by money matters: “the artist is wholly absorbed in his work: while it lasts he can have no thought of money;” (PB, 6) “[a]n author is as a rule endowed with an artistic temperament; he knows little of farming an estate and is wholly unbusinesslike in making commercial bargains. The outcome of this position was the literary agent.” (PB, 298) Thanks to his partnership with Rice, Besant was free from the worries of business arrangement and practical issues and could focus solely on the production of the literary text. When Rice died, Besant’s plunge into professional dealings must have been traumatic. He immediately availed himself of a literary agent, hiring A.P. Watt, one of the leading agents in London54 who, later helped by his son, would handle Besant’s affairs for the rest of his career. Besant always talked in positive terms of his agents:

> [I]et me here express my great and lasting gratitude to my agents, Mr. A.P. Watt and his son, by whose watch and ward my interests have been so carefully guarded for eighteen years. During that time I

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54 Watt also acted for Collins, Hardy, Conan Doyle, Mrs. Oliphant, and Mallock, among others. (Boege 1956 I, 256)
have always been engaged for three years in advance; I have been relieved from any kind of pecuniary anxiety; my income has been multiplied by three at least; and I have had, through them, the offer of a great deal more work than I could undertake. I cannot speak too strongly of the services rendered to me by my literary agents. […] the agent who knows his business may be of immense use to the novelist […] (Autobiography, 204)

In The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, Geilles (2007) explores the key role of the agent in the transformation of literary culture from 1880 to the early twentieth century. Besant’s The Pen and the Book offers a detailed picture of the British literary market around the turn of the century, and explains the paramount importance of agents: “[t]he Literary Agent has now become almost indispensable for the author of every kind, but especially for the novelist.” (PB, 215) He advised every novelist to put himself in the hands of a literary agent for three main reasons: to begin with, the agent was a businessman, and was therefore “able to meet the publisher […] on an equal footing. It is now one business man with another: and one knows as much as the other.” (PB, 220) As a matter of fact, one of the main issues writers met when trying to publish a work was that they knew little or nothing of the publishing trade, and publishers took advantage of their ignorance to underpay them, or, worse, to buy all the rights of the work. But with a literary agent the publisher knew it would be no use trying tricks: “[t]hey are two men of business talking together in an office: the matter is approached solely from a business point of view. […] When the Literary Agent comes away, either the interests of his client are safeguarded or the book is in his pocket still, to be taken elsewhere.” (PB, 223)

The second reason to hire an agent was that the literary market had become too wide and complicated to be dealt with on one’s own, especially with regard to securing copyright in all the different forms of publication and in different countries. Besant listed all the kinds of copyright a writer had a right to, reminding authors to “bear in mind very carefully the existence of these rights:” (PB, 140) the English serial right; the American serial right; the English volume right; the American volume right; the Colonial rights; the Continental rights; the translation right; and the dramatic right, if the novel was turned into a play. (PB, 140)

Thirdly, a literary agent was in touch with editors of papers and publishing houses, and knew all about their requirements and the possible openings: those who wanted articles or serials, those who had no empty room in their agenda, those that would be open at certain dates. The agent knew how to move in the market, and, according to Besant, he would save the bewildered author a lot of time while also increasing his opportunities. For all these reasons, Besant maintained that an agent’s usual commission of ten per cent was more than worth it:

[s]ome writers do not like the idea of paying a commission of ten per cent to an agent. But if their own work is doubled and trebled in value: if they are kept free from the constant irritation and suspicion
created by dealing directly with publishers; if they are kept free, also, from pecuniary worries, and find
that their only business trouble is to accept or refuse; if they are left to do their literary work without
any consideration of the commercial value: and if the Literary Agent does all this for them, surely he
is dirt cheap at ten per cent. \((PB, 215)\)

Naturally, an author had to pay attention to choose the right agent, and not one who secretly received
money from publishers for bringing them authors, “which is exactly the same as if a solicitor took
money from the other side.” \((PB, 217)\) Besant helped a few writers in this matter. For instance, when
at the beginning of the 1890s Kipling, then a young man, moved to London, Besant directed him to
his own agent:

I was elected a member of the Savile – the little Savile then in Piccadilly – and, on my introduction,
dined with no less than Hardy and Walter Besant. My debts to the latter grew at once, and you may
remember that I owed him much indeed. […] He advised me to entrust my business to an agent and
sent me to his own […] The father took hold of my affairs at once and most sagely; and on his death
his son succeeded. In the course of forty-odd years I do not recall any difference between us that three
minutes’ talk could not clear up. This also, I owed to Besant.\(^{55}\) (Kipling 1987, 83)

In all his commentaries, Walter Besant devoted a great deal of effort to uproot the widespread idea
that literature ought not to be even remotely connected with money. He fought the “false and foolish”
prejudice that it was “beneath the dignity of an author to speak of money,” \((PB, 15)\) in other words
that it was “unworthy the dignity of letters to take any account at all of the commercial or pecuniary
side:” \((Autobiography, 226-27)\) “[i]t is sometimes pretended that it is degrading to consider money
in connection with literary work. […] the prejudice shews a sense of the sacredness of literature as
something which should not be in the least mixed up with mercenary motives.” \((PB, 132)\) Besant
remarked that the same prejudice was not so pervasive with regard to any other form of artistic and
intellectual effort: the painter, the sculptor, the inventor, the musician, the singer, and so on, “might
blamelessly acquire by his work as much money as was attainable. Every kind of worker – except the
author.” \((PB, 133)\) He remarked that the moment any writer begins to make some money out of his
work, “a hundred voices arise,” especially from “those of his own craft,” voices that “cry out upon
the sordidness, the meanness, the degradation of turning literature into a trade.” \((Autobiography, 227)\)
Besant reflected that the only rational objection that could be made to writers making money by their
books was that they may be tempted to work too fast and too much, “with the view of making money

\(^{55}\) Kipling’s praise for Besant goes on: “Nor did his goodness halt here. He would sit behind his big, frosted beard and
twinkling spectacles, and deal me out wisdom concerning this new incomprehensible world. One heard very good talk at
the Savile. Much of it was the careless give-and-take of the atelier when the models are off their stands, and one throws
bread-pellets at one’s betters, and makes hay of all schools save one’s own. But Besant saw deeper. He advised me to
‘keep out of the dog-fight.’ […]” (Kipling 1987, 83)
without regard to their literary standards.” (PB, 134) This objection, however, could be applied equally to all who worked with their brain, and Besant dismissed it. He theorised a distinction between the two kinds of value of a literary text: the literary and the commercial value. The former was connected with a text’s “artistic, poetic, dramatic value,” and “[o]n that value is based the real position of every writer in his own generation, and the estimate of him […] for generations to follow.” (Autobiography, 228) The commercial value of a book, instead, “is just measured by the public demand for it – that and nothing more.” (PB, 5) Besant pleaded to keep separate and distinct these two values:

[what I mean will be understood exactly if we ask what would have been the price paid by an editor to Burns for one of his immortal pomes in his lifetime. Would he have given the poet a guinea? I doubt it. Does it make the least difference to that poem whether he got twopence or £100 for it? It is quite conceivable that a poem of the very highest value, one destined to sink into the very inmost heart of the people, and to abide with us as long as the language itself endures, may be published in a cheap magazine and bought for the merest trifle. (PB, 3-4)

The literary value of a text was not to be measured according to the commercial value, as Besant highlighted in The Art of Fiction: “[i]t is not always, remember, the voice of the people which elects the best man, […] it may happen that the Art of a great writer is of such a kind that it may never become widely popular;” (Art of Fiction, 76) “[a] failure to hit the popular taste does not always imply failure in Art.” (Art of Fiction, 77) Actually, there was not necessarily a connection between the two values: “[i]f a good book is not in demand, that fact does not make it a bad book. If a bad book is in demand, that fact does not make it a good book.” (PB, 4)

According to Besant, an author needed not to think of the commercial value of his text while he was writing it. That was the key to keep Art untainted: “an author of any kind cannot write at all – cannot at least write anything worth having, if he is not entirely absorbed in his work, and careless while he is engaged upon it, as to any other consideration at all;” (PB, 16) while an artist is at work on a text, he shall think only of the literary value, “and this alone is in his mind, otherwise his work would be naught.” (Autobiography, 228) Once the book is finished and ready for publishing, “then comes in the other value – the commercial value,” and at this point “the artist ceases and the man of business begins.” (Autobiography, 228) The artist has created a literary property of a certain value; he has created a goods, and so “[h]e is free to deal with it then as he thinks best. Why should he not?” (PB, 16) As a consequence, Besant claimed that authoring was a profession like any other, and that it should be both lucrative and respectable. “The profession of letters has been added to the other professions. Formerly, […] the noble, or learned, professions included Theology, Medicine, and Law. To these are now added Science, Art, Architecture, Engineering, Music and Literature.” (PB, 20)
particularly insisted that the man of letters deserved to be respected as the other professionals, and identified three requisites necessary for a profession to be held in respect: firstly, it must be independent, that is, “the members must not be servants of anyone;” (PB, 20) next, “it must be entitled to share in the national distinctions […]. Tennyson received a peerage: so did Bulwer Lytton; Dickens was offered a baronetcy, but refused, in which he was wrong, if only for the reason […] of the lesson it would have afforded to the people;” (PB, 20, 21) lastly, it must have “great prizes, whether of distinction, or of money, or both.” (PB, 20) Here Besant did not mean huge incomes, but rather the possibility for “a good steady man of letter” to “live in comfort and to educate his children properly.” (PB, 24-25) For the first time in history, “the profession of letters is beginning to possess these three qualifications for respect,” remarked Besant. (PB, 20) However, differently from the other professions, he noticed that “novelists are not associated as painters; they hold no annual exhibitions, dinners, or conversazioni; […] they have no President or Academy; and they do not themselves seem desirous of being treated as followers of a special Art.” (Art of Fiction, 11) Furthermore, Besant observed that little or no solidarity was shared among writers, but that, on the contrary, they usually hated each other:

[e]very other profession holds itself in honour. You never find a lawyer ridiculing other lawyers because they are unsuccessful. You never find an artist ridiculing another because nobody will buy his pictures. Yet the literary man has been constantly engaged in writing enviously and savagely against his brethren. This, I think, is the very worst feature of all: […] envy and jealously consumed him [the literary man] […] The mere fact that another man was simply an author, was sufficient to fill his soul with hatred against that man.” (PB, 12-13)

The Society of Authors

Having noticed these issues in the literary atmosphere of his time, Besant set out to find a remedy. In September 1883, he and a small number of other writers met “in order to form an association or society of men and women engaged in letters:” (Autobiography, 216) it was to become the Society of Authors.56 In his Autobiography, the novelist remembers the difficulties to define a programme for the society, since the position of men of letters was very confused and the issues connected with authorship were many and had never really been tackled before:

[i]t was only vaguely felt, as it had been felt for fifty years, that the position of literary men was most unsatisfactory. The air was full of discontent and murmurs; yet when any broke out into open

56 Besant’s Society of Authors was preceded by a series of similar projects, all failed, like Dickens’s project to establish an association of writers together with Thackeray and Carlyle in 1843. See Karell 2008, 173.
accusation, the grievance, in some mysterious way, became insubstantial, and the charge, whatever it
was, fell to the ground. It was impossible to find a remedy, because the disease itself could not be
diagnosed. (*Autobiography*, 216-17)

Besant devoted a lot of time and energies to his cause, and set to work to gain the adhesion of as
many renowned names of literature as he could. His “first and greatest success” was Tennyson’s
acceptance of the Society’s presidency,⁵⁷ (*Autobiography*, 218) an accomplishment that gained the
Society of Authors respectful consideration from the beginning. The Society came to include most of
the time’s well-known writers: *The Pen and the Book* reports a list of the 58 members of the council,
and it included – to mention a few – J.M. Barrie, A. Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Thomas Hardy,
Rudyard Kipling, and Charlotte Yonge. Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, and Matthew Arnold acted
as members of the representative body. (*Autobiography*, 219) In the first year of its creation, the
Society counted 68 paying members; two years later, in 1886, there were 153; in 1888 there were
240; in 1891, 662; in 1892 the number increased up to 870. “[W]hen it became gradually known that
such a society as this existed, that a secretary was in the office all day long, and that he held
consultations for nothing with all comers, all those who were in trouble over their books […] came
to us for advice and assistance,” reported Besant. (*Autobiography*, 222)
The Society started its work by offering assistance to writers in their dealings with publishers: “there
began to be poured upon us a continuous stream, which has never ceased, of agreements, accounts,
proposals, estimates, and letters between publishers and authors.” (*Autobiography*, 227) It mostly
gave legal consultation and tried to prevent writers from being underpaid by publishers, from being
overcharged with the cost of production, and from being charged for advertisement which never
appeared or which were printed for free in the publisher’s own magazines. Usually the Society
preferred private action to litigation in the courts, and in the cases of publishers who refused to mend
their ways, it simply tried to keep business out of their hands. (*Dial XIV*, 1893, 202) Two books,
entitled *Methods of Publication and Costs of Production*, were published, which shed light on every
form of publishing of the time with its relative costs and possibilities of profit, complete with real
accounts and cases. These books exposed the real costs of production, and gave suggestion to writers
on how to conduct their business without pitfalls and traps. However, the Society never supported its
allegations against publishers by naming names: it published facts but no names, and that,
notwithstanding the attacks, saved it from legal suits. From 1890, the Society started to publish a
monthly paper, *The Author*, which Besant edited until his death. Boege (1956 I, 275) remarks that
much of the material in the magazine bore the evidence of Besant’s hand: “[b]esides his signed

⁵⁷ Tennyson was Besant’s most admired living poet. (*Autobiography*, 78)
material it is plain enough that a large part of the unsigned material is Besant’s.” Most of the contents of the magazine concerned contracts, royalties, printing costs, pertinent legal cases, and examples of malfeasance by publishers; in succeeding pages there were usually a list of new books, “notes and news,” and various articles of general interest. So much was The Author the result of Besant’s personal efforts that after his death it had to suspend publication for two months (August and September 1901).

Beside these tasks, the Society decided to focus on three main points: the definition and defense of literary property, the consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright, and the promotion of international copyright. Besant defined the Society of Authors “a movement which means a complete revolution in the methods of literature, which will make authors, for the first time in history, the masters and administrators of their own property” (PB, 21)

In order to defend literary property, the Society first had to understand “what it is, of what extent, how it is created, how it is administered, how it should be safeguarded.” (Autobiography, 225) Since literary property was, more than any other, “the actual production of the individual,” it had to be “in his eternal possession.” (PB, 270) The Society’s first goal was that literature had to be universally recognised as a property protected by law, and that it was exclusively the property of the author. Colby (1994, 147) underlines that Besant’s most important result was indeed that of institutionalising, once and for all, the principle that the author can and must exercise a control over his text.

Secondly, a great part of the Society’s efforts were directed towards the consolidation of copyright laws. An especially appointed copyright committee drafted a new Copyright Bill, which was submitted to the London Chamber of Commerce to consider; it was then introduced to the House of Lords, and it became the starting point for future legislation. As to international copyright, the Society did much before the American Copyright Act of 1891: it repeatedly denounced the lucrative trade of pirated books in both America and the colonies, publishing accurate accounts of several cases. The Society also tried to stop the circulation of pirated editions within the UK: “[w]e [the British] had, in fact, […] been doing on this side exactly what the Americans were doing on their side – pirating

58 The Revised Copyright Act of 1842, whose promotion had engaged writers such as Dickens, Carlyle, Wordsworth, Southey and Browning, was a crucial step in the history of copyright laws, as it led to the extension of the copyright to the author’s life plus seven years. For a complete history of copyright, see MacFarlane 2007. Copyright will be discussed in chapter six.

59 In 1886 Great Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Haiti and Tunis, reunited in the Berne Convention, signed the International Copyright Act. The USA, however, did not join in the treaty, and continued to pirate English authors until 1891, when with the American Copyright Act they granted copyright to British authors under certain conditions. Once again, also in this respect Besant’s efforts followed – and realised – Dickens’s ones: Dickens’s American Notes dealt with the question of copyright in America extensively and also explored the relationship between the USA and Britain on this topic. During his journey in the USA, Dickens campaigned in favour of the international copyright law.
books. It was absurd to keep calling the Americans thieves and pirates while our people did exactly the same thing on a smaller scale.” (Autobiography, 224) It is not too daring to establish a connection between Besant’s collaborative experience with Rice and his founding of the Society of Authors. Ashton (2003, 109) intriguingly suggests that “[t]he trauma of losing his personal cushion against the marketplace forces” was what might have given Besant the necessary impetus to found the first professional association for writers in the United Kingdom. Ashton wonders whether there is any direct connection between collaboration and advocating literary professionalism: she suggests that Besant’s experience with coauthorship taught him that association leads to success. This hypothesis seems to me more than plausible: neither him nor Rice had succeeded each on their own; it is true that Rice had not taught Besant how to write novels, but he had taught him what a good agent could do to sell them, and the difference it could make to rely on a man who knew how to move in the field. Thanks to his partner, Besant had learned that literature could actually be turned into a profession – and a profitable one too; from desultory attempts at fiction writing, he and Rice produced one novel a year, had to respect specific engagements, and their activity was programmed: in a nutshell, their literary work had become a job. With the example of his enormous success due to the partnership, Besant noticed how instead the majority of authors stood alone. Had he not worked within a ‘Firm,’ he might never have given it some thought, and perhaps he would have never set out to found his Society. Therefore, the collaborative experience with Rice lay the foundations for Besant’s remarkable efforts for the community of authors.

Notwithstanding its hundreds of members, the Society of Authors remained closely associated with Besant’s name. As Boege (1956 I, 276) puts it: “[t]he Society which had soon come to include the

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60 Besant was deeply concerned with the improvement of the relations between the English-speaking countries, especially England and the USA. During his 1893 tour in America, he felt a hostility and suspicion towards England, “made up of prejudice and ignorance.” (Autobiography, 266) He noticed a “misrepresentation of things English,” (Autobiography, 266-67) and deprecated the fact that, even if they actually came to England, most Americans only saw the tourist-surface of it; he observed with regret that American tourists remained aliens in England, learning almost nothing of the English. He proposed an Anglo-American Institute, and in 1896 he wrote an article entitled “The future of the Anglo-Saxon Race.” (North American Review, CLXIII, 129-143) In 1900 he established a society, called the Atlantic Union, which admitted as members Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotchmen, Australians, Canadians, citizens of any British colony, and Americans. Because the Canadians and the citizens of the United States represented the largest field, the society was called the Atlantic Union. It promoted better relationships through the organisation of social events: for instance, in London members of the Union engaged themselves to receive American visitors, to organise walks and tours around the country, to hold receptions, dinners and concerts, and to introduce them to local society in order to “let them see more than is shown to the average stranger.” (Autobiography, 272) Besant was convinced that a better knowledge of their respective countries would bring to an improvement of their relationships. He realised that peace within the English-speaking world depended on stronger bonds between nations, but that the effectiveness of these bonds depended upon the sentiment of the people. Indeed, the Atlantic Union aimed at attracting “the classes which have most influence […] in the States – the professional classes, lawyers, physicians, authors, teachers.” (Autobiography, 272) An account of the aims of the Union can be read in his Autobiography, chapter XV.
The great majority of English authors continued to be known as ‘Mr. Besant’s society.’” Boege also reports that the Society was the subject of constant discussion in the press, much of it critical or satirical, and that Besant was constantly writing letters and replies to rebut misrepresentations. Besant tried also to underline that he was not the Society, and that he had no part in many of its activities. However, his continuous letters and his zealous denials merely ended up putting his name once more before the public as the champion of authors. For this reason, and for the series of bad novels he kept publishing in the 1890s, his reputation started to be more that of a public figure – however influential – than that of a novelist. Besant’s achievements for his profession led the public to see him as “the Great Heart of the New Grub Street,” as a posthumous notice recited.61

The importance of discussion and the unity of impression

It is now time to delve some more into Besant and Rice’s partnership, how it worked, and how they perceived it. Even if Besant did the writing and Rice acted as the manager, their partnership cannot be resolved so easily. Indeed, all sources, including Besant’s own words, also attest that Rice contributed significantly to the development of the stories, providing Besant with corrections and suggestions. For this reason, Besant always defended Rice’s status as a full co-author, a position that led to controversy. The following pages will analyse the model of literary collaboration proposed by Besant, drawing mainly on his article “On Literary Collaboration,” where he expressed his views on the much-debated topic of how collaboration could be possible in the production of literature. Since, as mentioned above, Besant’s article was a reaction to Brander Matthew’s “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration,” and both deal with the very same points, it is apposite to discuss it vis-à-vis Matthews’s essay. Both works heavily influenced how late Victorians perceived collaboration.

In their commentaries, both Besant and Matthews put great emphasis on the importance of discussion for the creation of a work of fiction. Besant stated that “the novelist can find nothing more helpful to his work than to talk it over” (Lit. Col., 208) and that “the main advantage of partnership lies in the discussion of the plot and its situations, and the hammering out of all the effects of which they are capable.” (Lit. Col., 207) As a matter of fact, “two minds working upon the same idea, having the

61 Bookman, XV, 1902, 469. Besant’s example was followed by George Bernard Shaw, who in 1931 founded the League of Dramatists as an autonomous section of the Society of Authors. Since then the Society has formed other specialised groups, and has improved author’s conditions with regard to taxation, libel, and social security. It conducted a successful 28-year campaign for Public Lending Right (PLR): the idea that the author of a book should be paid for its use by a public, commercial or other kind of lending library was first advanced by novelist John Brophy in 1951; it was finally secured in 1979, not as an amendment to the Copyright Act, but as a separate statute. The Society of Authors has also helped to set up the Authors’ Lending and Copyright Society, in order to secure income as far as rights are concerned (e.g. photocopying). The work of the Society continues to this day.
same object in view, and agreed upon the group of characters to carry out the plan of the piece, ought to arrive, more certainly and more clearly than one mind alone, not only at the possibilities but also at the certainties of the subject.” (Lit. Col., 207) Besant explained that when a plot, an incident, a situation, or a character are discussed, a thousand combinations occur and rise up in the mind during the conversation; those which are useless or unnecessary are more easily picked out and thrown away in discussion than on one’s own, while the most promising are developed to their full potential. Similarly, Matthews wrote that

the main advantage of a literary partnership is in the thorough discussion of the central idea and of its presentation in every possible aspect. Art and genius, so Voltaire asserted, consist in finding all that is in one’s subject, and in not seeking outside of it. When a situation has been talked over thoroughly and traced out to its logical conclusion, and when a character has been considered from every angle and developed to its inevitable end, nine-tenths of the task is accomplished. (Matthews 1891, 7)

Both Besant and Matthews insisted that collaboration was not useful to save time and labour: on the contrary, “discussion, you see, is far less rapid than thought.” (Lit. Col., 208) So, “[n]ot the saving of labour, but the improvement of the work should be the reason for partnership.” (Lit. Col., 207)

In My First Book, Besant nostalgically recalled the never-ending conversations and the consequent almost symbiotic lives he and Rice lived when writing their first novel:

I wish I was five and twenty-years younger, sitting once more in that dingy little office where we wrangled over this headstrong hero of ours⁶２ […] The office was handy for Rule’s and oysters. We would adjourn for the ‘delicious mollusc,’ and then go back again to the editor’s room to resume the wrangle. […] In the evening we would dine together, or go to a theatre, or sit in my chambers and play cards before resuming the wrangle. […]⁶３ And always during that period, whatever we did, wherever we went, Dick Mortiboy sat between us. (MFB, 11-14)

Thus, the discussion with one’s partner was fundamental in collaboration, and both Matthews and Besant emphasised it. However, from now on Besant and Matthew took different paths. For Matthews, discussion was the most important part of the creation, the “nine-tenths of the task.” He explained that “the subject was always thoroughly discussed between us; it was turned over and over

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⁶２ The ‘headstrong hero’ referred to here is Dick Mortiboy of RMM. Note that first Besant insists that the conception of their first novel was Rice’s and not at all his own (“The central figure, which, I repeat, is not my own, but my partner’s initial conception”, p.12), but, a few lines later, he calls the main character “this headstrong hero of ours.”

⁶３ It is worth noting that within two pages the word ‘wrangle’ is used five times. By repeatedly employing this term, Besant conveys the feeling that coauthoring a novel involves prolonged, exhausting discussions, an association that emerges from many accounts by other coauthors. For instance: J.S. Wood, “Editor’s Note” to The Fate of Fenella (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892), see infra chapter 4; Matthews, “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration,” 25: “M. Dumas is said to have answered a request to collaborate with the query, ‘Why should I wish to quarrel with you?’ “; Hichens, “The Collaborators,” 139: “ But we should quarrel inevitably and doggedly. […] We should tear one another in pieces.”
and upside down and inside out; it was considered from all possible points of view and in every stage of development. When a final choice was made […] the mere putting of paper was wholly secondary.” (Matthews 1891, 27) Since every single matter was discussed over and over, Matthews maintained that the writing was no longer important: after the discussion the material was ready, and “the putting down on paper of the situation and the character is but the clothing of a babe already alive and kicking.” (Matthews 1891, 7) He therefore affirmed that “in a genuine collaboration, when the joint work is a true chemical union and not a mere mechanical mixture, it matters little who holds the pen.” (Matthews 1891, 7)

This assertion irritated Besant, who devoted a great portion of his article to contradict it. Both Matthews and Besant believed in the importance of a ‘unity of impulse:’ they thought that a co-authored text had to appear to the reader as if it were the outcome of a single mind; it had to be united and coherent, and not betray the different hands behind it: “the very essence of literary partnership is that the result must appear just as spontaneous, just as entirely individual, as if it had been the creation of a single mind and the work of a single pen.” (Lit. Col., 202) “The presentement of the story must seem to be by one man. No one would listen to two men telling it together. We must hear – or think we hear – one voice.” (Lit. Col., 205) They differed in their opinions as to how this unity of impulse was to be achieved. According to Matthews, it had to be the result of harmonious equality: through discussion, the minds of the partners became one. Conversely, according to Besant, it had to be attained through the domination of one partner. Drawing on his personal experience, Besant argued that the writing had to be carried out by one of the partners only: discussion was fundamental, “[b]ut literary style is another thing. It is individual. One of the two must impress his own individuality upon the work.” (Lit. Col., 205) He reiterated this point in the Autobiography: “[i]f two men work together, the result must inevitably bear the appearance of one man’s work; the style must be the same throughout; the two men must be rolled into one” (Autobiography, 188) After discussing with one’s partner, the man in charge of writing had to take a final decision on the points on which they did not agree, and had to mould the text on his literary taste and style, otherwise the work would result in an uneven mixture: “one man must finally revise, or even write, the whole work”(Lit. Col., 205) and “in literary partnership, one of the two must be in authority: one of the two must have the final word: one of two must be permitted to put the final touches.” (Lit. Col., 204)

Besant remarked that this point was “the rock on which many literary partnerships get wrecked,” (Lit. Col., 205) because many coauthors thought that each had to write as much as the other. However, “the general notion of collaboration, that it must be carried on by each man contributing every other word, every other page, or every other chapter, is absolutely erroneous.” (Lit. Col., 200) He reported
the example of a manuscript sent to him by two coauthors who had made “the great mistake of writing it in alternate chapters:” (Lit. Col., 205)

[now, the style of one was not in the least like the style of the other; the effect was that of two men taking turns to tell the same story, each in his own way and from his own point of view. Nothing could have been more grotesque; nothing more ineffective. Every one of the characters talked with two voices and two brains, and had two faces. The thing was a horrid nightmare. (Lit. Col., 205)

Redefining authorship

The clearly split division of tasks between Besant and Rice projects the former as the literary genius and the latter as the helpmate, the assistant who acts as both a mediator between the creative artist and the surrounding world, and the clerk who offers help and suggestions. Hence, in Besant’s conception, the idea of the solitary author still remains. Yet, in all his commentaries Besant insisted in calling Rice a full coauthor. In “On Literary Collaboration,” he defended his position and illustrated why the partner who did not write was nonetheless to be considered an author. “Can, then, the other man who has contributed only rough drafts here and there, or even perhaps nothing at all in writing, be called a collaborator? Most certainly he can.” (Lit. Col., 205) Besant asked: “if he throws into the work all the harvest of his life shall he not be called a partner?” (Lit. Col., 206) Clearly, Besant was defending Rice’s position: since Rice contributed to the development of their books in everything but in the writing, Besant affirmed that neither of them could “be held responsible for plot, incident, character, or dialogue” (Autobiography, 188) and that it was “impossible for me to lay hands upon any passage or page and to say “this belongs to Rice – this is mine.” (Autobiography, 189) Matthews’s position was similar to Besant’s in the fact that “in a genuine collaboration each of the parties […] ought to have so far contributed to the story that he can consider every incident to be his, and his the whole work when it is completed.” (Matthews 1891,15) However, according to Matthews, both collaborateurs should take part in the writing (a phase that did not matter as much as the discussion). Besant went on:

[the first idea suggests leading situations, these suggest characters; these again other characters; in the discussions concerning these it is obvious that there must be many divergencies into paths perilous, many turnings back, many experiments, many failures, many happy discoveries, many checks, before the whole is concluded. Surely, when two minds are engaged in producing this result, both may be called partners in the work. (Lit. Col., 205-206)

Even if Besant wrote, Rice always gave an important contribution to the planning of the plot, read and edited everything his partner wrote, and provided new solutions for the development of the text.
Therefore, Besant advocated for the recognition as authors of this type of collaborators, thus detaching the noun ‘author’ from the act of writing. He was aware of the innovative, subversive power of his position, and stated: “[i]n the recognition – for the first time – of this fact lies, I think, the chief value of the essay before us.” (Lit. Col., 205) Besant further supported his argument by using a metaphor: “[i]t is not possible for a child to have two mothers, but a child may be watched, trained, educated, and moulded by two women.” (Lit. Col., 205) This image of the text as a child had already been employed by Brander Matthews: “any endeavor to sift out the contribution of one collaborator from that of his fellow is futile – if the union has been a true marriage. […] Who shall declare whether the father or the mother is the real parent of a child?” (Matthews 1891, 9)

Besant was aware of the risks his theories could lead to: “[o]f course, the admission into partnership, the allowing of any claim to partnership, of one who has written none of the book, is a thing which might lead to great abuses and preposterous pretensions. […] As it is, we constantly hear of men claiming to have inspired this work or that.” (Lit. Col., 206) He therefore took care to make some specifications and put forward three cases that should not be considered fit for collaboration. Firstly, he wrote that a man who only suggested a couple of situations afterwards adopted by the novelist could not on that ground claim partnership; mere suggestion of ideas was not enough:

I have […] received dozens of proposals from persons wishing to enter into partnership with me. One man offers a magnificent plot on the trifling condition that his name shall appear on the title page as collaborator. It is difficult to make this person understand that much more than a plot must be expected of a partner. (Lit. Col., 206)

Secondly, “another [man] sends a bulky manuscript. If I will only revise it and put his name with mine in the title page it is at my service. That man cannot understand that the work of an editor is not the work of collaboration.” In both these two cases, Besant wanted to underline that one had to participate in the whole creation, be a part of it from the beginning to the end, even if not contributing to the writing moment. Besant specified that collaboration is a “work which may bring mind closer to mind than in any other task.” (Lit. Col., 204), as Matthews had said that “in literature collaboration is more complete, more intimate than it is in the other arts.” (Matthews 1891, 2) Like marriage, collaboration was perceived by these authors as the union of two minds: “[i]n marriage husband and wife are one, and that is not a happy union when either inquires as to which one it is: the unity should be so complete that the will of each is merged in that of the other. So it should be in a literary partnership.” (Matthews 1891, 2)

The third case put forward by Besant introduced another crucial point in his discussion, the metaphor of collaboration as marriage:
third simply puts himself, his genius, his experience, his reputation – all – at my service in return for literary partnership. That man cannot understand that one would as soon offer to marry a girl met once at an evening party – or perhaps never met at all – as to take into partnership a complete stranger. (Lit. Col., 206)

To start a literary partnership, warned Besant, was not to be taken lightly: the partners needed to know each other quite well before associating to write a novel. The metaphor of collaboration as marriage had been, as several other points in Besant’s argument, already employed by Matthews. Both set down more or less the same rules for a successful collaboration, which were similar to the ingredients for a happy marriage. To begin with, the ideal collaborators should be alike to each other in their views, but not too much, otherwise the collaboration would result flat; mutual respect, sympathy and esteem for each other were necessary to make them accept their partner’s opinions. “Perhaps the first requisite is a sympathy between the two partners not sufficient to make them survey life from the same point of view, but yet enough to make them respect each other’s suggestions and be prepared to accept them,” writes Matthews. Similarly, Besant suggests:

[a]s in the partnership of marriage, so in that of literature, these unions are happiest and best where the two partners have many points of unlikeness as well as some of likeness. There should of course […] be equal invention, equal dramatic power, equal perception of proportion, equal artistic sense. With these there may be – and, perhaps, should be – unlikeness in pursuit, learning, experience, private life, birth, social connections, tastes, training, and temperament. (Lit. Col., 207)

Openness of mind and willingness to put oneself in another’s place and to look at the world from his standpoint were vital for the good functioning of the collaboration. The partners should be able to take as well as to give (Matthews 1891, 23) and “be tolerant of the other’s opinions.” (Matthews 1891, 5) However, at this point Besant’s and Matthew’s positions part: while Matthews sustains that each partner “must be ready to yield a point when need be,” and that “there must be concessions from one to the other,” (5) Besant limited his advice to general remarks such as having a “spirit of compromise and the readiness to sacrifice personal vanity.” (Lit. Col., 204) Indeed, in Besant’s opinion, as explained above, one partner had to have the final word; one man had to dominate over the other at some point, or the work would result incoherent and would show the different hands. According to Besant, it was inevitable that in every partnership “one will be stronger than the other.” (Lit. Col., 204) On the contrary, Matthews professed a strong belief in the equality of the partners: carrying on the metaphor of the marriage, he wrote that “[i]n collaboration as in matrimony, again, it is well when the influence of the masculine element does not wholly overpower the feminine.” (Matthews 1891, 25) In this light, Besant and Rice’s partnership could be seen as a typical Victorian marriage in which the former played the role of the husband, generally benevolent but domineering,
and the latter embodied the wife, who sometimes had to take a step back in front of the authority of the man. Within the metaphor collaboration/marriage, Matthews also advanced a distinction between literary monogamists and polygamists: “we may consider MM. Erckmann-Chatrian and Messers. Besant and Rice as monogamists,” while those who are “ready to collaborate at large” are polygamists. (Matthews 1891, 23)

A final ingredient in Matthews’s recipe for a good collaborative relationship entails a point not present in Besant’s discussion. Drawing on coeval, widespread notions that often in collaboration it was one partner only who basically did most of the work, as declared by Andrew Lang,64 Matthews recommended that each partner should have a “willingness […] to do his full share of the work,” (5) and to make sure, when choosing a collaborator, that he is ready to do his half:

[a] French wit has declared that the happiest marriages are those in which one is loved and the other lets himself (or herself) be loved. Collaboration is a sort of marriage, but witticism does not here hold true, although Mr. Andrew Lang recently declared that in most collaborations one man did all the work while the other man looked on. No doubt this happens now and again, but a partnership of this kind is not likely to last long. (Matthews 1891, 5-6)

The careful choice of one’s collaborator was deemed fundamental by both Mathews and Besant. The latter remarked that “[t]he great – the very great – objection to literary partnerships is the difficulty of finding your partner.” (Lit. Col., 208) Once again linking literary partnership to marriage, Matthews commented: “[a]s there are households where husband and wife fight like cat and dog, and where marriage ends in divorce, so there are literary partnerships which are dissolved in acrimony and anger.” (Matthews 1891, 25) He thus introduced another crucial point in both his argument and Besant’s: the fights involved in collaboration.

To take a man into partnership even for a short story […] is a step attended with great risks: it may lead to certain failure, with certain quarrels, recriminations, and pretensions. Why did the novel fail? Because of the other man. Or, if it was not a failure, why did the thing succeed? In spite of the other man. (Lit. Col., 208)

Matthews noticed that “in general it is when the work fails that the collaborators fall out,” (25) and he added that “[t]he quarrels of collaborators […] are the height of folly. The world looks on at the fight, and listens while the two former friends call each other hard names; and more often than not it believes what each says of the other, and not what he says of himself.” (Matthews 1891, 26) Fights were so generally connected with coauthorship (as chapter four will show) that to collaborate was

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64 Lang also seems to have suggested to “young men entering on the life of letters” to find “an ingenuous, and industrious, and successful partner; stick to him, never quarrel with him, and do not survive him.” (Matthews 1891, 29)
immediately linked to quarrelling, as Matthews ironically reported: “M. Dumas is said to have answered a request to collaborate with the query, ‘Why should I wish to quarrel with you?’” (25)

Strangely enough, however, Matthews and Besant distanced themselves from this aspect of collaboration. Both talked of their collaborative experiences in utterly idyllic terms, affirming of never having even a squabble with their writing partners:

I can declare unhesitatingly that I have never had a hard word with a collaborator while our work was in hand and never a bitter word with him afterwards. My collaborators have always been my friends before, and they have always remained my friends after. [...] There was never a dispute as to our respective shares in the result of our joint labors [...]. Sometimes I may have thought that I did more than my share, sometimes I knew that I did less than I should, but always there was harmony, and never did either of us seek to assert a mastery. (Matthews 1891, 26-27)

Since Matthews’s collaborations were mostly occasional, and restricted to one or few short stories, one could believe him. But that Besant and Rice never quarreled in ten years of partnership – as Besant insisted – seems unlikely. And yet he began his first commentary on his and Rice’s partnership, the 1887 preface to Ready-Money Mortiboy, by regretting the end of the collaboration in nostalgic terms:

[t]en years of continuous work, cheered by such a measure of success as we had not ventured to hope for, and undisturbed by the least jar of disagreement, cannot be looked back upon without mingled feelings of sorrow that the end came in so unexpected a manner, and of gratitude that the work was so successful. (RMM 1887, v)

Besant’s position towards his literary partnership underwent a radical change in his Autobiography. In fourteen years, the novelist moved from the romanticised commemoration of his ‘ideal’ literary partnership in 1887 to its brusque dismissal (almost a repudiation) in 1901. In unexpectedly blunt terms, he unceremoniously dismissed his long collaborative experience in a total of seven pages; moreover, he kept interrupting the discussion of the collaboration with various digressions unconnected with the main topic, as if he were unwilling to talk about it;65 his tone was cold and reluctant, totally different from that of RMM 1887. At a point, he abruptly declared:

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65 He first introduces his collaboration with Rice at page 169, only to stop the next page to talk about his various journalist work; then he picks up the topic again at page 181, again to interrupt at page 182 to launch his long attack on critics and reviewers (182-186); at page 186 he resumes the collaboration, finally giving some concrete information until page 190, when he makes a digression on the practice of serialising novels until page 193; after that, we find another attack on reviewers which lasts until page 197; pages 197-198 are dedicated to general information and to the account of Rice’s death.
So, even if in “On Literary Collaboration” he had claimed the importance of the help of a partner, he now declared that a writer is and must remain alone. Although talking in general terms, a few lines later Besant commented that, after some time, every collaboration was doomed to end, due to each partner’s natural desire to walk with his own legs and to enjoy fame on his own; he mentioned the restraint and the irritation each collaborator inevitably feels at being stuck in a partnership:

[there will come a time when both men fret under the condition; when each desires, but is not able, to enjoy the reputation of his own good work; and feels, with the jealousy natural to an artist, irritated by the loss of half of himself and ready to accept the responsibility of failure in order to make sure of the meed of success. (Autobiography, 188)

Besant states that a writer needs to keep himself intact: collaboration only leads to dismemberment. Even if he never plainly wrote that he had ‘fretted’ about his collaboration, it seems obvious that Besant was talking about himself and his collaborative experience. Indeed, in the next page he starts referring again to his own partnership, and he reflects that, had not Rice died, “the collaboration would have broken down” anyway, although “amicably.” (Autobiography, 189) Furthermore, Besant regretted that the collaboration had not ended before. He explained this strong statement by saying that, at his death, Rice had not been given the chance to enjoy fame on his own: “[i]t would have been far better if it had broken down five years before the death of Rice, so that he might have achieved what has been granted to myself – an independent literary position.” (Autobiography, 189) Although this explanation is not illogical, one has the impression that Besant himself was increasingly impatient with the collaboration, which he was probably seeing more and more as a cage – although there was no binding agreement, as he specified. Some pages later, Besant returns to the point: “I repeat that I desire to suggest nothing that might seem to lessen the work of Rice in the collaboration, while, for both his sake and my own, I regret that it ever went beyond The Golden Butterfly, which was quite the most successful of the joint novels.” (Autobiography, 190) Given Besant’s predominant position in the partnership and his role as the sole writer, he had probably been eager to interrupt the partnership with Rice. After the success of The Golden Butterfly, he must have felt confident enough to start working on his own, and he was more than able to do so – the success of his solo novels
written in the 1880s attests to that. There was an obvious disparity between the two men. The contributions were radically unequal.

Why, then, did Besant allow the collaboration to go on, a collaboration he was evidently sick and tired with? In the first place, as illustrated above, he was deeply averse to handling the business part of authoring, and Rice’s practical and managerial skills were fundamental to him. Secondly, Besant was doubtlessly aware that Rice was unlikely to achieve “an independent literary position.” *(Autobiography*, 189) For Rice, the end of the partnership would probably have meant the end of his career as an author. It is likely that Besant felt restrained by this awareness. Also, their literary collaboration had become a favourite with the public, and their books sold well; with everything around him going smoothly, it is possible that Besant was simply averse to changing.

**The romantic collaboration controversy**

There was only a type of literary partnership that Walter Besant felt sure to advise: the one with a girl:

> [t]here is, however, one kind of collaboration […] which may be recommended very strongly to every young literary workman. I would advise him to find among his friends – cousins – sisters’ friends – a girl, intelligent, sympathetic, and quick; a girl who will lend him her ear, listen to his plot, and discuss his characters. (Lit. Col., 209)

Besant proceeded to illustrate the qualities such a girl should possess: “[s]he should be a girl of quick imagination, who does not, or cannot, write – there are still, happily, many such girls.” (Lit. Col., 209) The young author would simply have to discuss with the girl his ideas, and

> [w]hen he has confided to her his characters all in the rough, with the part they have to play all in the rough, he may reckon on presently getting them back again, but advanced – much less in the rough. Woman does not create, but she receives, moulds, and develops. The figures will go back to their creator, distinct and clear, no longer shivering unclothed, but made up and dressed for the stage. Merely by talking with this girl everything that was chaotic falls into order; the characters, which were dim and shapeless, become alive, full grown, articulate. (Lit. Col. 209)

According to Besant, this kind of collaboration was to be preferred to all others, since “[a]s in everyday life, so in imaginative work, woman should be man’s best partner – the most generous – the least exacting – the most certain never to quarrel over her share of the work, […] her share of the pay.” (Lit. Col., 209) A girl, he believed, would never claim any right on the text, but she would selflessly step back and be content to stay in the shadow in order to leave her male partner enjoy the

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66 In particular, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men, Children of Gibeon, Dorothy Foster, and All in a Garden Fair.*
limelight. Besant also added: “[p]erhaps he would like to get engaged to her – that is a detail: if he does it might not injure the collaboration.” (Lit. Col., 209) From a metaphorical marriage Besant thus took collaboration to actual marriage.67

This last observation became highly controversial and triggered a series of reactions from the coeval press. The number of papers from February 1892 that reported and commented on Besant’s article is impressive, and most of them replied to his final advice. Although many articles found Besant’s suggestion stimulating and reported the passage in their first page under titles like “the most agreeable collaborator,” (Yorkshire Evening Post, 2 Feb. 1892, no. 445, p.1) sarcastic comments flooded the press. One newspaper remarked that “it would be interesting to hear what a lady novelist would think of the converse of this suggestion.” (Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette, 5 March 1892, no. 9467, p. 2) Another ironically reflected on the possible practical obstacles to Besant’s idea:

Mr. Besant […] gives us a capital account of the system of literary collaboration. There is one point of it quite idyllic. He recommends the novelist to discover some young girl. […] I can fancy the tender passages especially improving wonderfully under the arrangement. […] In the case of a young and rising storyteller, it may be easy to find a collaborator of this engaging kind; but when a novelist is getting on in years there may be a difficulty in getting her to ‘lend him her ear:’ it is probable that somebody else may have been promised the loan of it. If he is married, it is also just possible […] that his wife may object to such an arrangement. One can imagine a dramatic situation arising from it not included in the author’s plot. A feeble voice pleading that ‘we were only collaborating,’ and a more resolute one replying that that system of composition must be put a stop to. (Illustrated London News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 2756, p. 2)

The London Daily News observed: “Mr Besant suggests that a nice girl is the best kind of partner, but that would lead to indolence, flirtation, or even to the altar. After marriage, the nice girl who ‘collaborated’ so pleasantly will no longer do so, nor, to be sure, will she let the novelist work with other nice girls.” (13 Feb. 1892) The weekly magazine Hearth and Home dedicated a long article, ironically entitled “Walter Besant’s Guide to Matrimony,” to criticise Besant’s recommendation:

Mr. Besant – who likes to have a saying in all things literary – has pointed out a new method of collaboration which is likely to find great favour with match-making mammas. He advises the young writer male who can write to collaborate with the young thinker female who cannot write, and declares that by talking things over with a charming girl of quick imagination and ready sympathy everything that was chaotic will fall into order, and the dim, shadowy characters ‘become alive, full grown, articulate.’ In fact, to put it bluntly, Mr. Besant says to the youthful and aspiring author: ‘Flirt, and you

67 The question arises whether Besant was talking from experience. However, we know very little of his private life. We only know that in 1874 he married a woman named Mary Garat Foster Barham, and that they had four children. In his Autobiography, Besant only briefly mentioned his marriage in a few lines, in connection with a crisis in the Palestine Exploration Fund so that he had to shorten his honeymoon. (167) No information is given as to his married life. From his statements one may think that, after Rice’s death, Besant’s wife took the place of his last partner in discussing his novels with him. But we have no evidence and this remains only a speculation.
will be able to write; but flirt with someone who has got an intellect.’ A literary flirtation! (*Hearth and Home*, 11 Feb. 1892, vol. 2, no. 39, p. 383)

*Hearth and Home* went on to foreshadow the possible catastrophic consequences for the literary market were Besant’s “delicious recipe” to be taken seriously:

[i]s Mr. Besant, however, wise in setting such a very sparkling torch to the smouldering ambition which lurks in so many – fools? For, alas! The foolish ones of literature are a large and growing class. People who have nothing to say and say it at great length, bound in green cloth, this style two-and-six, abound, and literary tares are day by day springing up in such quantities as to choke much literary wheat.

The sowers of tares will certainly increase and multiply if men in authority like Mr. Besant give such delicious recipes for the making of books. You are a young, and probably a foolish, man. Floating through what you are pleased to call your brain are certain nebulous phantoms named by you thoughts or ideas. They float shadowly and refuse to take real shape, eluding you like the Fata Morgana. You are puzzled until Mr. Besant comes to your aid, crying on the housetops, ‘Collaborate!’ Forthwith you look about you for a young maiden of quick imagination, and to her you convey your nebulous phantoms. She thinks you handsome and therefore declares your phantoms beautiful. Cause and effect. You beg her to make them take shape, to clothe them in flesh and blood. She is eager to do so. You talk the matter over – you are always talking it over – while probably the censorious world, which understands not collaboration, begins to talk you over. The phantoms take shape. They are shadows no longer. The magic touch of this girl of quick imagination has waked your brain Galatea from a marble sleep. She opens her eyes, and you are entranced. So you send her forth to the long-suffering world bound in boards. What matter if the critics – vultures you term them – say your Galatea is a Frankenstein’s monster? You have collaborated, and the chances are you are looking out for a nice little house, and are dreaming domestically of a sweet dual life crowned with orange blossoms throned by a glowing hearth in a snug home. (*Hearth and Home*, 11 Feb. 1892, vol. 2, no. 39, p. 383)

Sarcasm reached its highest at the end of the article:

[i]n point of fact, Mr. Besant is coming forward as the apostle of matrimony. He says ‘collaborate heads,’ but he means ‘collaborate hearts.’ He is a new St. Valentine bidding, in rounded, literary phrases, the birds to pair. He should have called his article ‘Walter Besant’s Guide to Matrimony,’ and he might even set up a bureau, which would completely cut out his Society of Authors. If his advice be followed, we shall have more books, more weddings, fewer bachelor’s clubs, and more publishing houses. Literature and love will join hands and trot merrily along together to the chime of wedding bells, and the author of *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* will find his name changed upon the lips of the world. It will no longer call him Besant; it will smile upon him and murmur the word ‘Hymen.’ (*Hearth and Home*, 11 Feb. 1892, vol. 2, no. 39, p. 383)

Besant’s linking of literary collaboration and romance had a huge resonance in the late Victorian imagination. In fiction, this image was present, for instance, in the story “Always Wrong” by Charles T.C. James (1895), in which the protagonist has a female friend, “a beautiful girl, soul of his soul,” “before whom he stops, every now and then, to pour out his raptures” (as reported in the book’s review in *The Standard*, 11 Sept. 1895, p.2). But not only fiction was permeated by the connection
collaboration-love. In the columns of newspapers of the period such as *The Standard* it is possible to find ads such as the following:

*Widower, without encumbrance, 40, with moderate private means, of quiet and studious habits, engaged in literary work, is desirous of meeting with a cultured lady of literary taste and good musician if possible, possessed of independent means, with a view of sharing expenses of a refined home and collaboration. – Full particulars, in strict confidence, write Litterateur, 54, New Oxford-street.*

*(The Standard, 22 June 1894, no. 21.831, p. 9)*

Where collaboration succeeds and where it fails

A large part of Besant’s and Matthews’s essays were devoted “to point out the departments of literature in which collaboration may be of advantage and to indicate its more apparent limitations.” (Matthews 1891, 22) Both authors set out to assess the benefits and the limits of collaboration, and, interestingly, reached the same conclusions. Besant maintains that “two heads will prove better than one” where there was need for “construction, compressions, selection, and grouping;” (Lit. Col., 201); similarly, Matthews remarked that in the attaining of “forethought, ingenuity, construction, compression […] two heads are indubitably better than one.” (11) “[C]learness of purpose,” (Lit. Col., 208), a well-defined plot and distinct characters were the product of collaboration: “[c]ollaboration succeeds most abundantly where clearness is needed, where precision, skill, and logic are looked for, where we expect simplicity of motive, sharpness of outline, ingenuity of construction, and cleverness of effect.” (Matthews 1891, 12).

However, due to the discussions and mutual criticism implied in collaboration, the result may be too distinct, the construction almost scientific:

*[t]here is the danger that there may be too much distinctness – a loss of atmosphere – not enough left to the imagination. Living men and women are not always distinct; they change from day to day; they possess more than one characteristic; the miser is not always paring the cheese; the man of science is not always in his laboratory; the shrew is sometimes good-tempered; the wanton is sometimes serious and chaste. That is the real danger […].* (Lit. Col., 208)

The only possible way to avoid it, wrote Besant, was to give “the final revision to one of the two partners,” (Lit. Col., 208) but even that would not be enough. Matthews expressed a similar preoccupation: “with its talking over, its searching discussion, its untiring pursuit of the idea into the most remote fastness,” coauthorship could lead to “an over-sharpness of outline, a deprivation of that

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68 *The Standard* offers many instances of ads like this in the section ‘Situations Vacant and Wanted.’
vagueness of contour not seldom strangely fascinating.” (Matthews 1891, 14) In a work written collaboratively, there was less chance of the unforeseen:

[n]o doubt in the work of two men there is a loss of the unexpected, and the story must of necessity move straight forward by the shortest road, not lingering by the wayside in hope of wind-falls. There is less chance of unforeseen developments suggesting themselves as the pen speeds in its way across the paper – and every writer knows how the pen often runs away with him ‘across country’ and over many a five-barred gate which he had never intended to take. (Matthews 1891, 14)

Matthews affirmed that the presence of a partner and the necessity to talk things over together restrained the flow of inspiration. The very act of talking, according to him, held back the stream of one’s thoughts:

[w]here there may be a joy in the power of unexpected expansion, and where there may be a charm of veiled beauty, vague and fleeting, visible at a glimpse only and intangible always, two men would be in each other’s way. In the effort to fix these fugitive graces they would but trip over each other’s heels. A task of this delicacy belongs of right to the lonely student in the silent watches of the night, or in solitary walks under the greenwood tree and far from the madding crowd. (Matthews 1891, 11-12)

Owing to the mutual criticism of the joint authors, “an intuitive attaining of the ideal, the instinctive artistic creation of poetic wholes, is not to be expected from a partnership – indeed, it is hardly possible to it.” (Matthews 1891, 13) Consequently, “[c]ollaboration fails to satisfy where there is need of profound meditation, of solemn self-interrogation, or of lofty imagination lifting itself freely towards the twin-peaks of Parnassus. (Matthews 1891, 11) Besant remained on the same wavelength when he affirmed that “[s]atire, fun, humour, and pathos all may be exhibited at their best in partnership,” (Lit. Col., 203) but “[t]o touch the deeper things one must be alone. Two men talking together, using the same words, on solemn subjects, like a church congregation, might look ridiculous. One must, alone, speak to the alone. To treat of the graver things one must, alone, construct the machinery.” (Lit. Col., 203) Besant’s conclusion was therefore that “[n]either in the study of the wanderings and development of the individual soul, nor in the development of character, nor in the work of pure and lofty imagination, is collaboration possible.” (Lit. Col., 204) However, in storytelling collaboration “may be not only possible but useful:” (Lit. Col., 204) Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Reade were able to collaborate because “these writers are first and foremost, storytellers.” (Lit. Col., 204) Besant included himself in the ranks of storytellers, and in the Autobiography he expressed his pride in being part of “the company of the story-tellers.” (184)

Also in writing drama collaboration may be precious: the “deliberate scientific construction” of a collaborative text is “absolutely essential” in drama (Matthews 1891, 15): “[p]erhaps the drama is the
only form of literature in which so painstaking a process would be advantageous, or in which it would be advisable even.” (Matthews 1891, 28) Since a play has to follow rigid limitations of time and space, “the structure can hardly be too careful or too precise, nor can the dialogue be too compact or too polished” (28-29) and “there is no room on the stage for unexpected development.” (15) Then Matthews observed that France was the country “with the most vigorous dramatic literature,” (18) and that France was also the country where collaboration was most frequent; he linked the two facts, proposing that one is the consequence of the other: “in any country where there is a revival of the drama collaboration is likely to become common at once. […] I venture to suggest that one of the causes of immediate hopefulness for the drama in our language is the prevalence of collaboration in England and in America.” (18) Besant and Rice attempted at writing drama as well as fiction: firstly, they dramatised Ready-Money Mortiboy, but the play was “received with indifference,” (RMM 1887, x-xi) and withdrawn within a few weeks; then they tried again with a text written specifically for the stage, called Such a Good Man (later converted into a story), which debuted, without success, in 1879.

**Besant after Rice: the era of discussion**

In 1882, Besant and Rice’s partnership was interrupted by the latter’s death. Rice’s fatal illness – a cancer in the throat – lasted from January 1881 to his death in April 1882, and is narrated by Besant in both RMM 1887 (xi, xiii) and his Autobiography (198). However, the two accounts are told in very different tones. In RMM 1887, the story is quite long, detailed, almost repetitive, and written in a sentimental tone; one can feel the hope at his improvements, the disappointments at his relapses, the renewed hope at what seemed a recovery, and the anguish at the sudden decline in the last months of his life. Besant tells us of the shock at his collaborator’s final, sudden breakdown, as

> [h]e maintained his cheerfulness of tone until the very end. I received, in fact, so many letters from him, and all so hopeful, that I never had any serious fears about his recovery. The last letter I had from him was written only three or four days before he died. He told me […] that the doctor held out hopes of his being able to travel as far as Brighton in a few weeks, and made me promise to go there with him. The sea air, he said, would complete his cure, which was at length assured. Nothing could have been more hopeful. Yet on the following morning he collapsed altogether, and died two days after. (RMM 1887, xii)

From the account in RMM 1887, one feels the close bond between the two: witness the frequent letters, the promise to go to Brighton together to complete Rice’s recovery, the cheerful hope of Besant for his friend. Also, Rice is presented in a heroic light, facing his illness with optimism and without complaining. He carried on his work as manager of the duo until a few months before his
death, when he went to London to arrange a serial publication in the *Illustrated London News* for the following summer, “the very subject of which he did not live to discuss, though it appeared, as it had been advertised, under our joint names.” (*RMM* 1887, xi) The *Autobiography*, instead, presents a cold, shorter and much more pragmatic account: Rice’s ups and downs in more than a year of illness are just listed one after the other; the stoical attitude so stressed in *RMM* 1887 is not even referred to; no feelings on Besant’s part are mentioned. This is only a plain account, and the last words Besant ever spent on his ten years’ collaborator are shockingly icy: “[a]fter lingering for six months in great suffering, he died in April 1882 at the age of thirty-nine; the cause was a cancer in the throat.” (*Autobiography*, 195)

So not only did Besant devote only few pages in his long *Autobiography* to the experience with Rice, his tone is also glacial and dry. This may be due to the fact that Besant had spent the preceding twenty years answering to the press’s curiosity about his collaboration, and was exhausted. He had already said what he wanted to. After two decades of talking about the supposed mystery of his collaboration, perhaps at least in his autobiography Besant wanted to talk only about himself (he surely had a big enough ego). He decided to write about what he wanted, not what he was expected to. It was as if Besant took the occasion to reclaim his status as an individual novelist.

When the collaboration with Rice ended, Besant was forty-six; he had become a writer loved by the public and respected by the critics. As already mentioned, he did not limit himself to his career as a novelist: although he kept writing steadily, he devoted his time to philanthropic causes, to the Society of Authors, and to his ‘manuals’ to write fiction. He had become such a successful author during his partnership with Rice and in the few years afterwards, that his opinions on the topic of fiction were constantly looked for and respected. He focused on theorising what he considered the laws of fiction and how it should be written, and he set out to make the principles he followed in writing novels public.

Besant’s first famous commentary was *The Art of Fiction*, which sparked what Henry James called “the era of discussion.” (James 1885, 52) *The Art of Fiction* was originally a lecture delivered by Besant at the Royal Institution in London on 25 April 1884. On the following day, the *Pall Mall Gazette* devoted a short paragraph to the lecture in its ‘Occasional Notes;’ on 30 April a longer response appeared in the same magazine – also called “The Art of Fiction” – written by Andrew Lang. In May, Chatto and Windus published Besant’s lecture in volume form with notes and additions. On 24 May, the *Spectator* published a review of this edition, “Mr. Besant on the Art of Fiction,” and several other reviews and passing references appeared in the following months. In the
autumn, Henry James joined the debate in Longman’s Magazine with his own version of “The Art of Fiction,” to which R.L. Stevenson rejoined in the winter with “A Humble Remonstrance.”

Henry James’s “Art of Fiction,” which was a direct answer to Besant, is known worldwide. However, Besant’s own Art of Fiction has been widely overlooked by twentieth century criticism. Doubtlessly, when the two essays are placed side by side, Besant appears at his worst. Compared to James, Besant handles the topic in a too-simplified way, and, as Boege (perhaps a bit bitterly) comments, using a tone

more suitable for telling his listeners how to finish a piece of furniture than how to write good fiction; whereas James, letting us look over the shoulder of an artist who has sweated and agonized for twenty years, writes like a saint who finds his profoundest realities in the trials and triumphs of an unseen world. It is the play of two very different intelligences on the same material which produced on the one hand a commonplace discussion of a few innocuous ideas and on the other a magnificent manifesto for the novel, still vital. (Boege 1956 II, 38)

Even if the artistic value of James’s essay is surely superior, it is useful to look at Besant’s Art of Fiction as his ideas were extremely popular at the end of the nineteenth century, and it was his lecture that started all the subsequent debate. Indeed, at the beginning of his “Art of Fiction,” James bowed to Besant for giving him “a pretext” to express his “few remarks” on this comprehensive subject. (James 1885, 51) The success of Besant’s lecture made James realise that an audience actually existed for his ideas; it roused public interest and prepared the field for him: “Mr. Besant’s lecture at the Royal Institution […] appears to indicate that many people are interested in the art of fiction, and are not indifferent to such remarks as those who practise it may attempt to make about it.” (James 1885, 51) James admits to be “anxious not to lose the benefit of this favorable association, and to edge in a few words under cover of the attention which Mr. Besant is sure to have excited.” (James 1885, 51) James’s choice of entitling his essay with the exact title chosen by Besant was clearly aimed at exploiting the interest roused by it. Before Besant’s lecture, the English novel “was not what the French call discutable. It had no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it – of being the expression of an artistic faith, the result of choice and comparison;” (James 1885, 52) in that period “there was a comfortable, good-humored feeling […] that a novel is a novel, as a

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69 The debate was revived in 1891, when the New Review published two symposia: “The Science of Fiction,” by Besant, Hardy and Paul Bourget, and “The Science of Criticism,” featuring James, Lang, and Edmund Gosse. In 1895 Vernon Lee added her contribution “On Literary Construction,” in the Contemporary Review. Besant’s Art of Fiction was anticipated in 1882 by two articles: “Henry James, Jr.” by William Dean Howells in the Century Magazine, and “A Gossip on Romance” by R.L. Stevenson in Longman’s Magazine. Some reactions had followed, but it was only two years later that the debate really started, through Besant’s contribution.
pudding is a pudding, and that this was the end of it.” (James 1885, 52) James stressed the lack of mutual stimulation between writers, “of public exchange and private community, of intellectual fellowship,” (Spilka 1973, 106) a situation noticed by Besant, thanks to whom “the era of discussion would appear to have been to a certain extent opened.” (James 1885, 52)

Discussion, suggestion, formulation, these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere. Mr. Besant has set an excellent example in saying what he thinks, for his part, about the way in which fiction should be written; […] other labourers in the same field will doubtlessly take up the argument, they will give it the light of their experience, and the effect will surely be to make our interest in the novel a little more what it had for some time threatened to fail to be – a serious, active, inquiring interest […]. (James 1885, 53)

The main points in Besant’s discussion, although sometimes too simple and ingenuous, constituted the starting points of James’s manifesto.

Besant’s *The Art of Fiction* was basically a discussion of three propositions: first, that fiction must be recognised as the equal of all the other fine arts (Painting, Sculpture, Music, and Poetry); then, that fiction is governed by some general laws, which may be laid down and taught with as much precision as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion; thirdly, being fiction no mechanical art, no laws can be taught to those who do not already possess “the natural and necessary gifts.” (*Art of Fiction*, 6) Besant’s first proposition was applauded by James, whose essay remarked: “[i]t is excellent that he should have struck this note, for his doing so indicates that there was need of it, that his proposition may be to many people a novelty.” (James 1885, 56)

Besant pleaded for the establishing of schools of fiction, and pointed out that fiction was the only fine art that had “no lectures and teachers, no school or college or Academy, no recognised rules, no textbooks, and is not taught in any University? Even the German Universities, which teach everything else, do not have Professors of Fiction.” (*Art of Fiction*, 14) Besant made the question of the teachability of fiction a public issue and a matter for debate: by the late nineteenth century, the novel had a precise history, a distinct variety of subgenres, and a rather large body of important works behind it; it was time, according to Besant, to take it seriously as an academic subject. His plea was one of the first public arguments for creative writing courses. He observed that not one single

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70 Immediately after that, James specified that this naivete was not necessarily “the worse for that; it would take much more courage than I possess to intimate that the form of the novel, as Dickens and Thackeray […] saw it, had any taint of incompleteness. It was, however, naïf.” (James 1885, 52) He was trying to distance himself from his friend and fellow novelist, William Dean Howells, who in his 1882 essay had dismissed Dickens and Thackeray as men of the past (he wrote that the art of fiction had become a finer art in their days than it had been with Dickens and Thackeray), thus provoking a series of indignant reactions in the press.

71 Spilka (1973) points out that in 1874 a writer for the *Saturday Review* had called for “an Institute of Novel-Writing” (XXXVII, 415-16) and that Trollope and others had affirmed the need for training and for following some basic rules,
novenlist had ever tried “to teach his mystery, or spoken of it as a thing which may be taught.” (Art of Fiction, 15) Besant criticised novelists who did not want to speak about their art, thus feeding the deep-rooted discourse on fiction writing as involving a mystery. The only way open to those who want to try their hand at fiction is to acquire the art “unconsciously, or by imitation.” (Art of Fiction, 15) This general belief that one does not need any instruction to write fiction, Besant goes on, has led to the idea that anyone who has “talent” can write a novel: therefore, thousands of fools think “why not sit down and write one?” (Art of Fiction, 15) The result is the flood of “bad, inartistic” novels “which is every week laid before the public.” (Art of Fiction, 34) Conversely, young people should approach fiction with the same seriousness and awareness of its difficulties with which they would undertake the study of music or painting. The study of rules “will not make a man a novelist, any more than the knowledge of grammar makes a man know a language, or a knowledge of musical science makes a man able to play an instrument. Yet the Rules must be learned.” (Art of Fiction, 33) Besant’s plea for schools of fiction was reiterated in 1891 in an article for the New Review (IV, 304-319) entitled “The Science of Fiction,” occasioned by the announcement that one was to be established in the United States. Beside repeating the need for proper instruction in fiction writing, Besant replied to the criticism according to which schools of fiction would turn out a horde of mediocre novelists. According to him, it would be the exact contrary: as the schools of art and music had done, such schools would produce people who knew the technique of their art, who could practise it after a fashion, and who would be competent critics and fastidious consumers; the result would be a general improvement of the quality of the fiction produced.72

Having said so, Besant set down rules which, according to him, would enable aspiring authors to write good fiction. Since modern fiction’s aim is to portray humanity,73 the first rule he proposes is that in fiction everything “which is invented, and is not the result of personal experience and observation, is worthless; […] never go beyond your own experience.” (Art of Fiction, 34, 36) For instance, states Besant, a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid to deal with

but he concedes that Besant’s was the first systematic and influential appeal. It was he who “planted the idea of a teachable craft.” (Spilka 1973, 108)

72 Besant’s article was part of a symposium run by the New Review in 1891 on the topic of fiction writing and called precisely “The Science of Fiction.” Also Hardy and Paul Bourget contributed to it. Besant had already worked with Hardy the preceding year, when they had discussed “Candour in English Fiction,” together with Mrs. Lynn Linton (always for the New Review, II, 1890, 6-21). Besant, Hardy and Linton agreed on the power of unofficial censorship wielded by circulating libraries. Then, Hardy and Linton complained of the lack of freedom for the novelist: according to them, it was impossible to make a serious study of life because the market will have nothing that is not suited to the needs of young girls (as those needs are interpreted by her parents). On the contrary, Besant praised Average Opinion, saying that it was a benevolent tyrant who set natural, just bonds to Art, and that the limitations were not so narrow after all, bringing forth the works of George Eliot, Reade, and Collins as examples.

73 “The very first rule in fiction is that the human interest must absolutely absorb everything else.” (Art of Fiction, 21-22)
garrison life; or a writer belonging to the lower middle class should not introduce his characters into Society. This first rule was already problematic, as it somewhat denied the ranges of imagination. James was particularly troubled by it: he commented that “[i]t goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms;” (James 1885, 64) he went on asking “[w]hat kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end?” (James 1885, 64) to which he answers:

[experience is [...] an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative [...] it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelation.” (James 1885, 64)

The American novelist comments that it is “quite unfair” of Besant to declare that a young country lady “shall have nothing to say about the military.” (James 1885, 64) If she has sufficient imagination, “she should speak the truth about some of these gentlemen.” (James 1885, 65) An imaginative mind needs only a glimpse in order to be able to give a true impression of something; even one moment is experience: “the power to guess the seen from the unseen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern” is for the artist “a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale.” (James 1885, 65) The idea of experience is thus complicated by James, according to whom “experience consists of impressions.” (James 1885, 66)47 According to Besant, in order to be able to write from experience the novelist must acquire the ability of description, which consists in the power of observation and selection. Besant affirms that observation can be trained by keeping a notebook,75 while the faculty of selection cannot be taught (“selection requires that kind of special fitness for the Art which is included in the much-abused word Genius” 47), but whose principle is that everything “which does not either advance the story or illustrate the characters, ought to be rigidly suppressed.” (48) The characters must be real, or as such as might be met with in real life; also, they must be drawn clearly: if they are not grasped clearly by the author, they will never be clear to the reader (“what the author cannot set down, the reader cannot

47 For a fuller discussion of James’s definition of experience, see Spilka 1973, 112.

75 Besant’s advice to note down everything he sees and hears “so that nothing is lost” (Art of Fiction, 42) was transformed by James into his famous maxim, “Try to be one of the people to whom nothing is lost!” (James 1885, 66) James shared with Besant the belief in the importance of taking notes: “Mr. Besant is well-inspired when he bids him [the author] to take notes. He cannot possibly take too many, he cannot possibly take enough.” (James 1885, 67) James only adds that Besant’s rule would be more exact had he “been able to tell him what notes to take.” (James 1885, 67) But he reflects that, actually, it is impossible to tell: this the aspiring novelist “can never learn in any hand-book; it is the business of his life.” (James 1885, 67)
understand,” 51; “clearness of drawing […] includes clearness of vision,” 55). The writer must see and understand his characters thoroughly:

[s]o well do we know them, that they become our advisers, our guides, and our best friends, on whom we model ourselves, our thoughts, and our actions. The writer who has succeeded in drawing to the life, true, clear, distinct, so that all may understand, a single figure of a true man or woman, has added another exemplar or warning to humanity. (52)

Besant proceeds to illustrate some methods to draw clear characters: the first and the easiest – but also the worst – way is to provide the character with “some mannerism or personal peculiarity, some trick of speech or of carriage;” (53) another way is to describe it at length, but that may result tedious for the reader; the third and best method suggested by Besant is first to make a character intelligible by a few words, “allowing him to reveal himself in action and dialogue.” (53-54) The figure of Daniel Deronda, even though it is “drawn with the most amazing care and with endless touches and re-touches,” (50) must have been an “awful veiled spectre” to George Eliot, “always seeming about to reveal his true features and his mind, but never doing it, so that in the end she never clearly perceived what manner of man he was, nor what was his real character.” (50)

Besant’s next point became a controversial one. He claims that the modern English novel shall have a moral purpose, but that “fortunately” it is “not possible in this country for any man to defile and defame humanity and still be called an artist;” (57) the development of modern sympathy, the attention and respect for the individual, the appreciation of a life of devotion and self-denial, the deep-seated religion, together with “the sense of responsibility among the English-speaking races,” act strongly upon the artist and lend to his work, almost unconsciously, “a moral purpose so clearly marked that it has become practically a law of English Fiction.” (58) This moral purpose “is a truly admirable thing, and a great cause for congratulation.” (58) This point was overtly critised by James, who argues that most people will find “moral timidity” (James 1885, 82) rather than moral purpose, in the English novel. The “usual English novelist,” according to James, “is apt to be extremely shy […] and the sign of his work, for the most part, is a cautious silence on certain subjects.” (James 1885, 82) The “truly admirable” moral purpose of the English novel so praised by Besant struck James “rather negatively.” (James 1885, 83) The demand for moral seriousness, as opposed to artistic seriousness, troubled him considerably. Gard (1968: 8) writes that probably James sensed that English demand for clear-cut moral and social credentials was responsible for the low estimation of his own works; to many of his contemporaries, James’s subjects seemed thin, elusive, and “not manifestly serious and worth the application of serious men.” (8) As Spilka puts it, James felt he had “to speak
out radically for complete artistic freedom.” (Spilka 1973, 114) At almost the end of his essay, he wrote that the moral and the artistic sense “lie very near together,”

that is, in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that mind is rich and noble will the novel […] partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground. (James 1885, 83)

This coupling of the moral and the artist senses, reflects Spilka, introduced modern moral consciousness into the Victorian arena. (Spilka 1973, 114) What James is calling for is a change in sensibility, which his own age was not ready to accept.

Besant’s *Art of Fiction* claimed that style is to be cared for – but not as much as most critics think; the story, instead, is everything:

> [t]here is a school that pretends that there is no need for a story: all the stories, they say, have been told already; there is no more room for invention; […] One hears this kind of talk with the same wonder which one feels when a new monstrous fashion changes the beautiful figure of woman into something grotesque and unnatural. (65-66)

The material for fiction is infinite, because it concerns humanity, which is like a kaleidoscope: one can turn it about and look into it again and again, but he will never find the same picture twice – “it cannot be exhausted.” (43) Besant’s distinction between style and story puzzled James, who declared that he could “not see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of a novel which is the story and a part of it which for mystical reasons is not.” (James 1885, 76) Since the novel is “a living thing, all one and continuous, like every other organism,” (James 1885, 68) the story and the novel, the idea and the form are like the needle and thread: “I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle or the needle without the thread.” (James 1885, 77)

*The Art of Fiction*’s last rule tells authors never to use too gloomy a tone: “let him not tell his story with eyes of sadness, a face of woe, and a shaking voice. His story may be tragic, but continued gloom is a mistake in Art, even for a tragedy.” (73) Also, the writer should tell his story without trying to show his cleverness, his wit, and his learning.

Overall, Besant appears to have very definite ideas of what a good novel is. Yet his certainties at times feel somewhat like superficiality, and, taken literally, a writer would have a limited path to follow. Here lies the main difference between the value of Besant’s *Art of Fiction* and James’s. Besant is too simplistic, confident, didactic, concrete, too keen on prescribing rules. On his part, James distrusted precise prescriptions; although he is very careful to shape his criticism as mildly as possible, he ends up actually debunking most of Besant’s lecture. Even if he insists in saying that
Besant’s lecture is “suggestive” (James 1885, 84) and “excellent,” and that it is “difficult to dissent” and “surely impossible not to sympathize” (James 1885, 63) with his recommendations, James actually throws them out of the window. James is very cautious in his tone: “I shall take the liberty of making but a single criticism of Mr. Besant, whose tone is so full of the love of his art […]” (James 1885, 60) His “single criticism” is actually the most important of his many critiques to Besant: he affirms that it seems to him that Besant is mistaken “in attempting to say so definitely beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be. […] The good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free.” (James 1885, 60) According to the American author, a novelist had to be completely free in his choices; the “only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel […] is that it must be interesting.” (James 1885, 60) The ways in which a novelist may accomplish this goal (to be interesting) “strike me as innumerable and such as can only suffer from being marked out, or fenced in, by prescription.” (James 1885, 60) Since a novel is “a personal impression of life” that “reveals a particular mind,” impositions from the outside would limit the expression of the mind: “[t]he tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and a suppression of the very thing we are most curious about.” (James 1885, 61) The value of a novel is “greater or less according to the intensity of impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say.” (James 1885, 60-61) There must be no limit to what the novelist may attempt: such freedom is “the advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility” of the novelist. (James 1885, 61) James went back to this point at the end of his essay, remarking that to learn to be worthy of this freedom is the first lesson of the young novelist.

A further result of Besant’s lecture was Stevenson’s article “A Humble Remonstrance,” which opens with the following words:

[w]e have recently enjoyed a quite peculiar pleasure: hearing, in some detail, the opinions, about the art they practice, of Mr. Walter Besant and Mr. Henry James; two men certainly of very different caliber: Mr. James so precise of outline, so cunning of fence, so scrupulous of finish, and Mr. Besant so genial, so friendly, with so pervasive and humorous a vein of whim: Mr. James the very type of the deliberate artist, Mr. Besant the impersonation of good nature. (Stevenson 1884, 1)

Stevenson starts by praising Besant as cheerful and amiable – which sounds somewhat demeaning, in contrast with James being defined “the deliberate artist.” It looks as if Stevenson is admiring Besant’s “good nature” as a human being in order not to pass too harsh a judgement on his literary opinions. Some lines later, he criticises Besant for dealing only with “the modern English novel, the stay and bread-winner of Mr. Mudie.” (Stevenson 1884, 1) However, he quickly dismisses Besant: it is James’s essay that attracts Stevenson’s undivided attention. It is James that Stevenson addresses
throughout his reply, “with the emphasis and technicalities of the obtrusive student” (5) against the master of the art. “A Humble Remonstrance” dissents on some key points from James’s *Art of Fiction*, most importantly the American author’s conviction that art can compete with life, which, according to Stevenson, is impossible, since life is “monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant” and a work of art is “neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing and emasculate.” (Stevenson 1884, 3) A work of art such as a novel “exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, as a shoe must still consist of leather,” but rather “by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work.” (5) Crucially, Stevenson recommends to “the young writer” to “bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude:” on the contrary, a novel is “a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity. For although, in great men […] what we observe and admire is often their complexity, yet underneath appearances the truth remains unchanged: that simplification was their method, and that simplicity is their excellence,” (6) concludes Stevenson. In order to obtain this result, he recommends to “choose a motive, whether of character or passion,” and to “carefully construct his plot so that every incident is an illustration of the motive.” (5) In this respect, Stevenson’s position comes close to Besant’s. His tone is more practical than James’s, his suggestions more precise and down-to-earth, since “the young writer will not so much be helped by genial pictures of what an art may aspire to at its highest, as by a true idea of what it must be on the lowest terms.” (5) He suggests avoiding a sub-plot, “unless, as sometimes in Shakespeare, the sub-plot be a reversion or complement of the main intrigue;” (5) the novelist should in no case “utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved.” (5) Even if Stevenson (curiously) does not mention him when giving this kind of advice, his ideas are more similar to Besant’s than to those of “the impersonation of the deliberate artist.”

Besant went on theorising on the ‘art of fiction’ in *The Pen and the Book* and in the *Autobiography*. The tone is still that of pedantic instruction, and prolixity and repetition are constant features.76 Differently from the serene preaching of *The Art of Fiction* and *The Pen and the Book*, the *Autobiography* is written in a defensive and rather polemic tone, as can be glimpsed from an extract from the chapter dedicated to the years between 1882 and 1900:

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76 Mark Twain, invited by an editor to review *The Pen and the Book*, refused the assignment because it would have compelled him to disparage Besant: “Besant is a friend of mine, and there was no way of doing a review that wouldn’t cut into his feelings and wound his enthusiastic pride in his insane performance […]. The book is not reviewable by any but a sworn enemy of his; for so far as I can see, there isn’t a rational page in it.” (qtd. in Boege 1956 II, 36)
eighteen novels in eighteen years! It seems a long list; how can one write so much and yet survive? My friends, may I ask why a painter is allowed to produce a couple of pictures and more every year and no one cries out upon him for his haste in production; yet if a story-teller gives to the world a novel every year, the criticaster yaps at his heels and asks all the world to observe the haste which the novelist makes to get rich. (*Autobiography*, 200)

As usual, in defending his point Besant made a comparison with other professions. He then revealed to the world how he had managed to write so much and to keep up with his many other activities. He described a sort of scientific method of writing, giving very precise information: he explained that he worked at his novels every morning from nine to half-past twelve; that a novel generally took him from eight to ten months of work; consequently, “if you turn this statement into a little sum in arithmetic, you will find that it means about a thousand words a day.” (*Autobiography*, 200) It little helped that, in the next line, he hastened to specify that he did not exactly write a thousand words every day, but that this was only a general line of conduct. What he did was to talk about the profession of letters as if it was an accountant’s job. In his explanation there is no mystery, no idealistic view of literature, no exalted tone, no desire for a higher aim. It is the account of a man who loved to write, and who practised literature as a profession like any other. That was not what people wanted to read; that was not what his fellow writers wanted to admit.

In the next pages of the *Autobiography*, Besant described with precision the steps he religiously followed when writing a novel: first, one has to decide upon one “plain, clear, and intelligible motif – one which all the world can understand;” (*Autobiography*, 201) round this theme, a collection of well-drawn characters must be grouped, whose actions, conversations, and motives form a clear and consistent story – this is the most difficult part, because there is the risk that the characters may not be of much interest to the reader; the third step is what Besant calls the presentation of the story, which must be done with a view to dramatic effect. This is the phase which “involves practice and study in the art of construction.” (*Autobiography*, 201) Besant’s recipe for a good presentation of the story is the following: avoid long descriptions of characters – “it is best for the ordinary novelist to make his characters describe themselves in dialogue;” (*Autobiography*, 202) and keep the different parts of the story in proportion to each other – “it is amazing to find how many novels are ruined for want of due proportion between the parts, so that the beginning overshadows the end, or the end is out of harmony with the beginning.” (*Autobiography*, 201) Then, Besant compares his writing method with digging a tunnel – what he labels “the principle of the tunnel:” at first he writes at headlong speed the first two or three chapters; then he lays them aside for a few days, and, when the heat of composition is over, he takes them up again, so that he can estimate in cold blood the things that hold promise and those who do not; he then rewrites everything, correcting, cutting or expanding; while
rewriting a part, he goes on to another rough draft of a future chapter: “[s]o the novel is constructed much on the principle of a tunnel, in which the rough boring and blasting goes on ahead, while the completion of the work slowly follows.” (Autobiography, 202-203) He adds that at the outset, “when the work was difficult and the way thorny,” (Autobiography, 204) it is necessary to exercise upon oneself a certain amount of pressure; but after a little while, the characters become alive and they start to work out the story in their own way, “and their talk is incessant.” (Autobiography, 203) Now it is only a question of selection.

At the end of his long description, Besant wavered again between a pedantic and a defensive tone: “[p]erhaps it is superfluous to describe the methods of my work; as I said before, my readers may pass over this chapter; it may, however, be of some use to young aspirants to know how a craftsman in their art worked – may I add? – non sine gloriā, not without a certain measure of success.” (Autobiography, 203)

Besant’s case is far too similar to that of Anthony Trollope not to draw a comparison between the two. Trollope had been one of the most prolific and most widely-read novelists from the 1850s to his death in 1882; however, just after his death, something changed: the demand for his books suffered a precipitous drop, and his name was nearly forgotten. This abrupt decline has often been attributed to the damaging effect upon his reputation of his Autobiography. Exactly like Besant, Trollope’s Autobiography appeared posthumously the year after his death – in 188377 – and did a lot to make its author unpopular for the following decades. (Smalley 1969, 6; Halperin 1982, xiii; Super 1993; Allen 1996, 4) Like Besant’s, it charted the methodical ways in which the novelist worked and articulated Trollope’s belief that the writing of fiction was a profession no more sacred than that of a shoemaker or a grocer; Trollope candidly admitted that he wrote for money and that he thought of himself as just another tradesman providing a product at a price for public consumption. “The general public tends to know little about art; it is often thought as being produced in a highly rarefied atmosphere – in a garret, amidst starving infants and a wife who coughs. To those who believe this sort of thing, the Autobiography would be shocking. It hurt Trollope’s immediate posterity,” reflects Halperin. (1982, xiii) Authors were expected to write from inspiration, not to follow a daily schedule. Trollope’s Autobiography’s (in)famous passage in which he described his way of writing is strikingly similar to Besant’s:

[i]t was my practice to be at my table every morning at 5.30 a.m.; and it was also my practice to allow myself no mercy. […] By beginning at that hour I could complete my literary work before I dressed for breakfast.

77 As specified in the preface, written by his son Henry, Trollope wrote his Autobiography between the years 1775 and 1776, and left instructions to publish it after his death.
All those I think who have lived as literary men – working daily as literary labourers – will agree with me that three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write. But then he should so have trained himself that he shall be able to work continuously during those three hours – so have tutored his mind that it shall not be necessary for him to sit nibbling his pen, and gazing at the wall before him, till he shall have found the words with which he wants to express his ideas. It had at this time become my custom [the years from 1859 to 1871] […] to write with my watch before me, and to require from myself 250 words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the 250 words have been forthcoming as regularly as my watch went. […] (Trollope 1883, 250-51)

With his three hours every morning, wherever he was, whether on ship or on shore, on foreign trains or in foreign hotels, totting up to his 250 word every quarter-hour, his watch before him, Trollope managed to produce his prodigious output:

[t]his division of time allowed me to produce over ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months, would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year – the precise amount which so greatly acerbated the publisher in Paternoster Row, and which must at any rate be felt to be quite as much as the novel-readers of the world can want from the hands of one man. (Trollope, 250-51)

Trollope also followed a method similar to Besant’s ‘method of the tunnel.’ Each morning, before going on writing, he read and corrected what he had written the day before: “I always began my task by reading the work of the day before, an operation which would take me half an hour, and which consisted chiefly in weighing with my ear the sound of the words and phrases. I would strongly recommend this practice to all tyros in writing. […] (Trollope 1883, 251)

Like Besant, Trollope was very open in his Autobiography about the amount of money he made from his writing: he declared that from 1862 to 1874 his income averaged £4500 a year. In the 1860s and 1870s this was indeed an impressive sum. Again, like Besant, Trollope had a very busy life. He worked first as a clerk and later as a surveyor of the General Post Office, a job he kept from 1834 to 1867, after which he edited the St. Paul’s Magazine (for a salary of £1000 a year) for three years; he travelled extensively all over the world; in 1868, he stood (unsuccessfully) as Liberal candidate for the borough of Beverley in the General Election. Beside his forty-seven novels, he wrote dozens of short stories, political, critical, social and sporting articles and some travel accounts; he went hunting twice a week, “I was frequent at the whist-room at the Garrick. I lived much in society in London, and was made happy by the presence of many friends at Waltham Cross [where he lived]. In addition to this we always spent six weeks at least out of England. Few men, I think, ever lived a fuller life.” (Trollope, 250) Thanks to his industry and self-discipline, like Besant, Trollope was able to carry on simultaneously many different activities and to write a huge quantity of fiction. And yet, “Trollope’s Autobiography fell with a splash into the elegant waters of aestheticism. The book is a compendium
of all that was most offensive to the new modishness. It is the self-portrait of a man who went out to deny his literary caste.” (Sadleir 1961, 364) Both Trollope and Besant glorified hard-work, industry, precision and perseverance, some of the most celebrated virtues in the Victorian age. And yet, such celebrated virtues were not supposed to be possessed by artists. They were held as a category on its own. People did not like to hear what first Trollope and then Besant wrote, and their fellow-writers felt a kind of disloyalty to the conventions of their craft.

Strangely enough, Besant never mentioned Trollope among the writers he admired; actually, he never mentioned him at all. In his *Art of Fiction*, Besant listed the nineteenth-century writers more likely to be read in the future: we find Thackeray, Dickens, George Meredith, George Eliot, Charles Reade, and Blackmore. (*Art of Fiction*, 80-81) But on Trollope not even a word. When Besant explained his working method, he never mentioned Trollope’s example. Yet their paths are amazingly similar, even if Trollope has been re-evaluated and Besant’s name is still covered with thick dust.78

**The ‘Besantine’ age**

In his bitter appraisal of Besant, Spilka (1973, 103) states that Besant “was anything but a serious thinker and could not even follow his own good advice.” If perhaps a little too aggressive – he calls Besant’s *Art of Fiction* “mindless babbles” (102) – Spilka has a point. Although Besant preached extensively in favour of learning to ‘master one’s pen’ and warned young writers not to lose time in digressions that do not advance the story, his writing – both in the joint novels with Rice and much more alone – has a distressing tendency towards prolixity. He would have needed a coauthor with a strong hand able to discipline his pen, but, as we have seen, Rice was far from that and took care of other phases of authoring. All Besant and Rice’s production abounds with irrelevant material, digressions, and miscellaneous comments. Such garrulity became more and more pronounced in Besant’s later, solo novels, written between 1887 and 1901. “Mr. Besant is going down among the babblers,” commented the *Nation* in 1892. (LV, 436) If the writer – according to Besant’s advice – shall not try to show off his wit and learning in his novels, he certainly overlooked this rule. Boege aptly defines Besant “an irresponsible novelist,” especially in his later, overworked years: “[i]n reading his novels one constantly feels that this definitely is not the best work he could do.” (1956 II, 51) Besant’s “irresponsibility” consisted in the fact that, in order to turn out novels at a steady pace, regardless of his numerous other engagements, he resorted to verbosity, flights from reality, and a general carelessness. His “readiness to abandon the story, usually for some authorial comment lacking

78 For a discussion of Trollope’s *Autobiography*, see also Lauriat 2011 and Sussman 2013.
any virtue to atone for its irrelevance” (Boege 1956 II, 53) and his pronounced prolixity made his later writing slack and simply boring. Most of his later work lacks serious intention, or rather, the declared serious purpose is not fulfilled, but is tainted by an unreal, flaccid treatment. Much like Wilkie Collins’s novels ‘with a purpose,’ 79 part of Besant’s later fiction professed to be studies of specific problems: spiritualism (*Herr Paulus*), alcoholism (*The Demoniac*), heredity (*The Fourth Generation*), ill-gotten wealth and its corrupting influence (*Beyond the Dreams of Avarice*). However, Besant continuously slides into “the devices of the popular storyteller instead of holding himself to a serious study of the subject.” (Boege 1956 II, 52) He also often ends up dallying with the supernatural to reveal information or to motivate characters, a device he increasingly resorted to. Besides, the level of sentimentality and of improbable events – already heavily present in his joint novels – increased. All Besant and Rice’s novels have romanticised characters, a heavy dose of saccharine, and quite improbable plots. Several of their plots contain strange acts whose motivations are wholly inadequate. However, sometimes the improbable events blend with the dominantly realistic material in a way that was recognised by coeval reviewers as a distinctive quality of Besant and Rice. But in Besant’s later novels the improbabilities multiply in an alarming way and cease to blend with realism. Also, the eccentric characters with which he had achieved a certain success become mechanical, unbelievable, all more or less derivative from the same types.

In short, Besant’s later novels intensify the problems already present at the time of Besant and Rice’s coauthored fiction.80 As I have tried to show, I believe that the decline was not due to Rice’s absence, but basically to Besant’s overworking. The discussion of his novels in the *Autobiography* (205-215) confirms this impression. Surprisingly, he talks little of them: they are listed one after the other with some remarks as superficial and irrelevant as much of the content of the novels themselves. Besant affirms that *The Fourth Generation* is “the most serious of all my novels,” (210) but he does not give a reason for this statement, and the book is actually an inconsequential romance. Although he

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79 Although Besant never declared an explicit intention to follow Collins’s example in this field, in reading his later works one is indeed reminded of Collins’s ‘novels with a purpose’ such as *No Name* (dealing with the position of illegitimate children), *Man and Wife* (marriage laws and satirizing the mania for muscular sports), *The New Magdalen* (society’s treatment of penitents), *The Black Robe* (noted for its anti-Catholic bias as it exposed the machinations of a Catholic priest trying to convert an English man in order to bring his family estate back to the Church) and *Heart and Science* (vivisection). Like Besant, Collins had a firm belief in the purpose of his fiction, even though it was not always met with enthusiasm by his readers and the press – again, just like Besant’s case. After the publication of *Heart and Science* (1883), for instance, the *Athenaeum* famously declared that Collins had “hampered himself by trying to write with a purpose.” (qtd. in Page 1974, 26) In the novel, the villain Dr Nathan Benjulia is a specialist in diseases of the brain and nervous system and a cruel vivisector who embodies “all the caricatures of cruelty that the antivivisectionists had used against their political opponents in the years surrounding the 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act.” (Straley 2010, 348) For a discussion of *Heart and Science*, see also Costantini 2003.

80 A discussion of the features of Besant and Rice’s novels has been excellently done by Boege. (1956 I, 257-64) Therefore, this work does not deal with them in detail.
professes the pleasure of living with the characters of his novels while writing them, in reading such works one does not feel that they were real to him. The feeling is that he produced more and more fiction without the full engagement of his imagination. It is impossible to believe that Besant lived with his characters – except, perhaps, some characters of the early novels with Rice and of a few novels written alone in the 1880s, which are generally regarded as his best works (All Sorts and Conditions of Men, Children of Gibeon, Dorothy Foster, and All in a Garden Fair). When he died, Besant’s fame as a novelist had already declined. “[T]he man has now died, his books are already dead;” so Boege (1956 II, 50) sums up the general feeling reading Besant’s obituary notices. Another look at Besant’s Autobiography may be useful: in the Prefatory Note, the first thing the editor says of Besant concerns his devotion to the cause of authors; the preface even begins with a passage taken from an obituary notice written by George Meredith in which he praises Besant’s vigorous engagement in the fight for authorial rights:

[it] is hard to speak of him within measure when we consider his devotion to the cause of authors, and the constant good service rendered by him to their material interests. In this he was a valorous, alert, persistent advocate […]. How unselfishly, with how pure a generosity he gave his valuable time to the previously neglected office of adviser to the more youthful of his profession […]. He had no thought of trouble or personal loss where the welfare of his fellow-workers was concerned […] (The Author, July 1901)

Then, Besant is classified as a scholar, who popularised early French literature (xii); only in the third place is Besant identified as a novelist (the word “novelist” first appears only at page xv). This is significant, as his activity as a novelist was seen, at the moment of his death, not as his primary occupation, but rather as only one among the many activities he undertook during his life. Besant’s identity did not coincide with being a novelist, as Dickens’s, Thackeray’s or Trollope’s had been. The space allowed in his Autobiography to his novels is less than the space in which he discusses his Society of Authors, or his philanthropic work. His fictional work is most uneven because, as he himself declared, he seldom took fiction seriously as an art that demanded all his devotion, all his energies, all his efforts.

The fourth field which the preface of the Autobiography identifies as a very important one to Besant was his activity as historian and antiquarian: his engagement with his massive project, A Survey of London, came to occupy more and more of Besant’s time and efforts. His last six years were almost

81 “[T]he characters are all alive and they are working out the story in their own way […] and their talk is incessant […] And so the time passes; the summer follows the spring; the novelist is absorbed almost every day for three or four hours with his work. Unless he is working at other things he lives in a dream; he does not want to talk much; he does not want society; he wants only to be left alone. […] For thirty years I have been dreaming during the greater part of every year.” (Autobiography, 203)
entirely devoted to it; when he died, he had completed the work down to the end of the eighteenth century.

Lastly, the preface identifies Besant as one of the nineteenth’s century most active philanthropists: indeed, Besant’s enduring social commitment spanned from his social novels to his active support of many societies. The Victorian age was famously a time of causes, but among all the socially conscious novelists, Besant stands out for having achieved the most spectacular result of all. Although largely paternalistic and melodramatic, Besant’s slum fiction deeply touched his contemporaries. All Sorts and Conditions of Men (1882), Children of Gibeon (1886), and “One of two millions in East London,” (1899) are not profound, but they are sensitive and well-informed: he saw and reported the life of the London poor honestly. In all these works the East End, a place of monotony and dreariness, becomes almost a living character, as it had never been represented before in fiction. The building of the People’s Palace in 1887 was the direct result of All Sorts and Conditions of Men, in which Besant had envisioned and championed such a place. While exploring the East End for his novel, Besant had come to the conclusion that “one of the things very much wanted” was “a centre of organized recreation, orderly amusement, and intellectual and artistic culture.” (Autobiography, 244) Actually, the Palace was the result of the combination of Besant’s influence with another, pre-existing project: in 1841, John Beaumont, having made a fortune in insurance, left a fund of £12,000 to provide intellectual improvement and amusement for the inhabitants of the East End; however, the sum was not enough to accomplish anything, and the lack of enthusiasm of his trustees resulted in nothing being done. It was only when the fund was placed in the hands of Sir Edmund Hay Currie that the first steps were taken; a meeting presided by the Lord Mayor was held in order to decide what could be done. Meanwhile, All Sorts and Conditions of Men appeared in print, in which a ‘Palace of Delight’ was conceived to brighten the lives of the East End poor. Besant’s vision was taken as inspiration, and a campaign was started to raise more funds: a huge portion of English society, from royalty to aristocracy, businessmen, workers and their unions (the Drapers’ Company was the largest contributor by far), and plain citizens, emptied their pockets to make Besant’s vision come true. In 1886 the sum of £75,000 was raised and works began. Besant’s role was thus not to advance a radically new idea, but to fire public imagination. Thanks to his contribution, an otherwise impossible project became feasible. The People’s Palace, as it was called, was sited facing Mile End Road, Stepney, and the first section, the Queen’s Hall, was opened on 14 May 1887 by Queen Victoria as the first major event of the jubilee celebration. (Waller 2008, 888) When Besant was presented to the Queen, he was greeted by the crowd with a loud cheer, and he was the most applauded among all the men who had made the project possible. (The Times, 16 May 1887: 9-10) The place was a success. Dances, concerts and recitals were organized (it had a concert hall for 4000 people); it included a
swimming pool, a gym, an organ, a library of 15,000 volumes, a winter garden, billiard-rooms, art schools, and lecture rooms. It hosted a literary society, a debate society, and clubs for cricket, football, rambles, etc. (*Autobiography*, 245-46) In the months following its opening, *The Times* reported the great number of people using the facilities of the Palace: after five months, 1500 students were attending classes and accommodations were already full; over 600,000 people visited the place in the first six months, with an average of 1000 daily at the library. Besant founded and edited a weekly magazine, the *Palace Journal*, and was chairman of the library committee: he was most concerned with the library and the recreational features of the Palace. His original conception was indeed named ‘The Palace of Delight,’ where the amusement of the people was to be as supported as their education. However, his hopes were disappointed: in 1889, the Drapers’ Company donated another £25,000 and became the most important contributor; the weight of this sum, together with the preceding £20,000, caused The Palace to be increasingly under the influence of the Drapers’ Society, which aimed at strengthening the educational rather than the recreational side. The library was neglected, its staff was reduced, and no new books were bought; the provision of billiards was withdrawn because it incited betting; the recreational features like balls and concerts were no more funded: “[t]hey have turned the place into a polytechnic and nothing else,” lamented Besant in his *Autobiography* (247). He eventually lost interest in the Palace, and dropped out of its committee. (*Autobiography*, 251) Although in the *Autobiography* he allowed that “the successes far outweighed the failures,” (246) he could not conceal his dismay about the transformation of the Palace into a polytechnic.82 Besant’s philanthropic work did not end with the People’s Palace. In *Children of Gibeon*, he dealt with women’s work in the East End, especially with those who worked as sewers in their lodgings. The book led Besant to be introduced to many clubs for working women; he championed their cause, went to their meetings and raised funds; he also established a club for co-operation among working women and a committee for the improvement of salaries, both described in his *Autobiography* (249). He managed to create the Women’s Bureau of Work, which facilitated and made safer for women to find a job.83 (*Autobiography*, 255) Together with his friend Charles Leland, Besant established a

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82 In 1902 it became the East London Technical College and in 1907 a constituent of London University, renamed Queen Mary College in 1934.

83 However, Besant did not support the feminist cause. He shared his age’s general conception of women, and considered family as the sacred, basic unit of society, which shall never, under any circumstances, be dissolved. In 1882 he published his misogynist tract, *The Revolt of Man*, an explicit programme for a sort of final solution of the “woman question.” He also exposed his ideas in a sequel to Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, entitled “The Doll’s House – and After,” which appeared in the *English Illustrated Magazine* (VII, 1890, 315-325). Besant’s story is set twenty years after Nora slammed the door. Her violation of the sacred law of family ties has resulted in the ruin of her family: her husband Torvald has become an idle drunkard, and has been fired from the bank; one of their sons is his companion in drink; the other son works at the bank and has just embezzled some money; their daughter, Emmy, struggles to keep the family together. She and Krogstad’s son are in love, but Krogstad (who has gained control of the bank) prohibits the marriage as it would be
society called the Home Arts Association, of which he was the treasurer. The Home Arts Association was an evening school for the teaching of the minor arts: wood-craving, leather-work, fretwork, work in iron, weaving, embroidery, and so forth. The project proved a great success: over five hundred evening schools were established all over England. Besant was called to support, whether by practical acts or by writing or speaking, a wealth of charities: the London Hospital, the Ragged School Union, and the Salvation Army, to name but a few. He was not a subversive reformer, let alone a socialist; Besant was convinced that hope lay in gradual improvement. When he was knighted in 1895, it was not so much for his literary achievements as for the philanthropy and the effectiveness of his writing of the London slums.

All in all, Besant was a prominent public figure of his age. Although he first acquired fame as a novelist, he was something less and something more than that. His novels are no masterpieces, and some of them are the merest ephemera. His literary talent was modest, and Rice did not help him much in this respect. The exaggerated praise of the first years (when he was compared to Dickens) was compensated by the – equally exaggerated – attacks of the late 1890s. He was also the object of some satires by his fellow novelists. The character of Verena Tarrant in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* (1886) clearly shares some features with Besant: beside the rhyming surnames (Besant-Tarrant), Verena is exuberant and brilliant in society, and her extraordinary oratorical gifts bring her to represent a cause – in her case, women’s emancipation. However, she is guilty of an excessive naiveté, a not-too-sharp intelligence and a too light talkativeness – which sometimes makes her speeches empty and her decisions unpondered. In *The Green Carnation* by Robert Hichens (1894), Esmé Araminth, looking for something to slow him down, having obtained little results with absinthe and opium, turns to Besant’s novels as he hopes their dullness will help him: “[d]ear lady! […] Intelligence is the demon of our age. Mine bores me horribly. I am always trying to find a remedy for it. I have experimented with absinthe, but gained no result. I have read the collected works of Walter
Besant. They are said to sap the mental powers. […]” (Hichens 1992, 91) Punch parodied Besant in its series of Prize Novels: this was The Curse of Cognac by ‘Walter Decant,’ recommended by its author “as calculated to lower the exaggerated cheerfulness which is apt to prevail at Christmas time […] Married men who owe their wives’ mothers a grudge should lock them into a bare room, with a guttering candle and this story. Death will be certain, and not painless.” The adjective ‘Besantine’ became in this period a familiar label to the public, pointing to a shallow and sentimental optimism. Despite all this, there is no denying that Besant was a wide-ranging and influential man of letters. His non-fictional writings triggered debates in the press on both fiction in general, and on the role of literary collaboration in modern fiction writing; he sparked and played a key role in the ‘era of discussion,’ through which “the novel in England and in America acquired its first modern credo.” (Spilka 1973, 101) In particular, his lecture The Art of Fiction (1884) and his article “On Literary Collaboration,” (1892) generated a wave of responses from the press and from influential coeval authors. He spoke out on a great variety of subjects and always to good effects. He was the first to successfully found and direct a movement for the rights of authors, and he significantly contributed to the improvement of the status of writers in the UK. He was the spokesman, the organiser, the publicist of the community of writers from 1884 to his death. He had the power to move his contemporary readers, a power that made him a leader of public opinion. It seems that whatever Besant touched, it became of public interest. He surely had a gift – if not a high literary one. Nevertheless, when studying late Victorian culture, Besant’s role and achievements cannot be overlooked. Even if sometimes incongruous and verbose, his impact on his time deserves to be recognised, because Besant was first of all a man of his time. He marked the late Victorian age in so many ways. Queen Victoria died on 22 January 1901; less than six months afterwards, on 9 June, Besant died as well. With them, an epoch had ended.
Besant and Rice: a chronology

1836 Birth of Walter Besant in Portsmouth.
1843 Birth of James Rice in Northampton.
1851 Besant is sent to study in London, at Stockwell’s Grammar School.
1854 Besant enters King’s College, London, with a view to become a clergyman.
1855 Besant enters Christ’s College, Cambridge. Rice studies law Cambridge.
1861 Besant rejects holy orders and goes to the Mauritius as a Math professor at the Royal College.
1867 In June, Besant goes back to England. Rice leaves Cambridge.
1868 Besant gets a job as a secretary in the Society for the Systematic and Scientific Exploration of Palestine. This will be his main source of income for 18 years. He also publishes *Studies on Early French Poetry*, the outcome of a strenuous course of reading pursued during his stay in Mauritius. Besant sends an account of a visit to the island of Réunion, which he had written during his stay abroad, to *Once a Week*. The editor of the magazine is the twenty-five-year-old James Rice. From now on Besant contributes regularly to the journal.
1871 Rice proposes to Besant a collaboration on a novel. Rice is 28 and Besant is 35.
1872 *Ready-Money Mortiboy*, no authorial indication.
1873 *My Little Girl* published, “by the authors of RMM.” Then *Once a Week* fails, and Rice briefly returns to work as a barrister. However, he soon returns to literature, and starts to work as a London correspondent for the *Toronto Globe*.
1874 Besant marries Mary Garat Foster Barham. They will have four children.
1875 *With Harp and Crown*
1876 *This Son of Vulcan* and *The Golden Butterfly*. They also begin the first of a long series of Christmas Numbers for *All the Year Round*.
1878 *The Monks of Thelema* and *By Celia’s Harbour*, first novel to be published under their names.
1879 *The Chaplain of the Fleet*
1881 *The Seamy Side*
1882 Death of Rice at 39 of a tumour in his throat. Besant goes on on his own, with a novel almost each year.
1884 Besant establishes the Society of Authors, the first successful organisation for writers in the UK. It aimed at the improvement of domestic copyright and international copyright laws, and the recognition and protection of literary property.
1887 The ‘Palace of Delight’ in London’s East End is opened. Queen Victoria is present at the inauguration.
1893 Besant visits the United States.

1895 Besant is knighted for his literary and humanitarian achievements.

1901 9 June: Death of Besant at 65.

1902 Besant’s posthumous *Autobiography*. 
Chapter Three: Somerville and Ross

E. O. Somerville and Martin Ross – respectively Edith O'neone Somerville (1858-1949) and Violet Florence Martin (1862-1915) – are the best known of all late nineteenth-century coauthors. Between 1888 and 1915, they jointly published five novels, various collections of short stories, four travel accounts, and a variety of periodical literature. This duo’s popularity in the first decades of the twentieth-century was enormous, and their partnership widely celebrated, so much so that it was defined “the most brilliant successful literary collaboration in our times.” (Graves 1913, 436) Although in subsequent years their fame decreased significantly, they have never completely dropped out of the canon of Irish literature. (London 1999, 5) Also, they have been acknowledged in recent contemporary criticism as key figures in the study of women’s literary partnerships. Yet, as Jamison points out, the main problem with studies of female literary collaborations is that they have variously recruited Somerville and Ross as a significant case study in the development of a much more theoretically engaged approach to women’s collaborative life and work. While this has its benefits in terms of understanding the significance of Somerville and Ross’s collaborative practice within a broader social and literary context, as well as aiding the enhancement of critical theories crucial to highlighting the particularities and complexities of female authorship, the overall effect has been to disembodied the duo’s collaborative practice from both its historical roots and the cultural politics of the texts that it engendered. (Jamison 2016, 9)

Most critical projects have only utilised Somerville and Ross as an appropriate case study within a motley, ahistorical grouping of other female collaborators. Following Jamison’s approach, this chapter seeks to effectively widen the privileged discourses within which Somerville and Ross’s works have been usually read: the feminist/sexual issue and the Anglo-Irish tradition of the Big House writing. Although these approaches are meaningful, and have been fundamental in (re)discovering the significance of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration and in tracing a history of women’s coauthorship, more specialised studies of Somerville and Ross’s partnership outside of these perspectives are still largely lacking. The aim of the present chapter is firstly to identify and discuss the most significant features of Somerville and Ross’s literary partnership, from its origin through its peak to its decline; secondly, to relocate it within the historical, social and cultural context in which

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84 The collection of humorous short stories Some Experiences of an Irish R.M. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899) and the two sequels that followed, Further Experiences of an Irish R.M. (1908) and In Mr. Knox’s Country (1915), are the works that gave Somerville and Ross international fame and financial success, and for which they are best known to this day.

85 Feminist studies from the late 1990s onwards have re-discovered the significance of Somerville and Ross’s lives and works. The most prominent works are: London 1999; Laird 2000; York 2002; Ehnen 2008.

86 Apart from Jamison (2016), works exclusively on Somerville and Ross have been so far mainly biographical studies.
it developed and prospered: Somerville and Ross, their collaborative relationship, and their texts, were deeply of their time; their collaboration could not have flourished in any other period or place. Late nineteenth-century Ascendancy Ireland presented a unique atmosphere, which was about to fade forever at the time of the collaboration of these two cousins, who managed to capture it in their works.

**Literary foremothers**

Edith Somerville and Martin Ross came from ancient illustrious families. Their mothers were first cousins, the granddaughters of the judge and statesman Charles Kendal Bushe (1767-1843), Chief Justice of Ireland, known as “Silver-tongued Bushe” after his vehement speeches against the Act of Union of 1800. Yet perhaps more important for his great-granddaughters’ imagination was the figure of Bushe’s wife, Anne (Nancy) Crampton, whom he married in 1793. Mrs. Bushe was a woman of culture, and an artist, even if according to Somerville’s account – “marriage had subdued the artist in her.” (Somerville, *Irish Memories* 1917, 52) Also, she was a well-known friend of Maria Edgeworth’s. Somerville and Martin were extremely proud of their ancestor’s famous friendship with one of the literary women they admired most, and talked gladly of the “mutual admiration” (*IM*, 53) that existed between Mrs. Bushe and the pioneer of Irish novelists. In Somerville’s autobiography *Irish Memories*, one long chapter (III) is dedicated to the bond between Nancy Crampton and Maria Edgeworth; some of their correspondence is also reported in order to highlight how the latter “lost no time in falling in love with her ‘very dear Mrs. Bushe’ ” from their first meeting in 1810, and how the attachment “remained unbroken to the last,” until the novelist’s death in 1849. (*IM*, 53) Indeed, the letters tell us of a sincere affection, and of a communion of minds.

87 From now on, following a common practice among readers of Somerville and Ross, the latter will be referred to by ‘Martin,’ as did Edith Somerville. Somerville’s autobiography, *Irish Memories* (1917), written and published two years after her partner’s death, opens with the following words: “[p]erhaps I ought to begin by saying that I have always called her ‘Martin;’ I propose to do so still. I cannot think of her by any other name. [...] I shall write of her as I think of her.” (Somerville 1917, 1; *Irish Memories* will be abbreviated *IM*) When referring to both authors, they will be called by their pen names ‘Somerville and Ross,’ but when referring to Violet Martin alone, ‘Martin’ will be adopted. Differently from Besant’s autobiography – which posited Besant as an independent author and barely mentioned Rice’s name – Somerville’s one revolves around her literary partnership from beginning to end. The very first sentence is about Martin. It is indeed curious that an autobiography begins by talking of someone else. The very first topic is their first meeting, and the first chapter is entitled “The Martins of Ross.” The rest of the book is more a joint biography of Somerville and Martin than simply Somerville’s own. Martin – family, her childhood, her physical aspect, the major and minor events of her life, her riding accident and her painful final illness – gets as much attention as Somerville herself. As a matter of fact – just like all Somerville’s works after Martin’s death – the autobiography bears the double signature “E. O. Somerville and Martin Ross.” While Besant pointed out that his and Rice’s collaboration was never a binding one, going on from novel to novel (even though, during the cooperative effort, they used to spend months together in close contact), Somerville keeps highlighting their extreme closeness, the exclusivity of their bond, and the loving commitment between her and Martin. Besant’s and Somerville’s opposite treatments of their literary partners in their autobiographies mirror their divergent attitudes to the collaborative experience.
Although this friendship between cultured ladies did not lead to a writing partnership, Somerville and Martin were fascinated by it, and saw and described it in a romanticised light, using the same sentimental vocabulary employed to describe their own friendship. If Edgeworth and Mrs. Bushe’s first meeting was like “falling in love,” (IM, 53) Somerville reported of her first meeting with Martin in a similar way: “[f]or most boys and girls the varying, yet invariable, flirtations, and emotional episodes of youth, are resolved and composed by marriage. To Martin and to me was opened another way, and the flowering of both our lives was when we met each other.” (IM, 125) Edgeworth’s comment about Mrs. Bushe in one of her letters that she was “my delight and admiration, from her wit, humour, and variety of conversation” (IM, 53) could have easily been written by Somerville or Martin about each other. The correspondence between Edgeworth and Mrs. Bushe reported in Irish Memories is often concerned with contriving ways to meet, even for a few days or a dinner if they both happened to be in Dublin; likewise, Somerville and Martin’s letters are full of planning, of timetables and ticket prices (with mutual offers to pay for them), and of proposals of dates in which they could meet.

These might seem inconsequential biographical details, but they offer in fact an enlightening starting point to better understand Somerville and Ross’s literary partnership. The fact that their great-grandmother had developed an intimate, lifetime friendship with a woman they considered a literary foremother was inspiring and stimulating. Mrs. Bushe had died in 1857, only one year before Somerville’s birth and five before Martin’s, so she was not a faded ancestor but a very vivid presence in their families’ memory and stories. Her relationship with Edgeworth provided Somerville and Martin with an early model of female friendship based on mutual admiration, affection and shared literary interests. Both relationships lasted more or less thirty years, and were interrupted only by the death of one of the two.

The figure of their great-grandmother, however, affected Somerville and Ross in other ways: they admired Mrs. Bushe not only for her friendship with Edgeworth, but also for her own talents as an intellectual and an artist. Somerville in particular seems to have regretted that she had not had the chance to fully express her potential: “[s]he was a brilliant creature in all ways, and had a rare and enchanting gift as an artist, which, even in those days, when young ladies of quality were immured inexorably within the padded cell of the amateur, could scarcely have failed to make its mark […].”

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88 Indeed, Somerville and Ross have often been compared by critics to Maria Edgeworth because of the many similarities of their works, such as the use of Hiberno English and the interest in representing with irony Irish society and the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy to whom they belonged.

89 Mrs. Bushe and Maria Edgeworth’s friendship lasted from 1810 to 1849 (Edgeworth’s death), while Somerville and Martin’s lasted from 1886 to 1915 (Martin’s death), which amount, respectively, to thirty-nine and twenty-nine years.
However, to Somerville’s distress, Mrs. Bushe devoted herself to her large family, and did not exploit her individual talents: “[in] her time there were few women who gave even a moment’s thought to the possibilities of individual life as an artist, however aware they might be – must have been – of the gifts they possessed.” (IM, 52) Even if Somerville proceeds immediately to reassure the reader that her great-grandmother “was well satisfied enough with what life had brought her – honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” (IM, 52), her frustration with her ancestor’s wasted talents emerges quite clearly. The fact that Somerville never got married, despite repeated affectionate proposals from one of her cousins, the Oxford academic Herbert Greene, could be a reaction to Nancy Crampton’s fate as a married woman and mother of six – a woman she felt so akin to herself, but to whom circumstances had not given the chance to realise her potential. It is very likely that Martin shared her cousin’s opinion, but we have no explicit written evidence of her thoughts about it. Somerville attributed to her great-grandmother the artistic inclination of her family from that time onwards:

Mrs. Bushe lived on till 1857, a delight and an inspiration to her children and grandchildren. To her, even more than to the Chief, may be ascribed the inevitable, almost invariable turn for the Arts, in some form, frequently in all forms, that distinguishes their descendants, and to her also is attributed a quality in story-telling known as ‘Crampton-dash,’ which may be explained as an intensifying process, analogous to the swell in an organ. (IM, 61)

As a matter of fact, Somerville and Martin grew up breathing art in their large family circles. Many of their relatives were amateur painters and writers, and “although the reputations of neither Shakespeare nor Michael Angelo were threatened,” Somerville comments ironically that “there was scarcely one of them without some touch of that spark which is lit by a coal taken from the altar, and is […] called originality.” (IM, 61-62) In particular, the Martin family counted many respected names of the literary scene: Martin’s father wrote for leading London magazines in order to earn extra money at the time of the Great Famine; her mother was an amateur poet, with “that facility and versification that is akin to the gift of music;” (IM, 18) Martin’s eldest brother Robert was a prominent journalist and playwright; her mother’s cousin W.G. Wills was a well-known playwright, poet and painter.

Indeed, readers of Somerville and Ross find many metadiscourses by Somerville (the most significant ones are her autobiography Irish Memories and the 1946 article “Two of a Trade”), while – maybe due to her early death – we have very few written accounts by Martin (apart from her letters to Somerville and other relatives). Thus, in this work I will necessarily base many of my reflections on statements made by Somerville, though keeping in mind that they are only the point of view of one of the partners: even if Somerville declared on many occasions the perfect correspondence of her and her cousin’s thoughts – and, also by reading their letters to each other we are led to trust her – it is important to remember that we have only one point of view.

Robert Martin, thanks to his connections, would play an important role in launching Somerville and Ross’s literary career.
The web of the Martins’ connections by marriage laid a strand on Oscar Wilde via the Wills family (Oscar’s middle names were Fingall O’Flaherie Wills). Lady Augusta Gregory was also a cousin of Martin’s, and the two corresponded and met regularly. Both Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats were impressed by Somerville and Ross’s novels, especially by *The Real Charlotte* (it “described with unexampled grimness our middle-class life,” famously wrote Yeats, qtd. in Lewis 1989, 252) and its indictment of ‘shoneens’ – the new, rising, grasping Irish middle classes. They urged Somerville and Ross to write a ‘shoneen play’ for the Abbey Theatre. Martin’s letters to Somerville report Lady Gregory’s insistence:

> I must tell you that Augusta was here yesterday [in Martin’s Dublin house] and was rampant that I should write a play for the Abbey Theatre. […] When I divulged the fact that you had faint aspirations towards a play […] Augusta was enraptured – ‘A week at Coole would do it. We could give you all the hints necessary for stage effects etc. – even write a scenario for you – the characters and plot picked from your books – […]’. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 30 April 1905, *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross*, 273-74)

However, Somerville and Ross felt quite removed from the Irish Literary Revival. They were not enthusiastic about the kind of plays staged at the Abbey, since they “did not really approve of something that had been brought back to life with so much artificial respiration.” (Letters, 238) Martin in particular had seen a few, invited and accompanied by Yeats himself: “Yeats […] had implored me to come and hear his play […] Robert [her brother] would have had a bad relapse if he could have viewed me emerging from the stage door of the Abbey Theatre and escorted to a cab by W.B. Yeats,” Martin told Somerville, half-proud, half-ironic. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 30 April 1905, Letters, 273-74) The cousins found the products of the Irish Revival too artificial, the speech in the so-called ‘peasant plays’ inauthentic. Clare (2014, 97) aptly comments that “Somerville and Ross were certainly correct in spotting that the ‘peasant speech’ in the work of many […] Abbey playwrights was considerably less authentic than their own rendering of West Cork speech in their fiction.” Moreover, Somerville and Ross felt that French influences overwhelmed the Irishness of the

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92 However, there was little love left between Somerville and Ross and Oscar Wilde. In 1887, he was editor at the *Lady’s Pictorial*, and refused to publish Somerville’s French sketches. In an indignant letter to Martin, she gives an account of her meeting with Wilde in the offices of the journal: “[h]e talked great rot that ‘French subjects should be drawn by French artists’ – I was near telling him, as Dr. Johnson said – ‘who drives fat oxen must himself be fat.’ He assumed deep interest in the ‘Miss Martins,’ asked if they were all married: I said, ‘mostly all.’ He was kind enough to say that Edith [one of Martin’s sisters] was so pretty and nice – and bulged his long fat red cheeks into an affectionate grin at the thought of her. He then showed me a book of very indifferent French sketches – was foully civil, and goodbye.” (Letters, 68) The defiant pride in answering that not *all* Miss Martins were married, thus asserting Martin Ross’s independence, is palpable in the tone of the letter. Somerville’s general opinion of Wilde was that he was “a great fat oily beast.” (Letters, 68)

93 From now on, each time Somerville and Ross’s letters will be quoted, the abbreviation Letters will be used. They are all taken from Lewis 1989.
plays. The two collaborators were themselves influenced by French writing and art, but in the plays staged by Revivalists they saw Irish characters involved in “French situations” and behaving in “French – not Irish – ways.” (Clare 2014, 97-98) Therefore, Somerville and Ross “steered clear of Yeats and his movement:” (Cahalan 1999, 66) “I gave no further encouragement of any sort – and said we were full up.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 30 April 1905, Letters, 274).

An almost lost world: the Big House

After introducing Somerville and Ross’s background from their mothers’ side, it is apposite to look at their fathers’ families, as the paternal inheritance of the Big House had a deep impact on their literary work.

It has been remarked by almost everyone who has written on Somerville and Ross that their oeuvre is tinged with a nostalgic tone for the waning world of the Big House; some of their novels can indeed be included in the Big House novel genre, most overtly An Irish Cousin (1889), The Real Charlotte (1894), Mount Music and The Big House of Inver (written by Somerville alone after Martin’s death, but still double-signed), and all of their texts present the same partly-elegiac partly-ironic longing for the old rural system. The fact is that, like Edgeworth, Somerville and Ross not only wrote about the Big House; they were born and spent their lives in it. The Somervilles and the Martins were long-established Ascendancy families, the former based in County Cork, and the latter in County Galway.

94 For a discussion of the influence of France on Somerville and Ross, see also Stevens 2007, 127-58.
95 For more information concerning Somerville and Ross and the Revival, see Lewis 2005, 209-10, and Cahalan 1999, 78-79. It is amusing to read Martin’s description of Yeats (whom she met various times during her stays at Coole Park, Gregory’s residence) in a letter to Somerville written between 1896-1897: “[h]e is mad about old legends and spirits, and if someone said ‘Thim fine lobsters’ or anything, he would begin ‘There’s a very curious tradition about lobsters’ and then he was off. He is thinner than a lath – wears paltry little clothes wisped round his bones, and the prodigious and affected greenish tie. He is a little affected and knows it – He has a sense of humour and is a gentleman – hardly by birth I fancy – but by genius. […] Yeats is writing a strange and mystic novel about the southernmost Island of Aran – how a very French young man.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, fragment, Letters, 240) Martin gave another description of Yeats in the summer of 1901, picturing him “in seedy black clothes – with a large bow at the end of his long naked throat:” “[t]he afternoon and night at Coole were very interesting – Augusta Gregory, her son Robert (at Oxford) and W.B. Yeats were the party. […] He is egregiously the poet – mutters ends of verse to himself with a wild eye, bows over your hand in dark silence – but poet he is – and very interesting indeed – and somehow sympathetic to talk to – I liked him – in spite of various things.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 8 August 1901, Letters, 252) Although Yeats and Martin did not always share the same opinions on literary questions, they respected each other and took part to a symbolic event: “[t]oday Augusta made me add my initials to a tree already decorated by Douglas Hyde, A.E. and more of the literary crowd. W.B.Y. did the carving, I smoked, and high literary conversation raged.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 8 August 1901, Letters, 252) Somerville did not meet Yeats until 1931, when he invited her to the inaugural meeting of the Irish Academy of Letters. (see Cahalan 1999, 79) 96 As McCormack (1989, 162) illustrates, the collocation ‘Protestant Ascendancy,’ afterwards simply Ascendancy, came into use in 1792: it “does not seem to be traceable before February 1782 when it was uttered in the Irish House of Commons by Sir Boyle Roche. Moreover, as a deliberate formulation, it dates from 1792. In the course of that year
They belonged to the decaying Anglo-Irish class of landowners,\(^97\) that oligarchy first satirised in Edgeworth’s Big House novel *Caste Rackrent* in 1800. The collocation ‘big house’ refers to a country mansion owned by a Protestant Anglo-Irish family “presiding over a substantial agricultural acreage leased out to Catholic tenants who worked the land. […] Most big houses occupied property confiscated from native Catholic families in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.” (Kreilkamp 2006, 60) The newly established Anglo-Irish oligarchy was eager “to display its wealth and power – and indeed its permanence – through a classically inflected building programme,” in a sort of fantasy to visually transform Ireland into a replica “of an England that was increasingly imagining itself as the modern version of the imperial Roman estate.” (Kreilkamp 2006, 60) *Castle Rackrent* inaugurated the genre and established its conventions: the house in decay as the symbol of family and class degeneration, the irresponsible landlord alienated from his duties, the native Irish middle-class usurper of the Ascendancy estate. Unsurprisingly, the peak of the Big House novel was in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when, under the assault of new land laws and emerging nationalism,\(^98\) the Ascendancy was struggling to keep up with modern times. In Edgeworth’s time, the Anglo-Irish gentry was already in crisis,\(^99\) but by the end of the nineteenth century it was clear to everyone that its ruling role had ended.

Both Edith Somerville and Martin Ross felt this crisis on their skin: despite their social status and the stately houses where they lived, their families were moneyless because of non-payment of rents. The heirs of the Big Houses were left to their own means to earn a living: the sons were generally placed in the Army, the Navy, or the Church; to Somerville and Martin, “the ability to earn their own money was a matter of life or death, or at least life or marriage.” (*Letters*, viii) Lack of money, and how to raise it, are two of the most recurrent topics in their letters to each other, so that, as Gifford Lewis Roche’s words were ritualized in Dublin’s Corporation’s anti-Catholic resolutions in defiance of London’s wish to modify the penal code.” Moreover, ‘Protestant Ascendancy’ was first used “as the equivalent to Protestant interest (or the ascendance of Protestantism) and not to any specific social ‘class’ or party.” (McCormack 1994, 70)

\(^97\) The defeat of the Jacobites in 1689–91 left political power entirely in the hands of a Protestant class, so that fewer than 5,000 families owned most of the land in Ireland. (Welch 1996, 23) Kreilkamp (2006, 75) reports that in 1776 Catholics owned only 5 per cent of the land in Ireland, even though they constituted 75 per cent of the total population. The Irish Rebellion of 1798 led to the Union of 1800, which marked the end of the uncontested domain of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, and the start of its decline. (Cotta Ramusino 2019, 5-6)

\(^98\) Landlord control was first seriously dented when Daniel O’Connell began to mobilise the Catholic masses in the 1820s; it was further weakened by the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872; local government reform in 1898 replaced the landlord-dominated grand juries with elected rural and urban district councils; finally, the Wyndham Act of 1903 facilitated the purchase of holdings by the tenants, thus dismantling landownership itself. (Welch 1996, 23)

\(^99\) *Castle Rackrent*’s full title recites *An Hibernian Tale Taken from Facts, and from the Manners of the Irish Squires, before the Year 1782*, thus implying that the inadequacy of the Protestant ruling class was a thing of the past. However, the decline of the elite of landowners was a very contemporary issue in Edgeworth’s time, destined to get worse and worse. Therefore, the first Big-House novel is not only an account of past disorder, but a prophecy of future Ascendancy collapse. (Kreilkamp 2006)
points out in the introduction to their *Selected Letters*, the reader understands that the Ascendancy at the end of the nineteenth century was “an enormous confidence trick, shored up by faithful servants and good horsemanship.” (*Letters*, viii) The fact that they still owned the Big Houses was what saved appearances. Yet the running of these ancient, large estates cost money, so that much of their income was swallowed by their upkeep. Ross House was a great country mansion, built in 1777 in the peculiar style of the Ascendancy Big House, “a tall, unlovely block, of great solidity.” (*IM*, 7) Somerville remembered the apparently unromantic Ross House with a sentimental melancholy:

> there is a special magic in Galway, in its people and its scenery, and for me, Ross, and its lake and its woods, is Galway. The beauty of Ross is past praising. I think of it as I saw it first, on a pensive evening of early spring, still and grey, with a yellow spear-head of light low in the west. [...] On higher ground above the lake stands the old house, tall and severe, a sentinel that keeps several eyes, all of them intimidating, on all around it. (*IM*, 98-99)

After the death of Martin’s father in 1872, the house was left on a lease. The Martin family would return to live there only in 1888, after sixteen years of absence, during which time the tenant had stripped the estate bare and the house had fallen into utter neglect.100 Martin dedicated all her adult life to try to bring Ross House back to its past glories, also doing much manual labour herself. Somerville felt the decline of her class somehow less, at least in her youth, as Drishane House, in Castle Townshend, was still the place of a comfortable, social life. The situation got worse over the years, and in later times they would have to let the house for the summer.101 In her letters to Somerville, Martin expressed her heartbreak at the condition of Ross, now fallen from the almost royal status it had held; she clung to its preservation with all her strength, not out of vanity or snobbery: it was the affection for the estate and the quasi-feudal bonds with the local families that had been in the service of the Martins for generations.102 The Big Houses, indeed, were traditionally not only the seat of the lord, but (perhaps idealised and exaggerated in Somerville’s words) “places

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100 This was a common occurrence in those days, when gentry families were taking flight to England or Dublin after getting the best bargain they could. The tenant of Ross House, whose aim was just getting the most of the land, left it in an appalling state, as Martin complains in a letter to Somerville: “[i]t takes a long time to patch the present Ross and the one I remember on to each other. [...] I do not know anything gives such desolation as the loss of trees and shrubs and that devil who was our last tenant has laid about him for pure spite. [...] In the garden the old apple trees were cut down by this brute that he might have more room for planting his potatoes [...]” (*Letter from Martin to Somerville, 27 June 1888, Letters*, 77)

101 To this day, Somerville’s house, Drishane (County Cork), has remained property of the Somerville/Coghill family, while Martin’s Ross House (County Galway) left the Martin family in the 1920s and fell into extreme disrepair in the following decades until it was bought in 1984 by George McLaughlin, who has since restored the house and built some additions next to it.

102 “The tenants have been very good about coming and working here for nothing – except their dinners – and a great deal has been done by them. It is of course gratifying, but in a way very painful, and makes one want money more than anything.” (*Letter from Martin to Somerville, 27 June 1888, Letters*, 80)
that were once disseminators of light, of the humanities; centres of civilisation; places where the poor people rushed, in any trouble, as to the Cities of Refuge” (IM, 154-5).\(^{103}\) By the 1880s, those mansions had become “desolate, derelict.” (IM, 154-5). In her autobiography, Somerville romanticises Martin’s struggle to keep the house going: “[when the Martins returned to Ross] there was everything to be done, inside and outside that old house, and no one to do it but one fragile, indomitable girl.” (IM, 154) Somerville wants to make clear it was mainly “the torture of the thought that the Ross people might feel that the Martins had failed them, and that the ‘Big House’ was no longer the City of Refuge for its dependants” (IM, 155) that spurred Martin.\(^{104}\) As a matter of fact, although originally usurpers in a conquered country, the Martins and the Somervilles were Norman families who had spent barely a generation in England before settling in Ireland in the sixteenth century. (IM, 5) Somerville and Ross’s loyalties went more to Ireland that England, and they saw their role as an intermediary group who simultaneously tried to improve the condition of Ireland and its relationship with the United Kingdom. Charles Kendal Bushe had been a prominent figure in this group. Therefore, even if the Big House was originally a presence in the Irish landscape that embodied political, economic and cultural control of the remote English colonial power structure – and therefore a symbol of division, as highlighted by Kreilkamp (2006, 60) – it was also the site of an in-between class, a “race of hybrids” – to use Elizabeth Bowen’s words (1950,4) – neither alien nor native, who sympathised with the local lower classes and their superstitions,\(^{105}\) and were suspicious of English visitors in the land they were born in and loved. “Nonsense about being ‘English’! […] My family has eaten Irish food and shared Irish life for 300 years, and if that doesn’t make me Irish I might as well say I was Scotch, or Norman, or pre-Diluvian!” passionately writes Somerville to one of her brothers. (qtd. in Lewis 1985, 165) In a study aimed at introducing Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, and Somerville and Ross within the late nineteenth century Irish Literary Revival, David Clare (2014) argues that, despite being Anglo-Irish Protestants writing mainly for English audiences, Somerville and Ross deserve a place among the Revivalists. Like Wilde and Shaw, Somerville and Ross are usually ‘disqualified’ from the movement because of a “perceived Britishness” in their work. (91) Clare claims that the entire Irish Revival “was underwritten by […] the cultural Britishness of most of its key participants” (93):

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\(^{103}\) Especially during the Famine (1845-49), Big Houses became centres of help for their tenants.

\(^{104}\) Somerville blames the hardships and the physical and mental fatigue Martin had to face in order to run Ross House for her bad health condition: “[b]ut the comfort and the restored civilisation of the old house had cost a high price.” (IM, 158)

\(^{105}\) “In our parts of Ireland we do not for a moment pretend to be too civilised for superstition,” proudly declares Somerville in Irish Memories. (181) They did not seriously believe in fairies and other superstitions of the Irish peasantry, but respected and fiercely defended them from English scorn. The Silver Fox (1898) offers an excellent example of this attitude in the character of the Irish Slaney Morris, who falls out with her English suitor, the arrogant Mr. Glasgow, because of their radically different views on the superstitions of the local peasant families.
they all had upbringings heavily influenced by Britishness, also given where and how they were educated.106 Clare’s essay calls attention to the difference between ‘English’ and ‘British,’107 and underlines that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Irishness’ are not necessarily mutually exclusive terms. (92) Indeed, many Irish Protestants traditionally felt a more or less active antipathy towards the English.108 This anti-Englishness emerges from the novels by Somerville and Ross: from the base opportunist, materialist and greedy soldier Hawkins in The Real Charlotte through the invading pack of English idiots in The Silver Fox to the fastidious, class-conscious Jean Masterman in Dan Russel the Fox.109 In Somerville and Ross’s novels, English people are always ‘the other,’ mainly visitors in a country whose ways and customs they totally ignore.110 Kreilkamp (2006, 70) also sees the range of hostile portrayals of English visitors to big house territory in Somerville and Ross as the expression of “a growing animosity towards the sister country.” In their Big House novels, Somerville and Ross portray the decline of their own class without embellishments, mercilessly showing its faults and inadequacy. Dominick Sarsfield in An Irish Cousin, Christopher Dysart in The Real Charlotte, and

106 Most of them (George Moore, Bernard Shaw, George Birmingham, J.M. Synge, Douglas Hyde, Edward Martyn, etc.) attended public schools and colleges run along British lines or explicitly tied into the British system. Much of W.B. Yeats’s discontinuous education was conducted in London, and Lady Gregory was educated at home by English governesses. See Clare (2014, 93-94)

107 Indeed, ‘Britishness’ invokes the idea of one’s participation in a political and cultural partnership with all the countries in the ‘Atlantic Archipelago.’ Since the publication of J.G.A. Pocock’s influential essay “British History: A Plea for a New Subject” in 1975, scholars have increasingly used the term ‘Atlantic Archipelago’ in an effort to avoid the political and ethnical connotations of ‘the British Isles.’ (Kumar 2003, 6) The concept of ‘Britishness’ was developed by the Scots in the eighteenth century in order to promote a supernational identity that could accommodate the Scottish, Welsh, English, and Irish. However, the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish elements that were meant to be included in the British identity were soon overwhelmed by the contribution of the more powerful and numerous English: “the British stress […] moved from Scottish demands to be included within Britain, to English assumptions to standing for Britain.” (Gardiner 2004, 15) England’s hijacking of the concept of ‘Britishness’ has therefore led to confuse ‘English’ with ‘British.’

108 Clare takes as an example Elizabeth Bowen, who in her fiction and critical writings talked of the “subtle […] anti-Englishness” and the “ambivalence as to all things English” felt by many Irish Protestant. (Bowen 2008, 62-63, and Bowen 1986, 85-86)

109 Clare (2014, 98) also considers Somerville and Ross’s travel book In the Vine Country (1893), in which the two cousins repeatedly express their “defiant Irish pride and an anti-Englishness as strong as that of any Revival writer.” During their stay in France, Somerville and Ross are irritated to be called les Anglaises by the French, and so they get used to immediately declaring their true nationality, with positive consequences: “we found ourselves at once on a different and more friendly footing, and talk had a pleasant tendency to drift into confidential calumny of our mutual neighbour, perfidious Albion, and all things ran smoother and more gaily.” (Somerville and Ross 2001, 117)

110 Somerville and Ross’s last joint novel, Dan Russel the Fox (1911), is about the visit to Ireland by a group of English people. They are introduced to Irish ways and pastimes by their host, the witty Irish widow Lily Delanty. The young English protagonist, Katharine Rowan, is fascinated by what she perceives as the exotic and bewitching Irish country life and falls in love with the Irish huntsman John Michael. Her fellow-travellers, on the contrary, do not share Katharine’s attraction, and, after a brief sojourn, would like to go back to their usual life. Ireland appears to the eyes of the English as a foreign, strange and magic country, quite apart from England. This view of Ireland as a foreign land that enthalls the English/American visitor is present already in Somerville and Ross’s first novel, An Irish Cousin (1889) in which a young American girl comes to Ireland to visit her Irish relatives; similarly, she becomes acquainted with Irish country life and people, and feels all their charm.
Mr. Prendeville in *The Big House of Inver* are three examples of masters of a Big House incapable of or uninterested in effectively managing their responsibilities, and therefore guilty of the downfall of the Ascendancy. On the failure of Big House proprietors to achieve hegemony, Eagleton (1995, 31) comments: “the real test of hegemony is whether a ruling class is able to impose its spiritual authority on its underlings, lend them moral and political leadership and persuade them of its own vision of the world. And on all these counts, […] the Anglo-Irish must be reckoned an egregious failure.”

Yet Somerville and Ross – and this has usually contributed to exclude them from critical studies of the Revival – depict the waning of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy with melancholy. Also, their contempt for the rising Catholic middle classes, the ‘shoneens,’ who were taking the place of the Anglo-Irish, is evident: the most patent case is that of the middle-class social climber Charlotte Mullen, the anti-heroine at the centre of *The Real Charlotte*. Charlotte’s greediness and ruthlessness damage both the poor Irish peasants – who have to pay very high rents for squalid lodgings – and the Anglo-Irish Julia Duffy, whose Big House ends up in the hands of Charlotte. Nevertheless, I agree at least partially with Clare’s argument that Somerville and Ross’s Anglo-Irish position, and their sentimental nostalgia for the Big House golden days, do not make them more ‘English’ than their contemporary Irish Revivalists. The sentimental attitude towards the decline of the Anglo-Irish way of life is, using Clare’s words, “a manifestation of the ‘Britishness’ of these writers, but it was certainly not […] a proof of their ‘Englishness.’” (2014, 99)

However, it must be pointed out that in his plea to include

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111 Clare adds to his argument that Somerville and Ross’s rendering of West Cork speech in texts such as the *Irish R.M.* stories is more precise and authentic than the peasant speech in works by many playwrights writing for the Abbey. (Clare 2014, 97) Several trustworthy commentators such as O’Connor (1985) have repeatedly underlined the meticulous accuracy of Somerville and Ross’s rendering of Hiberno English. Also Gifford Lewis (1989, 25) maintains that “the exactitude and build of their record of Irish speech is unique.” Patrick Kavanagh has connected Somerville and Ross to James Joyce for their wonderful command of Irish-English dialect and dialogue (stating that “Somerville and Ross had a better ear for Irish dialogue than anybody except James Joyce,” qtd. in Cronin 1982, 82). Cahalan (1999, 65-104) has developed the idea and offers an extended comparison between Somerville and Ross and Joyce, analysing in particular the *Irish R.M.* stories and *Finnegans Wake*. These writers are indeed different under many aspects, from their social and family background to the kind of fiction they produced; the cousins wholly belonged to genteel Victorian society and struggled to keep alive the fading world of their ancestors; Joyce was an outspoken, self-exiled man; whereas he “made many outlandish public pronouncements deliberately intended to create a stir, Somerville and Ross […] proceeded much more indirectly, concealing their sternest words about the world around them within their own private correspondence;” Somerville and Ross worked in close collaboration, while Joyce “was the classic egocentric male, determined to immortalize himself, continually borrowing material from others but always subsuming it all into his own idiosyncratic, magnificent fictional world.” (Cahalan 1999, 65-66) Nevertheless, they also share some meaningful similarities. Martin died in 1915, but Somerville (1858-1949) and Joyce (1882-1941) were contemporaries. Joyce read Somerville and Ross and was influenced by their work. (see also Powell 1970, 102-3) Like Somerville and Ross, Joyce steered clear of the Revival; for many years Somerville and Ross were “scorned by the Irish literary and cultural establishment […] because they were misapprehended as anti-Irish, ‘stage-Irish’ writers,” and Joyce’s writing “was likewise attacked as anti-Irish as well as obscene.” (Cahalan 1999, 66-67) Somerville and Ross and Joyce all came into contact with the suffragist movement, in which Somerville played an active role; Joyce’s extensive interactions with the movement have been amply discussed by Scott 1984. Also, much of the humour by these writers, maintains Cahalan, “depends on a contrast of high
Somerville and Ross into the Revival Clare does not take into account the aims of these writers’ work: the goal of the authors of the Revival was declaredly to re-discover ancient Irish texts and traditions, an ambition that Somerville and Ross did not share at all. As discussed above, they were even quite suspicious of the Revival. Therefore, to include Somerville and Ross into a movement they actually disliked and whose purposes they did not feel as theirs seems an unnecessary forcing. What is relevant to this study is to underline the Anglo-Irishness – and everything it implies – of Somerville and Ross’s lives and works.

**Women who live by their brains**

“It was, as it happens, in church that I saw her first; in our own church, in Castle Townshend. That was on Sunday, January 17, 1886.” (*IM*, 120). After having grown up apart, Somerville and Martin met on an occasional visit of Martin and her mother to Drishane. Somerville was twenty-eight, and Martin was twenty-four. Each had already had some experience of life, as Somerville puts it: “[w]hen we first met each other we were, as we then thought, well stricken in years. […] Not absolutely the earliest morning of life; say, about half-past ten o’clock, with breakfast (and all traces of bread and butter) cleared away.” (*IM*, 1) In *Irish Memories*, Somerville would romanticise their first encounter, describing it as a sort of love at first sight, “the hinge of my life, the place where my fate, and hers, turned over, and new and unforeseen things began to happen to us.” (*IM*, 122) Actually, this meeting became significant to Somerville only later: it seems that Martin was fascinated with Somerville’s brilliant personality, but that Somerville, on her part, was not immediately stricken by this shy younger cousin. Somerville was the eldest of a family of eight children, and had plenty of cousins (Martin was the youngest of twelve); one more cousin made no difference to her. She was what Martin defined “a popular girl” (letter from Martin to Somerville, 19 May 1886, *Letters*: 6) and far too busy with her social life and her painting to notice Martin. In March 1886 Somerville left Castle Townshend to spend a few months studying in a Paris studio, and did not trouble to answer Martin’s first letters. Lewis (1989, 5) supposes that it would have been unlikely that a relationship would have developed had Martin not been so persistent in trying to get her attention.

Moreover, Somerville had to earn the money to pay for her studies in Paris,112 and did not want to lose time writing unnecessary letters. At that time, she considered herself more of a painter than a

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112 She made illustrations for the *Graphic* and other magazines.
writer, and had not thought of a literary career, all her energies being directed towards becoming a professional illustrator. She had briefly studied art in London at seventeen, but her serious artistic education started later, thanks to the help of her older cousin Egerton Coghill, who was also studying painting and invited Somerville to go with him to Düsseldorf. When Coghill moved to Paris, Somerville followed suit, notwithstanding her mother’s objections against a young woman living on her own in a city she defined “the Scarlet Woman.” (IM, 110) Somerville would spend many other periods of her life in Paris, sharing house and expenses with other young women artists. In 1886, her personality was already shaped, and in the accounts of those periods we find the seeds of the goals that would characterise her later life. In the French capital, she lived a bohemian, unconventional and relatively free existence for an upper-class girl of the 1880s, in a cosmopolitan environment of artists from all over Europe and America.

We had rooms in a tall and filthy old house in the Rue Madame, one of those sinister and dark and narrow streets that one finds in the Rive Gauche, that seem as if they must harbour all variety of horrors, known and unknown, and are composed of houses whose incredible discomforts would break the spirit of any creature less inveterate in optimism than an Art student. (IM, 113)

I find myself thinking how good it would be to be five and twenty, and storming up that rickety staircase again, with a paint-box in one hand, and a Carton as big as the Gates of Gaza in the other. (IM, 118)

Art was already the main object of Edith Somerville’s life, and she was determined to be an independent professional woman. However, the friendship with her apparently negligible cousin would change the way in which she would pursue her aim: it would lead her to change her focus from painting to writing.

During her Paris stays, no chaperone was around to supervise Somerville, and she could come and go as she pleased, at least as long as she had money:

we knew that when it [money] ended there would be no husks to fall back upon; nothing but one long note on the horn, ‘Home!,’ and home we should have to go. (I once ran it to so fine a point that I could buy no food between Paris and London, and when I arrived at my uncle’s house in London, it was my long-suffering uncle who paid the cabman). (IM, 114)

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113 Somerville had published a sensationalist short story and some humorous pieces, but she did not worry too much about a career as a writer.

114 In subsequent years, Martin would visit Somerville during her Paris stays, and did not approve completely of her friendships there.
From this passage we learn another fact that would remain a constant in Somerville’s life: lack of money. Need of cash would prove to be a fundamental spur – but also a limitation – of her and Martin's literary career, as we shall see below.

On her part, Violet Martin was just beginning to turn into ‘Martin Ross.’ After her father’s death when she was ten, she had lived a rather secluded life with her mother in a gloomy Northern Dublin house; differently from Somerville, when they met she had had little experience of life and had travelled little. Yet she had already, like the men in her family, published a few serious articles. She did not think of herself as a novelist, even less as a humorous entertainer, but rather as a politically engaged essayist, who wrote “in the grave columns of the Irish Times.” (IM, 124)

So the question arises: why, and how, a struggling painter and a shy aspiring journalist ended up co-authoring humorous fiction? Actually, the idea of collaborating did not come out of the blue; rather, it seems like an almost natural outlet for the two young women’s talents. Both Somerville and Martin were familiar with the idea of collaboration: Somerville, as an illustrator, knew well the close collaborative relationship between painter and writer; Martin had been exchanging ideas for stage plots with her cousin and playwright William Wills, with whom she was considering a more formal collaboration. (Jamison 2016, 90-91) Moreover, they already had in their family an example of collaboration, as Wills and another cousin of the clan, Mrs. Greene, were collaborating on a shilling shocker around 1885-86. Collaboration was in the air which Somerville and Martin daily breathed. Thus, it does not seem so strange that “on my second or third meeting with Martin I suggested to her that we should write a book together and that I should illustrate it.” (IM, 124).

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115 However, Jamison points out that the kind of collaboration with Wills placed Martin in a subordinate position: “Wills suggests to Ross that they should write a story together ‘under my supervision and inspiration,’ and he refers to Ross not as his partner, but as his ‘amanuensis.’” (William G. Wills, letter to Martin Ross, n.d., MS. 17/876, Somerville and Ross Papers, Queen’s University Belfast, qtd. In Jamison 2016, 90) Yet, despite Wills’s downplaying of Ross’s contributions as a mere literary assistant, Stevens (2001, 67) argues that Ross “worked with him in some capacity,” and that he paid for her work and attempted to get her more work with other playwrights and directors. When An Irish Cousin, the first novel by Somerville and Ross, appeared, Wills claimed his share of merit: “I am sincerely delighted and proud of you, because it was I who reared you. Loftus has been here talking of your novel […] I spoke and claimed the praise for myself – I formed her, I said, I developed her nascent qualities, in fact I am the author of that book.” (William G. Wills, letter to Martin Ross, qtd. in Jamison 2016, 91)

116 Also, like many other children, the Somerville children and their cousins often collaborated to set up plays and write stories. London (1999, 104-6) provides some examples of nineteenth-century women writing with and within the family in their early years: before publishing her first work of fiction, Louisa May Alcott collaborated on plays with her sisters; the Rossetti children (Michael, Dante Gabriel, Christina, and Maria) collaborated on a collection of tales and on two family journals, completed with poems and stories; Rudyard Kipling and his sister Alice ‘Trixie,’ when still teenagers in India, published a co-authored collection of tales and a collection of verse parodies; most famously, the Brontë sisters, together with their brother Branwell, collaborated on a voluminous series of works varying from tales, plays, poems, little magazines and multi-volume novels that they shared only with each other (initially, all four children participated in joint projects, then Charlotte worked most frequently with Branwell on one saga – Angria – while Emily and Anne on another – Gondal. See London 1999, 33-62).
In June 1886 Somerville returned from Paris, and the friendship between her and Martin bloomed. Their first collaboration was an article entitled “Palmistry,” written by Martin and illustrated by Somerville for the Graphic (published on 11 October 1886). The step towards a full literary collaboration was not far, and the key to it was the friendship that developed between the cousins. The summer of 1886, spent “in sheer idling” (IM, 126) in Castle Townshend, proved vital for the development of their personal and literary partnership. The two young women got to know each other, took long walks, played lawn tennis, chatted for hours, “lying in the warm, short grass of the sheep fields,” and it was “the beginning […] of a new era.” (IM, 125) They built the foundation of their partnership in their intimate, exclusive, and, under many aspects, romantic friendship. Their habit of taking time only for themselves, going for walks and spending entire mornings outdoors talking together (the afternoons were dedicated to their respective social schedules) would become a basic element of their collaborative method. The fact that they ‘talked’ their stories into existence is well known and has been remarked by many critical works on Somerville and Ross, but few have taken the pains to point out the importance of their first summers together (1886 and 1887), when they, by becoming friends, were actually preparing the ground for their literary careers as professional writers. Friendship proved to be for Somerville and Ross, as for many other women writers, a vital element for their lives and careers. In a celebrated passage, Somerville asserts that

> [t]he doctrine that sincere friendship is only possible between men dies hard. […] The outstanding fact, as it seems to me, among women who live by their brains, is friendship. A profound friendship that extends through every phase and aspects of life, intellectual, social, pecuniary. Anyone who has experience of the life of independent and artistic women knows this. (IM, 326)

Female friendship is declared to be fundamental for women’s intellectual, social, and even financial condition. If a woman chose to be independent, that is, not to marry and pursue a career that would enable her to earn a living, then friendship with other women in her same situation was what, according to Somerville, provided the emotional support she would need. Somerville had already experienced this in her Paris days, when she had lived with other “independent and artistic” young women;\(^\text{117}\) with Martin, she took this idea to a further level, making their friendship the most significant emotional relationship of her life and the underlying rock of her career. They were not the only ones. As Faderman underlines in her illuminating study of female friendship Surpassing the

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\(^{117}\) Lewis (1989, 36) underlines that Somerville did not work with “feeble amateurs.” On the contrary, “to most of her student friends it was a matter of great consequence that they should train to a professional level. They wanted to be self-supporting and many went on to become teachers or illustrators.” In 1887, Martin visited Somerville in one of her stays in Paris to see what studio life was like, and thought it awful. Somerville’s friends in Paris were a motley collection of women from Scandinavia, Middle-Europe and America who lived bohemian lives. Martin did not approve of this kind of company, and was particularly amazed by the super-blonde Miss Overweg, who in her opinion behaved vulgarly.
*Love of Men* (1981), in the last decades of the nineteenth century employment opportunities for women, though still limited, increased, and a woman with exceptional ability and motivation could make her way as she seldom could have done in earlier times. In the era of the New Woman, new opportunities were opening for women, who could be able, for the first time, to support themselves. This opportunity, and the choice to live for their personal goals, most of the time of an artistic nature, led many women not to marry. Thus, a new class of women, pioneers who obtained their position not by virtue of any connection to a father or a husband but only by their own efforts, started to rise. (Federman 1981, 204)

The fact was, most of these women believed that marriage was incompatible with their life ambitions. A husband would demand what nineteenth-century husbands were taught to reasonably expect from a wife; housekeeping and child care would have absorbed most of the time and energies necessary for a woman’s personal and professional pursuits. But even if these practical reasons for not marrying were strong enough, Faderman highlights (205), their emotional reasons were even stronger. In Victorian society, men and women inhabited different spheres; their worlds were separated, not only in their daily occupations, but in their leisure interests as well. Women were taught to see other women as kindred spirits and men as the Other. Same-sex friendship was encouraged, not only between women but also between men (here, however, the taint of homosexual suspicion could sometimes lurk). In the final decades of the nineteenth century, when women started to assert their right to independence and work, their ties to each other became even more important.

Also, a proper Victorian marriage would have implied that the wife be inferior to the husband, and that she would have selflessly sacrificed her ambitions to his. She was supposed to tone down her personality in order to be a docile, meek companion. Even if the husband would not claim superiority over her, “society would nevertheless attribute that superiority to him, and she would have to live with the injustice,” (Faderman 1981, 205) or at least would have to play a role in which she did not fit. These New Women, instead, sought equals, partners who were striving for their same goals and who could, above everything, sympathise with them. Many found in female friendship what they needed, in an otherwise quite isolated condition:

[w]hat they felt they needed was a mate with whom they could share the happiness and misery of their struggles, who would understand what these struggles were since she was engaged in them too, and who could share on an equal basis the excitement of the new ideas which surrounded them. (Faderman 1981, 205)

A “profound friendship” was so vital because the lives of these women who “lived by their brains” could be extremely lonely. An unmarried woman who did not seek support from a male relative and
lived on her own by her own means was normally ostracised. In a society like the Victorian one that idealised marriage and reduced the role of women to that of wife and mother, New Women represented a threat, or, at best, were made fun of and scorned. They needed companions who understood and were there for them, for whom they would do the same.

Somerville and Ross spoke of their friendship as a perfect union, a marriage, and, as has been shown in this chapter, talked of their relationship in overtly romantic terms.¹¹⁸ This has led critics to suppose that an actual sexual relationship existed between them, and many biographies and studies of Somerville and Ross have focused on either proving or negating their lesbianism.¹¹⁹ In 1952 Geraldine Cummins, Somerville’s close friend and first biographer, maintained that Somerville had “definite views” on the “evils of sexual immorality and considered the Irish Roman Catholic Church wise in its condemnation of misdemeanours of this kind.” (Cummins 1952: 104) She was trying to save Somerville and Ross’s reputation from the stains of lesbianism that fluttered around them. Indeed, in Somerville and Ross’s time there had been some (in)famous cases of women for whom love (or at least romantic, ‘monogamous’ friendship) and literary work were interrelated: Michael Field is the most prominent case, but also Marie Corelli and Bertha Vyver, Alice French (who wrote under the name of Octave Thanet) and Jane Crawford, and Rosa Bonheur and Nathalie Micas, to name a few, were independent women who formed long-lasting Boston marriages.¹²⁰ These women lived together for almost all their adult life, and did not include a man in what they felt to be their household paradises.¹²¹ Some had explicit homosexual intercourse, but, in most cases, the doubt remains. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that nineteenth-century conceptions of female friendship

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¹¹⁸ “For most boys and girls the varying, yet invariable, flirtations, and emotional episodes of youth, are resolved and composed by marriage. To Martin and to me was opened another way, and the flowering of both our lives was when we met each other.” (IM, 125)


¹²⁰ The term ‘Boston marriage’ was widespread in the late nineteenth-century to describe a long-term monogamous relationship between two unmarried women; they were financially independent from men, sometimes because of an inheritance (like Michael Field), but more commonly thanks to a career. They were usually feminists and New Women, and their feminist values formed a strong basis for their life together. (Faderman 1981, 190) The expression ‘Boston marriage’ is taken from Henry James’s novel The Bostonians (1885), which was declared by the author to be a study of those friendships between unmarried women in the polished, intellectual atmosphere of New England.

¹²¹ However, although they frequently spent periods of time or travelled together, Somerville and Ross did not live under the same roof until Martin’s mother’s death in 1909, nine years before her own death. From 1909 to 1915, Martin resided at Somerville’s family house in Castletownshend. Also, their union was different from many Boston marriages (see later in the chapter) as neither of them ever set up house independently from their family homes (Ross and Drishane). They were “family women, rooted to their family homes.” (Letters, xxii). An important role in their friendship was thus played by letters.
were very different from those of later years. Women were assumed to be asexual, acquiescing to sexual activity only for the sake of their husband and for the higher, more fulfilling purpose of procreation. Since there was no possibility that women (at least respectable women) might have sexual urges, they were permitted a level of intimacy and demonstration that in the twentieth century, and after Freud, would become instead suspect. A woman in bed with another woman would have raised nobody’s eyebrows, no inference would have been made. (Faderman 1981, 152) Therefore, it is misleading and dangerous nowadays to try to interpret Somerville and Ross’s affectionate declarations of love. Faderman concludes that a Victorian woman probably would not have spoken so openly about her love affair with another woman had she been burdened by the memory of shared carnality. […] [I]t would have been astonishing, considering the Victorian antipathy to sexual expression of any kind, if such relations could have been carried on free of guilt and without an imagined cost to the ‘purity’ of their love. (Faderman 1981, 208)

Simply, it was perfectly innocent and ‘normal’ to be on intimate, deeply affectionate terms with a female friend, and nothing alarming was perceived by Somerville and Ross’s contemporaries. The label ‘lesbian’ was not so commonly used. Since women were believed to be “unsullied by the evils of carnality,” “a sex-hating society” (Faderman, 1981, 203) could view their relationships as ideal and even admire the purity and the devotion of such relations as would be impossible for later readers. 

Also, a respectable woman would always have to restrain herself with a man, even within marriage, for fear of losing her reputation (a wife with too strong a sexual appetite would be seen as suspect and unsuitable). Being “passionless” was viewed as a proper lady’s virtue. (Cott 1978) With another woman, on the contrary, the shield of restraint could be put aside: women could express all the intensity of their feelings and emotions for a female friend without fear of being improperly labelled.

The aim of this study is not to try to infer whether or not Somerville and Ross were homosexual. Firstly because it is simply impossible, since to read with twenty-first century eyes and prejudices the declarations of Victorian women, who were immersed in a totally different cultural atmosphere, becomes a matter of mere speculation. Secondly, and more importantly, because it does not matter: whatever the sexual nature of their relationship, what is relevant to this study is what Somerville and

122 Very different was the case, for instance, of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote under the male singular pseudonym Michael Field. Bradley and Cooper proudly declared their homosexual love; however, they belonged to an elite of bohemian, aristocratic intellectuals – very different from Somerville and Ross’s conservative, religious families. Bradley was Cooper’s aunt, and took her practically from infancy, later attending university with her. They shared a household, found a circle of friends among homosexual couples, and wrote together Sapphic lyrics. Early biographers, however, went to great lengths to cover their lesbianism, as does Sturgeon (1922, 75): “[Bradley’s devotion] was the expression of her mother-instinct, the outflow of a natural feminine impulse to cherish and protect.”
Ross thought essential for their literary career; it was the spiritual and emotional aspect of their union, the constant affection, encouragement and support, and the intellectual affinity that made their daring life choices possible and their literary collaboration successful. They strongly believed that, without their friendship, their professional achievement as “women who live by their brains” would have been impossible.

The beginning of the collaboration

The first serious joint literary effort of Somerville and Ross sprang from their joint family background. In 1887, they engaged in the compilation of the ‘Buddh Dictionary,’ a collection of words and phrases used by the network of families that descended from Charles Kendal Bushe, which was completed that summer. Somerville would later underline that their complicity arose not only from their personal affinity, but also from their shared family heritage: “[b]eing Irish, I have to acknowledge its spell, and I think it is indisputable that a thread, however slender, of kinship adds a force to friendship.” (IM, 42) The dictionary project points to the already underlined problematic position Somerville and Ross occupied within nineteenth-century Ireland: the terminology examined in the Buddh dictionary is a prominent element capable of setting Anglo-Irish Ascendancy families apart from both the world of the ‘proper English’ and the world of the native Irish. The language they spoke distanced them from both worlds. London (1999) stresses the fact that Somerville and Ross recognised themselves “as speakers of a language different from the ‘English’ of both the residents of England and the Irish peasantry.” (122) London also interestingly sees in the Buddh Dictionary the first seeds of their later literary production: like the dictionary, their works of fiction document and preserve the morals and manners of the Irish and Anglo-Irish people in a precise moment in history; like the dictionary, their literary texts “perform a service for the ‘language’ – a way of life – passing out of existence, and hence in need of translation and transcription.” (London 1999, 123) Somerville and Ross’s works are often praised for their accurate reproduction of the living language of the Irish people, and their interest in language is certainly testified by the Buddh project.

123 In their families, all descendants of Bushe called themselves ‘Buddhs.’ Somerville referred to Buddh terms as “the froth on the surface of some hundreds of years of the conversation of a clan of violent, inventive, Anglo-Irish people, who generation after generation, found themselves faced with situations in which the English language failed to provide sufficient intensity, and they either snatched at alternatives from other tongues or invented them.” (Letters, 297)
124 London (1999) reflects that “if Somerville and Ross could merge their voices as one, this was because they not only came from the same class, but were, in fact, blood relatives.” (123)
125 Somerville and Ross “foraged among the country people in search of phrases and habits of speech,” (Cronin 1968, 10) and recorded what they heard “with all the tender precision of a folk-lorist.” (Lyons 1970, 120) They kept notebooks in which they annotated words and sentences heard in the streets; once they had used the phrase in one of their works, they scratched them out.
Noticing how easily they could write together, Somerville proposed that they might actually write a novel together. The literary atmosphere of the late 1880s was full of what were then known as ‘shilling shockers,’ and Somerville and Martin thought it would be funny to try their hands at something of that kind. Thus, in October 1887 they began writing a sensationalist story, affectionately called between the two of them ‘The Shocker.’

Somerville claims that their joint venture began “in idleness and without conviction,” (IM, 129) as something they did for the fun of it. Also, she adds, they did not have the support of their families – which held a central role in their lives – who dismissed their efforts with sarcasm or open hostility:

we began what was to be known to us as ‘The Shocker,’ and ‘The Shaughraun,’ to our family generally, as ‘that nonsense of the girls,’ and subsequently, to the general public, as ‘An Irish Cousin.’ Seldom have the young and ardent ‘commenced author’ under less conductive circumstances. We were resented on so many grounds. Waste of time; the arrogance of having conceived such a project; and, chiefly, the abstention of two playmates. They called us ‘The Shockers,’ ‘The Geniuses’ (this in bitter irony), ‘The Hugger-Muggerers’ (this flight of fancy was my mother’s); when not actually reviled, we were treated with much the same disapproving sufferance that is shown to an outside dog who sneaks into the house on a wet day. (IM, 128-29)

The fact that their families showed “disapproving sufferance” towards their writing is nothing new when women writing is concerned. The difficulties of those early times are almost identically repeated by Somerville in her late-life essay “Two of a Trade:”

[the books] were resented on so many grounds. Waste of time. Unjustified Conceit, and chiefly the Mutiny of two playmates. They were called ‘the Shockers,’ the ‘Geniuses (this in savage irony) and they found themselves the victims of a kind of inverted Boycott, a determination to pursue them to any retreat in order to compel participation in the sport of the moment. This on one typical occasion, being only evaded, and the escape of the fugitive Shockers being only secured by their overhearing sounds of a search party on their track, and by their fleeing instantly to the kitchen garden where they laid themselves at full length between rows of umbrageous Cabbage, remaining motionless while the pursuit swept by. (“Two of a Trade,” 84) [my emphasis]

Humour, excess and grotesque combine in this passage. The use of so many words from the field of warfare (mutiny, boycott, evaded, escape, fugitive, fleeing, pursuit), even if half-playfully, evokes the opposition that the two aspiring authors actually suffered at the hands of their relatives. Ehnenn (2008, 53) notes that, despite the humorous tone, “the passage uses violent images to detail the

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126 Such claims are common to many women co-writers when they recount of their beginnings. This aspect will be discussed later in this chapter.

127 This essay was commissioned to Somerville in 1946 for the opening number of an Irish literary magazine, Irish Writing: the magazine of contemporary Irish literature, edited by David Marcus and Terence Smith.
consequences of stepping outside of the accepted realm of female behaviour.” As women, whose function was chiefly social, not taking part in the social occasion of the moment was seen as failing a duty, as a mutiny, a rebellion against what the authority – common sense and their families – expected from them. Women had to be companions for the members of their family circle; taking time for themselves was not seen as a right, let alone taking time to write. Because Somerville and Ross put the activity of writing together over other, more social and feminine activities, they became “fugitives,” outlaws who had to “flee” and “escape” from their relatives. The “pursuit” ends up resembling a fox hunt – an activity Somerville and Martin were, as members of the gentry, well familiar with, and which they practised regularly. Somerville and Martin, accomplished hunters and horsewomen, became sport themselves. Ehnenn (2008, 53-4) underlines that, like the fox, there is nothing they can do but hide motionless among the leafy shadows of the cabbages, waiting for the hunt party to go away.

And yet, a sort of pleasure emerges from the account: the scheme and its repetition – the two friends’ resistance to patriarchal oppressive forces, their families’ resentment and the following chase – are presented as a kind of game. Being together against “every man’s hand” (IM, 129) turns into a game, and one to play in team. Also, “persecution had its usual effect” on rebellious spirits, and “deepened somewhat tepid effort into enthusiasm:” (IM, 129) standing alone but together against everyone else around them made the two cousins even closer and their purpose stronger. What began “in idleness and without conviction” turned into a goal. The support provided by female friendship, thus, turned out to be vital from the very beginning of these women’s literary career. Without it, the determination to keep writing might have wavered. Being in disgrace, but being in it together, not only made the burden lighter, but even turned it into a game that could be funny to play. Like the impertinent magic fox that keeps tricking the hunters in their later novel The Silver Fox, Somerville and Ross made the persecution a source of amusement.

Another event concurred to give the cousins the determination they needed. In a fictionalised account, after the model of Mary Shelley’s 1831 Preface to Frankenstein, Somerville narrates how inspiration came to Martin and her. In the autumn of 1887, she reveals in Irish Memories, she and her cousin went to visit a local ‘Big House.’ However, from their letters we know that it was only Somerville to go. This, together with the claim that they had become intimate friends right at their first meeting,

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128 In the following letter of 21 August 1898, Martin remembers when Somerville told her of her visit to the Big House: “I seem to remember very much the first beginnings of the Shocker just now – when I was humping over the Dumpy [the studio stove] and you were mucking with paints at the window you told me of the old maniac’s face at the window over the White Hall door – and remember you were the person who suggested that we should try together to write a shocker or story of sorts on that foundation – and you were also the person who lifted us through the first chapters.” (Letters, 142-43)
are part of Somerville’s romantic attempt at making Martin a central presence in her life from the early moments of their acquaintance. She went to visit a friend of her family’s, an elderly lady, who lived alone in an old manor some twenty kilometres from Drishane. The place, in the best Big House tradition, was in a state of semi-abandonment.\footnote{By the time Somerville wrote her autobiography in 1917, the place was in utter ruin: “[t]he little lady who entertained us is dead now; the old house, stripped of its ancient portraits and furniture, is, like many another, in the hands of farmer people; its gardens have reverted to jungle.” (IM, 129)} “[I]t was the old house, dying even then, that touched our imaginations.” (IM, 129) By the end of the visit, Somerville tells us, the sun had set, and it was at that precise moment that into the Irish Cousin some thrill of genuineness was breathed. In the darkened façade of the long grey house, a window, just over the hall-door, caught our attention. In it, for an instant, was a white face. Trials of ivy hung over the panes, but we saw the face glimmer there for a minute and vanish. […] As we rode home along the side of the hills, and watched the fires of the sunset sink into the sea, and met the crescent moon coming with faint light to lead us home, we could talk and think only of that presence at the window. (IM, 130)

In a suggestive description, Somerville places the origin of their inspiration:

[t]he shock of it was what we had needed, and with it ‘the Shocker’ started into life, or, if that is too much to say for it, its authors, at least, felt that conviction had come to them; the insincere ambition of the ‘Penny Dreadful’ faded, realities asserted themselves, and the faked ‘thrills’ that were to make our fortunes were repudiated for ever. […] [A]n ideal of Art rose then for us, far and faint as the half-moon, and often, like her, hidden in clouds, yet never quite lost or forgotten. (IM, 130-31)

In fact, Somerville must have reflected on the apparition by herself on her way home, and told Martin only later. So the shared ecstasy of inspiration is fictional.

Nevertheless, the whole episode, however romanticised, gives us a first instance of inspiration taken from real life that was to be so fundamental to Somerville and Ross. Somerville’s visit to this Big House and her account of it is similar to Martin’s much later visit to Tyrone House (reported in a letter dated 18 March 1912), which provided Somerville with the inspiration for The Big House of Inver, written on her own after the death of her partner. The fact that Somerville never went to Tyrone House, and could nevertheless write about it and its history, is due to Ross’s enthusiastic letter and exhortation “if we dare to write upon that subject!” (Letters, 294) The role played by letters in their writing thus turns out to be, from the dawn of their partnership, crucial.

With their wills set and their inspiration on fire, Somerville and Ross plunged into the writing of their first novel. Famously, their writing was far from being a smooth process: they would discuss every single matter, argue over it, then write and rewrite.\footnote{Somerville and Ross’s method of collaboration will be discussed later on in this chapter.} Much of the process was carried out by letters,
because each was expected to live with her family and not stay away too often. Curiously enough, notwithstanding their apparent disregard for their relatives’ opinion, Somerville and Ross seem to have greatly cared about what they thought of their books. They regularly read the new parts aloud to their families, who “offered criticisms, incessant, and mutually destructive.” (*IM*, 135) Their letters are full of reported comments and suggestions by their mothers and siblings. Collaboration, thus, was for the amateurs Somerville and Ross a kind of family affair. Only two were the writers, but everyone around was involved. Although battling against the oppressive, patriarchal power, Somerville and Ross never became estranged from their families; on the contrary, they managed to keep up a good relationship with them.\textsuperscript{131}

Somerville’s mother, in particular, at first disliked the idea of her daughter writing fiction, but this would not make her less intrusive.\textsuperscript{132} On the contrary, the “tall, and fervent and flaming” (*IM*, 87) Adelaide Somerville would always expect to be consulted for her opinion, which she would never fail to provide. In January 1888, Somerville wrote in her diary: “Gave it [the Shocker] to mother to read. She loathes it.” (*Letters*, 134) In particular, she complained of the lack of love affairs in her daughter’s books – a remark she would keep making for the subsequent texts as well – which she, as “frankly mid-Victorian,” (*IM*, 82) thought necessary in a good novel. The absence of romanticism would remain a constant in Somerville and Ross’s works, and, from their letters, it seems that it was Martin who insisted on keeping the writing ironically detached: “[m]other has complained bitterly of the want of love interest. […] I said that I had urged you in vain to insert many such – and she declared that you were quite wrong.” (letter of Somerville to Martin, 21 January 1888, *Letters*, 63)

Somerville’s relationship with her mother was never easy, and they regularly argued; she died a few years later, in 1895: “[s]he did not live to see many of our books, but I fear that such as she did see, with their culpable economy of either love-makings or happy endings, were a disappointment to her. In her opinion the characters should leave a story, as the occupants left Noah’s Ark, in couples.” (*IM*, 90) Adelaide Somerville would provide the model for the strong but despotic and stiff-upper-lip figure of Lady Dysart in Somerville and Ross’s masterpiece, *The Real Charlotte*. Also, the “ideal daughter” she never had, with “hair of dazzling gold, blue eyes as big as mill-wheels, and […] incessantly enmeshed in the most lurid flirtation,” (*IM*, 92) would come alive through *The Real Charlotte*’s Francie Fitzgerald; the unhappy fate Francie faces at the end of the novel may suggest what Somerville thought of her mother’s feminine ideals.

\textsuperscript{131} Notably, when their writing would prove financially successful, the family opposition stopped altogether.

\textsuperscript{132} “Mother’s attitude is one of disfavour, but she tries in vain to conceal her interest.” (letter from Somerville to Martin, *Letters*, 65)
Both Somerville and Martin showed an indulgent attachment to their mothers, taken as a natural part of the air breathed by upper-class daughters. They laughed at their mothers’ absurdities, but kept close to them and stoically accepted their criticisms and condemnations. Even after the success of their first novels, and the enthusiastic reactions from the most respected literary figures of their day, they still talked in their letters about the opinions their mothers had of their work. (Keane 1989, iv) Martin’s mother was more affectionate and supportive, although generally inattentive, while Somerville’s did not approve of her daughter’s eagerness to be an independent artist. She had very reluctantly tolerated Somerville’s stays in Paris, believing that, sooner or later, her daughter would have settled down; when she did not, and her time was devoted more and more to writing, her mother did not conceal her disapproval. Presumably, she “believed that writing was quite acceptable as long as it was not taken seriously, like amateur theatricals, and did not become a professional occupation.” (Pepinster Greene 2016, 198) A respectable lady should not put herself out in the literary market. Thus, she opposed the use of the family name when the moment to publish An Irish Cousin finally came.

The book was completed, with much effort, in May 1888. The continuous revisions and rewritings had cost them a lot of time and energy, and the end of the novel had seemed to Somerville “further off than the end of the world.” (IM, 136) Contrary to coeval mainstream opinion about collaboration and its (supposed) mechanical distribution of tasks, in Somerville and Ross’s case it did not make the work faster; the incessant mutual criticism and changes, with discussions on every single matter, made it much slower. The clean copy was sent to a London publisher, Sampson Low, who after a month returned the manuscript without comment. Somerville tells us that they accepted the refusal with tranquillity, decided to place it “in the hands of a friend to do with it as he saw fit, and proceeded to forget all about it.” (IM, 136) Actually, they did not. Lewis (1989, 141) underlines the key role Martin had in the publishing and in the promotion of An Irish Cousin. She used the connections of her brother Robert in the London literary world, and pulled strings shamelessly.

In December 1888, the situation took a favourable turn for An Irish Cousin: Bentley & Son offered £25 on publication, plus £25 on sale of 500 copies of the book. The reality of their ‘Shocker’ being actually published struck the two cousins, and a note in Martin’s diary expresses all their ecstasy: “All comment is inadequate. […] Wrote a dizzy letter of acceptance to Bentley, and went to church,

133 “I am reading the Shocker to Mama, who is even more satisfactory than Rose – reiterates that it is thoroughly interesting, says comprehendingly ‘Hmm’ at every other paragraph – notes all points related to the plot – altogether shows herself to be a woman of taste. This is encouraging.” (letter from Martin to Somerville, qtd. in Letters, 76)

134 From their letters, we understand that it was Somerville to do the clean copying, as she had what she referred to disparagingly as a clear commercial hand.
twice, in a glorified trance.” (IM, 136) The novel was published in two volumes in the autumn of 1889, and the months in between were spent in excitement and reconsiderations of their work. Martin in particular reflected much on the meaning the writing of the novel had had for her. A perfectionist, she was not fully satisfied with the novel, but vividly recognized its importance in both their lives:

[a]ny period of good work has a nice honest romance about it. I do not think much of the Shocker all around I am bound to say. It has its points but it is indifferently written – with awkwardness and effort. However the tone is very sound and the sentiment is genuine and it is sincere and unusual. That is my opinion.
You once said a little thing about it and what the writing of it did for us – if you don’t remember it I do – that is good enough. Anyhow it was a nice little thing. Goodnight now.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 3 December 1887, Letters, 62)

Martin reflected on the personal gains of their joint literary activity, the “nice little thing” that it did for them. The physical product of their partnership, the novel itself, does not seem as important as the experience of the collaboration, and the pleasure and the joy it gave them.

On the eve of publication, a thrilled but nervous Martin goes back to the beginning of the enterprise:

[w]e little thought then that I, at Ross, should take the World with a view to seeing my own writing in it, and should see the Shocker in large type heading Bentley’s list therein. […]
Here’s good luck to the Shocker and even if it doesn’t do much to making our fortunes I do not think it was time wasted. It taught us a lot – in a literary way – and I don’t think we shall ever forget it. And the long time that we fought over it, it was my fault – isn’t that true? […] Goodnight again – you were a nice woman to write with. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 21 August 1889, Letters, 143)

Again, it is repeatedly the personal and intellectual gain of the collaboration that comes to the foreground. It is the shared act of writing and the pleasures that derive from it that count the most for Martin. Somerville was, above all, “a nice woman to write with.”

After the publication, Somerville and Ross went great lengths to bring the novel to the attention of reviewers and literary men. It was Martin who dealt more with the practical aspects of authoring, showing greater facility for publicity and distribution. She would take charge of the money side of the business, negotiating with publishers and trying to get the best possible price for their work. Her

135 Black’s biography emphasises the Gerard sisters’ incredulous excitement at the acceptance of their manuscript: “[t]hey wrote at random to three firms, whose names they took from an advertisement-sheet of paper. Two of these at once disappointed them. After some delay […] they were suddenly electrified by the intelligence that it was accepted […] and by-and-by, to their great joy, the young authors found themselves ‘in print!’” (Black 1896, 156-57) Their reaction resembles Somerville’s and Ross’s, who were surprised when Bentley & Son accepted to publish their first novel. The development of the literary careers of these two pairs of women – who had started as amateurs writing with a female relative close at hand and turned into popular professional authors – are strikingly similar.
connections with Edmund Yates\textsuperscript{136} proved vital: he was well known in the 1890s as a novelist and founder and editor of \textit{The World}, for which Martin published some articles under her own name only,\textsuperscript{137} and his role as propagandist for Somerville and Ross would always be remembered with gratitude by the two cousins.\textsuperscript{138} Also, the role of their families in advertising the novel was part of that sort of ‘family collaboration’ discussed above, as the following extract demonstrates:

[m]ama did not come home today, but she shall at once be set to work tomorrow. I into Oughterard to fetch Rose out in the afternoon and shall set Molly and Edmond on the trail. In fact anyone \textit{I meet or can think of shall not be ignorant of the Shocker}. […] \textit{You will have to take to getting up early & religiously writing a certain number of letters before breakfast}. I am afraid this is a baddish time for books to come out, but we must make up for that by energy. What about Egerton’s man on the \textit{Saturday}? I have incensed Edith about Willie Wilde and Desart, and must concoct a discreet line or two to Edmund Yates – Edith is going up to the horse show, and accordingly will see everyone she knows in Ireland, and can go round the book shops – and the Grays are trusty people of large acquaintance. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 21 August 1889, \textit{Letters}, 142) [my emphases]

A few days later, Martin communicated good news to her partner: Carnegie Libraries agreed to subscribe to and circulate \textit{An Irish Cousin}, as well as recommend the book to the booksellers Eason and Son. The ‘family collaboration’ went on:

Molly Helps has been very kind about it – and said at once that she would write to Charlie Graves, who reviews the light literature for the Spectator, to give us a good word. […] I wrote the best letter I could to Edmund Yates today. Indeed I write letters all the time and Rose is very good about it too – Mama of course ploughs away, but her eyes come against her. I should make Aylmer ask for it at every station on the Underground if I were you. I am sure that your mother is magnificent in the matter of letters, and \textit{if the family really put their shoulders to a wheel they could do a great deal}. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 24 August 1889, \textit{Letters}, 144) [my emphasis]

\textsuperscript{136} Edmund Yates (1831-1894) began his career in the theatre; in 1860 he became editor of \textit{Temple Bar}; his novel \textit{Broken to Harness: A Story of English Domestic Life} (1864) was a great success; in 1867 he became editor of \textit{Tinsley’s Magazine}, and in 1874 he published the first number of \textit{The World: A Journal for Men and Women}. Among his staff there were writers like M.E. Braddon and Wilkie Collins.

\textsuperscript{137} The first of these articles, “A Delegate of the National League,” appeared in July 1889. It was welcomed with mingled emotions by Martin’s family: “[t]hat ‘a Shocker’ should preach, that ‘one of the girls’ should discourse on what was respectfully summarised […] as ‘Deep subjects of Life and Death,’ was not quite what anyone enjoyed.” (\textit{IM}, 198)

\textsuperscript{138} As a matter of fact, at least according to trustworthy commentators such as Lewis (1989, 38), the naming of the Irish R.M. as Major Sinclair Yeates was a tribute to Edmund Yates, not to the poet W.B. Yeats, as many believe. Nevertheless, Cahalan (1999, 78-79) maliciously suggests that “there remains the slight, teasing possibility that their Major Yeates might have been named partly as a private joke at the poet’s expenses.” He then notes the similarities between the poet and the fictional magistrate: “Somerville and Ross, avowed realists, had little patience for his shadowy romanticism; like the poet, Major Yates is often quite abstracted. It would not have been out of character for Somerville and Ross to have a private little joke – rather along the lines of their use […] of the language of the ‘Buddhs’ as a confidential comic tone – protecting themselves by keeping quiet about it” and by the different spelling.
Martin asked Lady Augusta Gregory to advertise the book to her social and literary circles. She applauded Martin’s artistic endeavours with Somerville, and, after reading the novel, predicted “great fame and popularity” for them. (Jamison 2016, 88)

The publication of An Irish Cousin presented the two women with a new problem: under which names was the book going to appear? Martin’s pseudonym was ready to hand, her precedent articles in The World having been signed ‘Martin Ross,’ coupling her surname with the family estate. Now it was Somerville’s turn to make up a pen name. That they would not use their birth names was taken for granted from the beginning, as this early letter of Martin to Somerville – dated December 1887 – tells us: “[y]ou must think of a name for yourself. Two New Writers is every day more odious to me – Gallantly invent something like Currer Bell, George Eliot, or any of them […] but anyhow do try for a name.” (Letters, 61) In Irish Memories, Somerville lightly declares that her mother opposed to her using her family name “for some reasons that I have not forgotten.” (IM, 137) As hinted above, Mrs. Somerville did not like the idea of the old and prestigious family name being associated with a novel. After “much debate and searching of pedigrees” the name of a Somerville ancestress, ‘Geilles Herring,’ “was selected to face the music” in her place. (IM, 137) However, the career of Geilles Herring was brief. It sounded kind of comic, and provoked hilarious reactions, from themselves first of all: “[y]esterday in telling Rose the title of the book to put in one of her letters, I called it ‘An Irish Herring’ and then laughed so interminably that Rose nearly wept from boredom and fury,” wrote Martin (Letters, 143-44); Edmund Yates seems to have asked Martin “the reason of her collaboration with a grilled herring.” (IM, 137) Another name was thus needed. The first edition of the book sold well, and a second edition was printed by the end of the same year. This time Somerville tried with ‘Viva Graham.’ However, the name ‘E.Œ. Somerville’ was about to make its appearance on the cover of her next books. Stories report that Adelaide Somerville gave up her doubts when her daughter’s literary work proved successful: now that there were not only excellent reviews but also cheques to be put in the bank, the atmosphere changed in Drishane. In a letter of September 1889, Somerville even proposed to her literary partner a plan devised by her mother to enable them to write together: “[m]other’s last suggestion is that you and I should live three months about at other’s houses.” (Letters, 155)

Begun in imitation of the fashionable shilling shockers, An Irish Cousin had turned out to be much more. Indeed, the novel perfectly inserts itself into the tradition of the Irish Gothic. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, in Ireland the Gothic became increasingly intertwined with the Big House

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139 Over the years, Martin continued to communicate with Lady Gregory and to keep her informed of her and Somerville’s literary projects, and she sometimes spent time at Gregory’s home, Coole Park.
The political situation of the time certainly played a crucial role in this association. Anglo-Irish proprietors of Big Houses were surrounded by the material and psychic conditions encouraging a turn to the Gothic: stuck in their crumbling mansions, isolated from the native Irish Catholic community, surrounded by acts of local violence, and burdened by financial crisis and utter instability over their political role, they practically lived in a perfect Gothic scenario. Late Victorian Ireland can be seen as a “living Gothic for a post-Union ruling class slowly acknowledging its failure to maintain hegemony over a newly emboldened tenantry.” (Moynahan 1995, 111) Ascendancy anxieties found their expression in allegorical Gothic motifs that intruded upon and interacted with the conventions of the realistic Big House fiction. (Kreilkamp 2006, 67) Kreilkamp illustrates how Charles Maturin (1782-1824), Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-73), Bram Stoker and Somerville and Ross developed full-blown Protestant Gothic Big House novels, and identifies four characteristic motifs: “deranged and demonised landlords, settings in decaying houses, a growing class obsession with racial pollution and cultural decline, as well as sadistic threats against helpless young women.” (67)

An Irish Cousin presents each of these tropes: a naïve, orphaned American girl, Theo, comes to Ireland to visit a brooding uncle, Dominick Sarsfield, who belongs to the landed gentry and lives in a country mansion near Cork, Durrus, “a long, low house, looking wan and ghostly in the moonlight” (Irish Cousin, I, 43). In the best Big House tradition, Durrus is a mixture of past greatness and present decay: imposing, gloomy and neglected, it provokes in Theo “an unexplainable shudder.” (I, 50-51) When the wind blows, the portraits of the Sarsfield ancestors shake in their frames in the draughty corridors. (I, 68) The room assigned to Theo, her father’s room, is menacingly out of proportion and seems to hold promise of violence:

[t]he room was large and bare. The paper and the curtains of the two windows were alike detestable in colour and pattern. The enormous bed had once been a four-poster, but the posts had been cut down, and four meaningless stumps bore witness to the mutilation it had undergone. A colossal wardrobe loomed in a far-off corner; a round table of preposterous size occupied the centre of the room. Six

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140 “Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Big House novels reflect Anglo-Ireland’s response to a range of violent threats: memories of the United Irishmen Rising of 1798, the early nineteenth-century Tithe Wars and rural faction fighting, as well as the later rise of Fenianism and the hostility directed at landlords in the Land War and the War of Independence.” (Kreilkamp 2006, 76-77)


142 Uncle Dominick is, as has been already underlined, an example of a master of a Big House who lacks the energy and the financial resources to run it. “‘This place is shockingly neglected,’ my uncle said, […] ‘in old days it was a whole different affair. […]’ We had by this time come to the dilapidated old hothouse, and we both stood and looked at it for a few seconds. […] ‘I wish I had the energy and the money to get this whole place put to right […] but I have neither the one nor the other. […]’” (Irish Cousin, 87-88)
people could comfortably have dined at the dressing-table. In fact, the whole room appeared to have been fitted up for the reception of a giantess [...] (An Irish Cousin, I, 49)

In addition, Theo spots a secret door in her bedroom, which leads to another, smaller room and a passage. The Gothic setting is thus ready. Uncle Dominick perfectly embodies the doomed satanic landlord. His past is full of dark secrets – including the death of his elder brother Owen, Theo’s father, under mysterious circumstances. A vague, instinctive dread seizes Theo each time she is in her uncle’s presence. Detached, intellectual and ceremonious, he behaves with “strained and glacial geniality” (I, 47) towards Theo when they meet daily at dinner; he spends the rest of the day alone, leading a solitary life walking restlessly about the house or staying closed in his studio. In his ways and appearance, Dominick reminds the reader of the charming but dangerous vampire after the model created by Polidori: although “decidedly a handsome man,” (I, 56) there is “something repelling in his manner;” (I, 67) his dark hair and eyes contrast with an “unwholesomely pallid skin;” (I, 56) an iron-grey moustache conceals yellow teeth, “long and slightly prominent.” (I, 56) Dominick’s son, Willy, on the contrary seems good-natured and friendly. He and Theo become friends and spend many pleasant weeks together hunting and riding in the beautiful Irish countryside. However, Willy too starts to behave in an increasingly disquieting way: he gets more and more possessive, and when Theo rejects his marriage proposal because she is in love with their neighbour, Nugent, Willy is subject to violent bouts of anger. Estranged from her cousin and afraid of her uncle, Theo spends her days alone in Durrus’s solitary rooms, and ends up being almost a prisoner. This follows the Gothic tradition of the heroine being incarcerated on isolated estates, with a male relative, representing patriarchy, to act as her oppressor. (Kilfeather 2006, 89) To make things worse, a madwoman – the lodgekeeper’s wife, Moll Hourihane – keeps wandering about Durrus, especially at nights of full moon, when she alternates ghostly dances to moments of utter desperation:

raising her arms above her head with a wild gesture, she began to step to and fro with jaunty liftings and bendings of her body, as though she was taking part in a dance. [...] [p]lacing her hands on her hips, she danced with fantastic lightness and vigour some steps of an Irish jig. Suddenly, however, she checked herself; she knelt down, and, turning a pale face to the sky, she crossed her hands on her breast and remained motionless. Her absolute stillness had in it an intensity almost more dreadful than the strange movements she had previously gone through, and I [Theo] stood staring in inert terror at the grey kneeling figure, with a face as white as that which was still turned rigidly skywards in what appeared to be the extremity of supplication. (An Irish Cousin, I, 93-94)

143 The figure of Willy is a fictional version of Hewitt Poole, a cousin of Somerville’s with whom she had had a flirtation in 1878; they exchanged poems and drawings; after staying at Drishane in the autumn of that year, when he probably asked for Edith’s hand, he departed and was never seen in Drishane again. In 1880 he married another woman. (Lewis 1989, 109)
A tall and vigorous woman, Moll never speaks, but she occasionally howls (the howl was a trope in Irish Gothic, representing the demonization or repression of Gaelic culture, see Kilfeather 2006, 88). When Moll comes to the scene for the first time, Theo thinks she is seeing a ghost, and “the frightening glare of Moll’s Hourihane’s eyes” (*An Irish Cousin*, I, 112) haunts her. One night the woman steals into Theo’s room through the secret door and tries to suffocate her with a pillow. The figure of Moll Hourihane inevitably calls to mind Jane Eyre’s madwoman, Bertha Mason: although in Somerville and Ross’s correspondence there is no mention of Bertha, the similarities between the two characters are evident. They do not speak, but at best emit some guttural beastly sounds; they are presented as more similar to animals than human beings: Moll haunts the Sarsfield’s family graveyard, where she claps her hands and beats her breast in her perpetual keening (*An Irish Cousin*, II, 46); when Jane finally sees Bertha in her own room, she depicts her as a “wild animal” that “grovelled, seemingly, on all fours,” running backwards and forwards (Brontë 2006, 338). Both can count on robust, strong bodies, and were in their youth extremely beautiful, though in a vulgar, unrefined way; the events of their tragic lives made them lose their beauty and their mind. Both Bertha and Moll have been wronged by a man they loved, whether husband or lover, who considered himself her superior: both Rochester and Dominick belong to the Protestant landed gentry, while Bertha is ‘only’ a creole heiress in Jamaica, and Moll an Irish maid; both men have been attracted and seduced by these women’s wild and fierce beauty, only to reject them when they realised they could not control them. Finally, both Bertha and Moll creep into the heroine’s bedroom with murderous intentions, (*An Irish Cousin*, II, 173-77; Brontë 2006, 326-27) and meet their ruin at the end of the novel.

At the end of *An Irish Cousin*, the truth concerning Dominick’s past comes out: in their youth, Dominick and Moll, then a servant of the household, had had an affair; when his brother Owen, the heir to the estate, had come home from America seriously ill, Moll killed him in his sleep with a pillow, in order to please Dominick and hoping that he would marry her. He, appalled by Moll’s act, nevertheless helped her to secretly snatch the body out of the house and bury Owen in the bog nearby. Being the years of the Big Famine, there were few people around: so Dominick became the master of Durrus and their secret was safe. However, Moll’s hopes were disappointed: Dominick had never intended to marry a mere servant, and soon after becoming master of the Big House made a suitable marriage with a local Protestant wealthy girl (Willy’s mother). On being turned out of the house, Moll had gone mad. Dominick’s obsession with class pride and blood purity is a recurrent theme in late nineteenth-century Big House fiction (Kreilkamp 2006, 70). The horror for what was viewed not only as stepping out of one’s social class, but also as racial miscegenation (between Protestant landlords and their Catholic underlings) is present also, for instance, in Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* (1864), where
the degeneracy of the eponymous protagonist is completed through his marriage to an Irish barmaid and his fathering of a debased son. In An Irish Cousin, the landlord’s youthful affair with an Irish servant engenders criminality and madness. "Such dark readings of the native Irish woman’s contribution to Ascendancy decay reflect a growing obsession with pure blood lines (in horses and dogs, as well as in the inhabitants of the Big House)," (Kreilkamp 2006, 70) at a time when Ascendancy power and privilege were declining.

Twenty years later, Dominick’s son Willy starts an affair with Moll’s daughter, Anstey, thus repeating his father’s path. An infuriated Dominick hopes that the arrival of Theo would distract Willy from such a degrading relationship. His desires are realised, and Willy falls in love with his cousin and abandons Anstey. However, in the final chapters Willy finds out his father’s crime, and, threatened by Moll’s husband to reveal everything—thus bringing public disgrace to the Sarsfield family—he agrees to marry Anstey and go to Australia. The day after Willy’s elopement, Dominick falls mentally ill, and Theo finds him dead in the bog where he and Moll had buried his brother. Differently from Bertha, Moll does not die in the end, but her madness gets worse. Here it is the man who wronged the madwoman, Dominick, who dies. Although shocked by the events, Theo is finally relieved and can have her happy ending with Nugent.

The cover of the first edition is worth looking at, as it suggests Gothic conventions (figure 12): Medieval-like, green letters on a black background, a twig with drops falling from it—one immediately thinks of blood drops—strike the viewer, who understands right away that this is a Gothic novel. The font evokes Celtic folklore stories, underlining the ‘Irish’ quality of the novel. Martin herself recognized the commercial strength of the choice of font and colours, even if she did not completely agree: “[t]he books have come—I was a little disappointed with the first sight of them […] Black and green are of course fashionable, but at the same time it is a trifle funereal and gloomy.” (Letters, 144)

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144 Transgressive sexual relations between the landlord and a servant, engendering an illegitimate child, Peggy Prendeville, are also present in The Big House of Inver.

145 The novel is full of comments made by Dominick on the unnaturalness of master-servant relationships. During a discussion at a dinner-party, the violence of his argument strikes all the guest: “I cannot believe that any sane person can honestly hold such absurd theories. What! Do you mean to tell me that one of my tenants, a creature whose forefathers have lived for centuries in ignorance and degradation, is my equal? […] What I maintain is that any fusion of classes […] would have the effect of debarring the upper while it entirely failed to raise the lower orders. […] It is absurd to suppose that the natural arrangement of things can be tampered with. This is a subject I feel very strongly […]” (Irish Cousin, I, 186-87)
Notwithstanding the many familiar Gothic tropes, the smart and profound portrayal of Anglo-Irish society – from the inhabitants of the Big House to the local peasants – and the vivid drawing of the characters placed the novel above the deluge of sensationalist stories that were being published. The book received popular and critical acclaim, and the two coauthors were immediately compared by reviewers to Maria Edgeworth for the “absolute faithfulness” with which they described Irish provincial society: “[t]he interior of a modern Irish squire’s house has seldom been drawn with such skill, and never since Miss Edgeworth’s time with such absolute faithfulness and want of exaggeration, as Durrus, the home of the Sarsfields.” (review of An Irish Cousin in the Standard; reported at the end of a re-edition of An Irish Cousin, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1903)
Somerville herself recognized the similarity with Edgeworth’s Big House novels, and in her autobiography she attributes the success of the book to the fact that Edgeworth “had been the last to write of Irish country life with sincerity and originality, dealing with both the upper and the lower classes, and dealing with both unconventionally.” (IM, 138) Indeed, Edgeworth’s successors as realistic chronicler of the Big House, William Carleton (1794-1869), Charles Lever (1806-72) and George Moore (1852-1933), did not convey the same ironic poignancy. In particular, Somerville comments, Lever’s stories “merely created and throned the stage Irishman,” (IM, 138) thus corroborating English stereotypes about Ireland. Lever and the others simply failed to make their characters living people.

The excited reviews by the main London magazines of the time – the Spectator, the Athenaeum, the Morning Post, among others – struck the incredulous Somerville and Martin, and strengthened their purpose to become (co)authors: “we were justified of our year of despised effort; the hunted Shockers emerged from their caves to take a place in the sun,” wrote Somerville. (IM, 139) They had striven to bring their novel to the attention the press, had mobilised their families and friends, but had somewhat prepared to be generally ignored, or worse. This attitude is understandable, being Somerville and Ross young women, used to receive little consideration for ‘their nonsense.’ Martin’s comment in a letter to Somerville on the eve of publication is representative of the two women’s defensive attitude: “Now let us collect our newspaper friends – the Saturday, the Spectator, the World, the Sunday Times, Vanity Fair (Desart) and Willie Wilde who is I think the Daily Telegraph.” (24 August 1889, Letters, 144)

Success was what they had hoped for but had not dared to expect: “[i]t is very much like a dream – that I should sit down and write about a flourishing critique of the Shocker […] but there it is, in black and white,” writes Martin. (4 September 1889, Letters, 147) An Irish Cousin, like all Somerville and Ross’s subsequent fictional works, was – as declared in the title – “an undoubtedly lifelike Irish story.” (review in the Athenaeum, 31 August 1889, no. 3227) At the end of the nineteenth century, Ireland – especially provincial Ireland – was still perceived as a distant part of the Empire. Its ways, traditions, and society were felt as exotic by the English audience. Somerville and Ross presented themselves as purveyors of this strange land, a reputation they would maintain for all their career. They depicted “the gloom of the Celtic character and the tragic possibilities that underlie it,” but managed to balance and lighten it with humorous passages and “cheerful views of the oddities of rustic society in a distant district.” (review in the Athenaeum, 31 August 1889, no. 3227) The Morning

146 Among these authors’ major Big House novels: Carleton’s The Squanders of Castle Squander (1852), Lever’s The Martins of Cro’ Martin (1854), and Moore’s A Drama in Muslin (1886). See Kreilkamp 2006, 65-69.
Post caught what was to become the heart of Somerville and Ross’s production when it remarked that “the authors understand the management of light and shade, so that tragical as are the main incidents of the book, it is frequently relieved by pages that would not be out of place in a purely humorous novel.” (review in the Morning Post, reported in Letters, 149)

**Between amateurs and professionals: the struggle for the “serious novel”**

After the success of *An Irish Cousin*, Bentley offered Somerville and Ross £100 for a three-volume novel. However, at that time the two cousins were already engaged in turning a short story they had published in the *Lady’s Pictorial* into a novel, which was to become *Naboth’s Vineyard* (Spencer Blackett, 1891), their second, one-volume novel. Although it was quite a simple, linear story, dealing only with the peasant and low-middle class, the book was another triumph with both the public (it appeared as a yellow back at 2s., and Tauchnitz reprinted it) and the critics, who reviewed it “with a respect and seriousness that almost alarmed us.” (*IM*, 211)

Having achieved another unexpected success, the two cousins now felt confident enough to devote themselves exclusively to writing: “we decided forthwith to abandon all distractions and plunge solemnly, and with single-hearted industry, into the construction of the three-volume novel desired by Messrs. Bentley.” (*IM*, 211) Unfortunately, they never actually managed to do that. This is one of the main problems with Somerville and Ross’s partnership: they had huge potential, and they saw it; and yet, for a series of reasons this chapter will try to unroot, they did not give it full expression. The fact that they wrote only five novels in almost thirty years of collaboration, but plenty of short stories and various periodical literature, is telling. They struggled to focus on writing what they called “serious literature,” but pressing family obligations, the endless social functions and charity events supported by the class to which they belonged, the managing of their respective Big Houses, constant need of ready money, and Martin’s increasingly bad health would more and more distract Somerville and Ross from their purpose. Short stories and articles were quicker to write, and required less constant application. Very little time was available to them to pursue their goals. Their letters are full of exasperated complaints about lack of time to work. A couple of extracts will suffice to give an idea:

> [t]his is torn and broken day and the week does not promise to be much better. […] Tomorrow a hideous tennis function at the Broughams – Wednesday Herbert goes – some of us will probably be dragged to the Powells. Thursday, we have a tennis party to which every bounder in the whole country is coming and on Friday we have a dinner. My whole being heaves and curdles alternatively at the prospect. To attempt anything serious or demanding steady work is just simply impossible here – and I feel sickened of even trying. We are all so tied together – what ever is done must be done by everyone
in the whole place and as the majority prefer wasting their time, that is the prevalent amusement. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 10 September 1888, *Letters*, 118)

I never had a more frenzied morning than this; the drawings to fix, gum on, write letters about, and then the drawing room to arrange for a crowd of female tea drinkers […] I am finishing in bed at 11.30 p.m., after a fiery argument. […] The entertainment was not amusing. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 15 January 1891, *Letters*, 169)

As in the description of the ‘hunt’ of the rebellious girls in *Irish Memories*, one of the problems was that Somerville and Ross belonged to large, sociable and intruding families, which had demanding claims on their women. To take part in social activities was a duty for the women of the upper class. Although they sometimes tried to take time to be alone and write, Somerville and Ross did not want to exclude themselves. They did not want to fail in what was expected from them and live as literary recluses. Most of the time, they liked the sociable life of the Big House. In order to find time to work, they travelled as often as they could afford to, so that they could be on their own and free to spend their time as they pleased.

Not only busy social schedules, but also the running of their estates took up much of their time. Martin in particular was the first to be encumbered by this task when she and her mother went back to Ross in 1888. By 1890, she had succeeded in making it comfortable again, and, with visitors coming and going continuously, as it was common for great residences of the time, it was difficult for her “to devote herself to literature, especially serious literature.” (*IM*, 211) Especially during the summer and the autumn, many relatives came for long stays at the house. Her brother Robert came often to reside at Ross with his wife Connie, an uncultivated woman who had drinking problems. Martin’s mother did not get along with her daughter-in-law, and they were often at loggerheads. Much of Martin’s time was given to making things smooth in the household. Somerville enjoyed more freedom in her youth, but her mother’s sudden death in 1895 left her mistress of Drishane, with all the honours and the duties; although she showed satisfaction at running the household and holding the family together, this accession to duty left her with less time to write.

Furthermore Martin, due to shortage of money, often did manual labour about the residence herself, and her already weak health resented from these exertions. Martin’s health had never been particularly sound: she was painfully short-sighted, suffered from neuralgia, and sometimes had to spend whole days in bed. The “vague lassitudes and neuralgia bouts” were called by Martin her “mysterious sickness,” and she was taken to see various specialists in Dublin (in the end she settled with Dr Stoker, the brother of Bram, author of *Dracula*). In 1898, the situation would get worse as she was badly hurt in a riding accident, after which she had to spend several months in bed as an invalid, and never fully recovered.
With these premises, Somerville and Ross nevertheless set out to write what they referred to as their ‘serious novel:’ *The Real Charlotte*. Its writing was intermittent, and took three years of erratic spells. As the chapter of *Irish Memories* devoted to it stresses, “*The Real Charlotte* can claim resemblance with Homer in one peculiarity at least, that of a plurality of birthplaces.” (*IM*, 229) They first began to plan it in November 1889, but then, provoked by an “intolerably vulgar” (*IM*, 214) guide-book of Connemara sent to Martin by an English friend, the two cousins decided to undertake a tour of the district and write themselves a travel book on the subject. 147 The commercial industrialisation of travel in the second half of the nineteenth century spurred the market of tourist literature, and Ireland was at the centre of many inexact and stereotypical accounts by English visitors. Somerville and Ross felt that such guides provided inaccurate and superficial impressions of their native land, and set out to correct them. Beside Connemara, in the next few years Somerville and Ross would make other significant tours aimed at the publication of travel books (Bordeaux in 1891, Wales and then Denmark in 1893, the Aaran Islands in 1895). 148 Jamison (2016, 108) points out that, although they were reluctant to interrupt their fictional work, “the numerous practical and intellectual attractions of the genre appealed to the two women:” as with humorous short stories, travel pieces provided them with a steady income and were more easily managed than novels. So, “[i]n spite of our excellent resolutions, the serious novel was again put on the shelf” (*IM*, 214) after only a few chapters.

In November 1890 Somerville and Ross took the project of *The Real Charlotte* again in their hands. From this time on, even with continuous interruptions,

...those unattractive beings, Charlotte Mullen, Roddy Lambert, the Turkey-Hen, entered like the plague of frogs into our kneading-troughs, our wash-tubs, our bedchambers. With them came Hawkins, Christopher, and others, but with less persistence. But of them all, and, I think, of all the company of more or less tangible shadows who have been fated to declare themselves by our pens, it was Francie Fitzpatrick who was our most constant companion […] We knew her best; we were fondest of her. Martin began by knowing her better than I did, but, even during the period when she sat on the shelf with her fellows, while Martin and I boiled the pot with short stories and the like […], or wrote up tours, or frankly idled, Francie was taking a hand in what we did, and her point of view was in our minds. (*IM*, 229-30)

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147 This resulted in the publication of *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart* (1893). For a detailed analysis of this text, see Jamison 2016, 105-130. Jamison observes how travelling in Connemara as both tourists and natives mirrors in many ways Somerville’s and Ross’s own ambiguous position as both Irish and English, “their already anomalous and hyphenated Anglo-Irish identity.” (110)

148 Somerville made two more significant tours after Ross’s death: in 1920 she went to Sicily (a description of which was included in *Happy Days! Essays of Sorts*, 1946), and in 1928 she visited the United States (*The States Through Irish Eyes*). These travel accounts, as well as those made with Martin, include illustrations by Somerville.
The Real Charlotte revolves around two women, the Machiavellian Charlotte Mullen and her naïve orphan cousin, Francie Fitzpatrick. Charlotte and Francie are each other’s opposites and embody two different models of femininity: Francie is nineteen, conventionally beautiful, playful, spontaneous and irresponsible; on the contrary, Charlotte is a middle-aged unmarried woman, painfully ugly, scheming and cynical. No love is lost between them. At the death of a common aunt, Charlotte cheats Francie out of her inheritance and starts her pursuit of climbing the social ladder. Francie, who has always lived with some poor relatives in a squalid Dublin neighbourhood, is forced by their disastrous economic situation to go live with Charlotte in her small town, Lysmoyle. The forced arrival of her young and pretty cousin disrupts all Charlotte’s plans. Francie attracts the attention of the small country community, and the novel follows her love relationships with three suitors: Mr. Lambert, Christopher Dysart, and Gerald Hawkins. Roddy Lambert, a middle-class land agent, is a charming man who likes to live above his means, and so is in constant need of money. Charlotte has been in love with him since her youth, and a quick hint that something had passed between them is made in the novel; after making a marriage of convenience with a passive and docile widow, Lambert exploits Charlotte’s faithful attachment to him in order to make her lend him money and do things for him, thus misleading her over his true feelings. However, Lambert falls in love with Francie, who, on her part, just likes to flirt with him. Christopher Dysart is the heir of the local Big House, and the representative artist figure in Lismoyle: sensitive but inept, he does not succeed in anything in particular, neither in his diplomatic career, nor in his attempts at poetry and painting. He falls in love, in spite of himself and his snobbish taste, with Francie’s simple and straightforward ways. The third suitor, Gerald Hawkins, is a vain and flirtatious English soldier; thanks to his good looks and his fake gallant manners, he manages to win Francie’s affection. But he does not tell her...

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149 The title of the novel was originally The Welsh Aunt, a title that positioned it as a sort of sequel to An Irish Cousin.

150 Notoriously, the character of Charlotte Mullen was based on a cousin of Somerville’s called Emily Herbert, who had cheated Somerville out of an inheritance which would have relieved her from money worries. A common aunt had left all her money to Somerville and her brother Jack (about £4000), but the will was destroyed by Emily Herbert. Somerville and Martin gaily admitted to whoever asked that Charlotte’s original was Herbert, as if finding pleasure in their ironic revenge. In different points in Somerville and Ross’s correspondence we find mention of Emily Herbert, and their tone is unforgiving, as in the account of her death: “Emily was an awful drunkard, & when she finally drank and cat-poisoned herself to death, they found her dead body in the bed with fourteen cats sitting round it!” (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 27 July 1908, Letters, 284)

151 Descriptions of Dublin were mostly supplied by Martin, as she had spent her schooldays in a gruesome, dull North Dublin neighbourhood. The description of a Dublin Sunday School in the first chapter is derived from Martin’s own memories. (Irish Memories, 102)

152 Christopher ends up taking up the new art form of photography. As Hand (2011, 111) remarks, “[t]he interest in photography displays the stunted nature of Christopher’s character; he is drawn to it […] because it is much easier than the hard work associated with either painting or writing poetry. Its accessibility and easiness reinforce his claim to a certain aristocratic languidness.”
He is already engaged; when Francie discovers his secret, Hawkins promises her to break his engagement and marry her, without having really the intention of doing so. Blinded by her passion for Hawkins, Francie rejects Christopher Dysart’s proposal. Her refusal destroys Charlotte’s plan of a marriage between her cousin and a member of the gentry, thus putting an end to her ambition to count an aristocrat among her relatives. Infuriated at her cousin’s decision, Charlotte kicks Francie out of her house. Left helpless in Dublin, and abandoned by Hawkins, Francie ends up marrying Lambert, whose wife had died in the meanwhile. At this point, Charlotte has managed to acquire a farm she had always wanted; her financial success is complete; she has also managed to involve Lambert in a business with her and, now that he is free, her hopes to marry him are higher than ever. However, at hearing of Lambert’s sudden marriage with Francie, all Charlotte’s pursuits seem empty. The ‘real’ Charlotte, who had stood lurking from the beginning, uncovering herself only occasionally, now takes over. Charlotte is here described as a wild, bloodthirsty beast:

[a] human soul, when it has broken away from its diviner part and is left to the anarchy of lower passions, is a poor and humiliating spectacle […]. […] now that she had been dealt the hardest blow that life could give her, there were a few minutes in which rage, hatred, and thwarted passion, took her in her fierce hands, and made her for the time a wild beast. When she came to herself she was standing by the chimney-piece, panting and trembling; the letter [the letter Lambert had written to inform her of his marriage with Francie] lay in pieces on the rug, torn by her teeth, and stamped here and there with the semicircle of her heel; a chair was lying on its side on the floor […]. (The Real Charlotte, 291-92)

Then she sees the photograph of Lambert she used to keep in her drawing room, and

the biting thought of how she had been hoodwinked and fooled, by a man to whom she had all her life laid down the law, drove her half mad […]. She plucked it out of its frame with her strong fingers, and thrust it hard down into the smouldering fire. […] ‘The cur, the double-dyed cur! Lying and cringing to me, and borrowing my money, and – and –’ Even to herself she could not admit that he had gullied her into believing that he would eventually marry her – ‘and sneaking after her behind my back all the time! […]’ she tried to laugh, but instead of laughter came tears as she saw herself helpless, and broken, and aimless for the rest of her life – ‘I won’t break down – I won’t break down –’ she said, grinding her teeth together with the effort to repress her sobs. She staggered blindly to the sideboard, and, unlocking it, took out a bottle of brandy. She put the bottle to her mouth and took a long gulp from it, while the tears ran down her face. (The Real Charlotte, 292)

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153 It is hinted in the novel that Charlotte had a hand in the death of Lambert’s wife: firstly, she makes Mrs. Lambert read the letters of Lambert and Francie, thus shocking her; then, when she has a heart attack, Charlotte intentionally fails to give her her pills.
Charlotte has become not only wild, but demonic. Her only aim, from now on, is revenge. Firstly, she asks Lambert back the money she had lent him, thus putting him in the condition to steal money from the estate which he manages. Then, she denounces his theft to his employer, Christopher, who feels compelled to fire him, leading him to financial and social ruin. Meanwhile, she sabotages Lambert’s marriage by arranging apparently casual meetings between Francie and her old suitor, Hawkins, thus re-kindling the passion between them. Francie, bored with her new life as a married woman, finds new vitality in her renewed romantic attachment to Hawkins, who, since she is now the property of another man, finds her irresistible. Blinded by empty passion, he wants Francie to elope with him to Australia. She, confused and incapable of taking a resolution, at first agrees, but after learning of Lambert’s ruin feels pity for him and reconsiders her decision. Hawkins insists, but she is killed in a riding accident before taking any decision. Moments before Francie’s sudden death, Charlotte reveals to Lambert to be the cause of his ruin, thus cutting all possibilities of attracting him in the future. So, in the end, Charlotte’s revenge turns back against her, and nobody wins. The ending is full of bitter irony, because Charlotte is defeated a few minutes after she has defeated Lambert and Francie.

Somerville reveals that it was Martin who first developed the character of Francie, the young co-protagonist of the novel, but then, as with everything they wrote together, it became a familiar presence for Somerville as well. Francie became such a constant presence in the minds of the two cousins for the following two years that, when they finally wrote the final scene of Francie’s death in the early summer of 1892, “it felt like killing a bird that had trusted itself to you.” (IM, 231) In a suggestive passage, Somerville records the writing of the final scene:

[w]e had sat in the cliffs, in heavenly May weather, with Poul Ghurrum, the Blue Hole, at our feet, and the great wall of Drishane Side rising sheer behind us, blazing with yellow furze blossom, just flecked here and there with the reticent silver of blackthorn. […] We and the dogs had achieved as much freedom from social and household offices as gave us the mornings, pure and wide, and unmolested. There is a place in the orchard at Drishane that is bound up with those final chapters, when we began to know that there could be but one fate for Francie. (IM, 231)

These lines give us a sense, again, of Somerville and Ross’s writing as something illicit, clandestine, furtive. At other points in her autobiography Somerville remarks that they usually managed to find time to write in the morning, the only time for an upper-class woman free from social and household offices. Also, this extract tells us of a habit of Somerville and Ross: they wrote a lot outdoors. This may seem a trifling detail, but actually speaks volumes about the life of the two: within the house, whether Drishane or Ross, they would always be interrupted, their attention would always be requested for something; within the house, time was not theirs. Only by ‘fleeing’ outside they could
find a space for themselves. Unlike the stereotypical image of the author who closes himself up in a garret and writes, Somerville and Ross produced a great deal of their work in the open air. If a man was closed in his rooms, nobody would go and disturb him; if a woman did the same, her privacy would seldom be respected. Once again, the image of the two young women hiding themselves somewhere outside the house, in full contact with nature, returns. In the account of the pursuit during the writing of An Irish Cousin, they found a safe hiding place in the kitchen garden (“fleeing instantly to the kitchen garden where they laid themselves at full length between rows of umbrageous Cabbage” “Two of a Trade,” 184); this time, The Real Charlotte was completed in the orchard. However external, these were still domestic spaces, belonging to the realm of the house, and yet outside it so that the two women could taste a bit of freedom. Working outdoors was a habit Somerville and Ross were to keep for the rest of their partnership. Later on, in Irish Memories, Somerville recalls the origin of their famous Irish R.M stories: “[i]t was among Cazin’s sand-dunes, […] that the ‘Irish R.M.’ came into existence. […] [w]e sat out on the sandy hills, roasting in the great sunshine of Northern France, and talked until we had talked Major Sinclair Yeates, R.M. and Flurry Knox into existence.” (258) Also, their novel Dan Russel the Fox was written – as usual, with various interruptions – in nature, where nobody could disturb them:

[w]hile we were at Amélie, we wrote the beginning of ‘Dan Russel the Fox,’ sitting out of the mountain side, amidst the marvellous heaths, and spurges, and flowers unknown to us, while the river […] stormed ‘in confluence’ in the valley below us, and the pink mist almond blossom was everywhere. Dan Russel progressed no further than a couple of chapters and then retired to the shelf, where he remained until the spring of 1909 found us at Portofino […] We worked there in the olive woods, in the delicious spring of North Italy […]. (IM, 305)

Somerville and Ross’s literary partnership thus debunks the conventional image of the solitary author. One may try to imagine and contrast the scenarios described by Somerville with the iconic painting of Dickens by Maclise, sitting alone at his desk, in silence, pen in hand, writing. Instead of a single male author, we find two authors, both women; instead of writing under inspiration, in silence, they talk and discuss before and after the proper writing; instead of sitting at a desk in a room, they often create their stories in unconventional, casual, outdoor settings, rambling outside the ‘garret’ of the Romantic mythology. The creative moments could not be more different. As it was the norm with Somerville and Ross, after the actual writing of The Real Charlotte was concluded, a process of intense revision started, which lasted many months, so that it was only in

154 As we have seen in chapter two, Dickens’s portrait by Daniel Maclise engraved by William Finden marked Dickens’s consecration as the middle-class author, at the same time respectable and popular. The iconography of Maclise’s portrait became the canonical way of representing writers for the next decades. (Patten 2001, 31)
February 1893 that the manuscript was sent off to Bentley. However, the offer made by the publisher, £100, did not seem adequate to the cousins, who “wrote breathing forth fire and fury, and refused.” (IM, 232) Only five years before, they had accepted in dizzy and grateful incredulity £25 for their debut novel; now their confidence had grown, and the awareness of the value of their work made them reject four times that sum. They knew that The Real Charlotte was their best work, a firm belief that would remain steady for the rest of their lives. This was the beginning of Somerville and Ross’s self-perception as professional writers, capable of producing goods – a literary text – of a certain value and who wanted to be paid accordingly. They went to London, and began a long process of negotiations with different publishing houses, during which, ironically accounts Somerville, they “saw and heard many cheerful things.” (IM, 232) The Real Charlotte was finally sold to Ward and Downey for £250, and it was published in three volumes in May 1894. The publisher promised them half of the American rights as well, which never materialised.

When The Real Charlotte came out, Somerville and Ross were in Paris, the former working as a painter in a studio, the latter writing some articles on France. However, reviews reached them quickly. And they were bad. Although the novel was universally declared clever and original, and the humorous passages of the first volume widely appreciated, its general grimness and cynicism shocked and outraged critics. It was proclaimed to be “unsympathetic, hard and harsh,” (Weekly Sun) and the characters vulgar and nasty. A review ironically advised Somerville and Ross to “call a third coadjutor, in the shape of a judicious but determined expurgator of rubbish.” (IM, 236) The point most insisted upon was the general unpleasantness of the characters, and the fact that they did not call for sympathy from the reader. One review lamented:

[t]he picture it gives of lower middle class life in Ireland is not altogether agreeable.[…] The happy go-lucky mode of life, the curious mingling of shrewdness and childishness, […] the irrepressible love for fun and frolic, are so admirably hit off by the observant and clever collaborateurs, that we feel instantly that they are drawing, for the most part, from life […]. But […], as the story and the characters develop, and the seamy side of Charlotte Mullen, Mr. Roddy Lambert, and others, is brought prominently into view, […] my pleasure […] in reading the book, gradually declined; and not even the undoubted cleverness of the writers could reconcile me to the way to which the tale is worked out. The worst side of human nature has just now a strange fascination for novelists […]. English people who read this novel will be confirmed in their mistaken idea that Ireland is a nation of barbarians, for the authors have forgotten unfortunately, that without light and

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155 Somerville and Ross’s letters to each other offer an insight into the process of revision, as it was sometimes carried out by correspondence. The sustained and elaborate process of editing and rewriting The Real Charlotte would constitute engaging material for future research.

156 “I may say that Martin and I have not wavered from the opinion that The Real Charlotte was, and remains, the best of our books.” (IM, 238)
shade there is no real art, and as their story grew under their hands the light that glimmered in vol. I went out completely, and the book winds up in unrelieved gloom.
I am sorry that it is so, for the authors have the gift of delineating character very strongly developed [...]. But what is worth while to expend such an amount of cleverness upon such a sorry crew? The next time that E. G. Somerville and Martin Ross combine to write a novel of Irish life I hope they will [...] devote their clever and graphic pens to the task of delineating men and women who are brave, generous, and noble, instead of wasting their powers upon elaborately finished pictures of the sordid-minded Charlotte Mullens and Roddy Lamberts, whose ill-spent lives need no historian. (Lady’s Pictorial, 19 May 1894)

What was so praised in An Irish Cousin, the balance of light and shade, of tragedy and humour, was felt to be lacking in The Real Charlotte, which proceeded in “unrelieved gloom.” Another review declared it one of the most disagreeable novels to read, and stated that “we can hardly imagine a book more calculated to depress and disgust [...]. The amours are mean, the people most repulsive, and the surrounding depressing.” (source unknown, reported in IM, 236) Charlotte was, predictably, the most heavily criticised character of the book. Her different versions of herself (she even has different voices according to the mask she is wearing) and her machinations disgusted the press. More importantly, her plots and her greediness were not compensated by youth and beauty. A plain spinster had rarely, if ever, been the central focus of a novel. Thackeray’s equally wicked Becky Sharp had outraged the press, but at least she remained within the role traditionally expected from evil women: the seductress, the ambitious temptress, the man-eater. Her climbing of the social ladder was facilitated by beauty, marriage, and flirt. Charlotte’s rise, instead, is carried out exclusively through her efforts and craftiness. No man helps her. “Unattractive and single in a setting where beauty and marriage are the only means for women’s material and social survival,” (Ehnenn 2008, 154) Charlotte’s independence destabilised readers. That an ugly spinster could have so great an authority (she practically runs the community of Lysmoyle) was unheard of. Charlotte fails to become a wife and a mother, the main roles prescribed to Victorian women, and instead of selflessly accepting her destiny, and settle into a quiet, uneventful life, she carefully devises and carries out an ambitious plan for her personal realisation through financial and social achievements – however mean they could be. She rejects the passive, religious life that Victorian middle-aged spinsters were supposed to be contented with. On the contrary, she is active, demoniacally active, “an agent of upward mobility for herself and downward mobility for her enemies.” (Laird 2000, 114) In her relationship with Lambert she passes from being his victim to his executioner: he has conveniently given her the illusion that sooner or

157 Charlotte is ‘chameleon like,’ as she employs different registers and accents in different circumstances. She uses Standard English or Hiberno English, or a male register when she believes it pragmatic to do so. (Hand 2011, 109) “Charlotte had many tones of voice, according with the many facets of her character, and when she wished to be playful, she affected a vigorous brogue.” (The Real Charlotte, 24)
later he will marry her, and uses his charm to make her do whatever he wants, thinking she will always be compliant; however, during the novel she turns the situation upside down. Though her bad actions are set down plainly in the novel, Charlotte is not presented entirely unsympathetically, and cannot be labelled as utterly evil. The reader is disgusted by her actions, but feels intensely her pain behind them. Indeed, the narrator makes sure that the reader gets acquainted with her deep suffering: her ugliness is continuously, almost obsessively remarked, and she is perfectly aware of her lack of attractiveness. Her outlets for her repressed sentimental life are the French novels she reads and the exaggerated affection for her cats. In a society that places such high value on women’s looks, the devaluation of her appearance is internalised by Charlotte as a reason for deep suffering and failure, and provokes a need for revenge in her:

"[i]t is hard to ask pity for Charlotte, whose many evil qualities have without pity been set down, but the seal of ignoble tragedy had been set on her life; she had not asked for love, but it had come to her, twisted to burlesque by the malign hand of fate. There is pathos as well as humiliation in the thought that such a thing as a soul can be stunted by the trivialities of personal appearance, and it is a fact not beyond the reach of sympathy that each time Charlotte stood before her glass her ugliness spoke to her of failure, and goaded her to revenge.” (The Real Charlotte, 300)

Somerville and Ross do not explicitly condemn Charlotte, but simply lay her actions and her reasons in front of the reader. The title proves of crucial importance in the reading of the novel: it immediately warns the reader to expect a drama of appearances and reality, truth and falsehood, mask and self. In my opinion, the ‘real’ can be read in two ways: on a first layer, Charlotte seems moral and good to the people around her, but in reality she is aggressive, domineering and selfish; on a second, deeper layer, the emphasis is on Charlotte’s motives behind her actions, on a ‘real’ suffering Charlotte against the ‘evil’ one. Three layers of Charlotte’s personality thus emerge: the external respectable and amiable one; the in-between evil and passionate Charlotte; and lastly, the suffering soul underneath. So, although Laird (2000, 119) and others have written that the ‘real’ Charlotte is as ugly as she physically appears,158 or ever uglier, I agree with Ehnenn (2008, 157-159) in stating that it is

158 “[…] it is in her likeness to herself – her both superficial and ‘real’ ugliness – that the horror lies.” (Laird 2000, 119). Laird offers an illuminating analysis of the uncanny in The Real Charlotte: the eponymous protagonist’s shifting personae and a series of coincidences ending in disaster contribute to unsettle the reader. Although written in a tone of skeptical realism, The Real Charlotte presents nonetheless Gothic elements: “the omniscient narrator registers skepticism towards the uncanny, […] yet tracing uncanny coincidences as carefully as if they were not coincidental.” (Laird 2000, 121) For instance, Francie’s fatal fall is foreshadowed by many other, increasingly serious falls, when first her hat, then herself fall down. The funeral of Julia Duffy, whose farm Charlotte acquires thus sending her to a workhouse, is highly reminiscent of the funeral in An Irish Cousin which horrified Theo – both being Irish country funerals, characterised by keening and violent demonstrations of grief. Laird also underlines how Charlotte’s personality contributes to make The Real Charlotte a Gothic novel under many aspects: “the novel’s psychological and causational explanation is contradicted by so many vivid passages portraying Charlotte merely as succumbing to a repressed ‘other’ side of herself[…]. The malign influence
not so easy to categorize Charlotte and thus to judge her. Charlotte is simultaneously demonic, sympathetic, and tragic. The novel asks what real morality is and who possesses it, but, in the light of everyone’s reasons, “moral evaluations are no longer so easy to make.”(159)

The lack of a happy ending for any of the characters and the absence of lofty feelings, brave actions and at least one pure love affair found no favour with the press. Francie, though basically innocent and well-meaning, was declared vulgar and insolent for her unladylike love of flirtation. The novel did not allow love to find its ideal realisation: firstly, nobody’s love is requited, as each of the characters loves someone who does not love them back; secondly, they are all distorted kinds of love: Charlotte’s love for Lambert is a possessive and controlling passion; Lambert’s feelings for Francie are blinded by physical attraction, so that he does not see that they could not be happy together; Christopher’s infatuation for Francie is an idealized love that does not correspond to how she is in reality; Hawkins’s passion for Francie is just a product of his vanity; and finally, Francie’s attraction for Hawkins is a childish romantic attachment. Only the character of Christopher Dysart found some supporters in the press, who saw in him the only gentleman in the story. He is also the

of Charlotte’s ‘many bad fairies’ at birth produces something in Charlotte more than ‘wild,’ more than ‘animal;’ she becomes ghastly, demonic.” (Laird 2000, 118-19)

159 Ehnenn (2008, 159) also notes the similarities between Charlotte and Somerville and Ross: they are all Anglo-Irish New Women, unmarried, independent, excellent in their managerial skills, struggling to assert themselves in a world of male privilege. Drawing on Lorna Reynolds’s study of women in Irish literature and legend (1983), Ehnenn intriguingly connects Charlotte to the mythological figure of the Morrigan, thus highlighting the impossibility to read Charlotte’s character through normative identity or social constructions of femininity or morality (157-160). The Morrigan is the primordial war goddess of Irish mythology, and she is characterized by continuous shapeshifting. The etymology of her name has been interpreted as ‘phantom queen’ or ‘great queen.’ (Tymoczko 1999, 143) She aids in battle through magical means, confusing and manipulating her enemies rather than by fighting with weapons; although dangerous, the Morrigan is not so easily identifiable as evil, as she is generally portrayed to be on the ‘right’ side, helping the gods of order defeat the gods of chaos. Masterful, wrathful, power-loving, willful and uninhibited, the Morrigan can be a powerful ally to those she loves, but when scorned, a ruthless enemy. The Morrigan’s fraught relationship with CúChulainn (like Charlotte’s relationship with Lambert) is due mostly to his refusal to treat her with the obedience and the reverence she wants; she attacks him three times, in the shape of a wolf, an eel and a heifer; when, in the guise of a crow she perches on his shoulder at his funeral, it is not clear whether she does so in mourning or in triumph. The Morrigan’s shapeshifting reminds of Charlotte’s constant change of mask. Irish Revival versions of the Morrigan are greatly softened, in order to maintain Victorian decorum; episodes of violence or copulation are omitted or toned down (as in the case, for example, of Augusta Gregory’s 1904 translation of The Second Battle of Mag Tuired, called Gods and Fighting Men: The Story of the Tuatha de Danann and of the Fianna of Ireland, in which the episode of the Morrigan’s copulation with the Dagda is obscured). Also, Irish Revival versions of the Morrigan generally focus on her appearances in the shape of a beautiful girl, depicting her and her transformations so that she can be perceived as being really a beautiful young woman. Ehnenn ascribes this choice to anxieties about changing notions of femininity in the era of the New Woman: “[w]hat to do with a war goddess in an era when the New Woman, the suffragist, and the invert provided all too visible modern day examples of dangerous femininity?” (161) On the contrary, Somerville and Ross’s Charlotte is a more faithful modern version of the Morrigan, as she never becomes beautiful and is not toned down.

160 Christopher idealises Francie, as he sees her as a soul to be saved and instructed. He likes to spend afternoons reading poetry to her, which she does not understand but is too polite to disappoint his enthusiasm.
only character who sees the ‘real’ Charlotte behind the façade, as he feels an instinctive distrust towards her. When Charlotte denounces Lambert’s theft to him, he is not grateful to her but only feels repugnance for her meanness and pities Lambert. Yet he achieves nothing, and does not even try to alert the others of Charlotte’s manipulative schemes; he simply lacks backbone.

Reactions from Somerville’s and Ross’s families and friends were not much better. Somerville reports that a friend of theirs objected that the novel “would give English people the idea that in all ranks of Irish life the people were vulgar, rowdy, and gave horrible parties.” (IM, 237) One of Somerville’s brothers wrote to her “in high reprobation,” saying that “such a combination of bodily and mental hideosity as Charlotte could never have existed outside of your and Martin’s diseased imaginations.” (IM, 238) That two ladies could have conceived such a grim prospect was even worse. Adelaide Somerville “summarised the general opinion,” when she affirmed that “[a]ll here loathe Charlotte” and that “Francie deserved to break her neck for her vulgarity.” (IM, 236-37)

On receiving such criticism, Somerville declares that they “laughed rather wanly.” (IM, 237) Yet a certain depression was inescapable, as she adds in the next line. Even the few positive reviews seemed to have misunderstood them. Their initial gratification at what seemed to them “the best & best-written” (letter from Martin to Somerville, 25 January 1895, Letters, 216) review they got, penned by T.P. O’Connor in The Weekly Sun, turned into indignation when they realised that O’Connor had taken them for shoneens (an Anglo-Irish term of abuse for those who aped English behaviours and attitudes).

Notwithstanding indignant reviews, the novel was quite a success with the public and scored “steadily improving sales.” (IM, 241) In January 1895, Martin went to visit some friends in Scotland, and realised for the first time that, with The Real Charlotte, Somerville and she had made “a mark that was far deeper and more impressive than had been hitherto suspected by either of us.” (IM, 241)

Martin found herself at the centre of attention: “[t]hey are all, as people, more interesting than the average, being Scotch. And they have a high opinion of Charlotte,” (Letters, 213) wrote an amazed Martin to her collaborator; “[i]t is pleasant to hear Mrs. Jackson tell how she went into an assembly of women […] and heard them raving of Charlotte.” (Letters, 213) Finding herself a literary celebrity almost overnight had its effects on the shy Martin:

I am beginning to be accustomed to having people introduced to me, and feeling that they expect me to say something clever. I never do – I am merely conversational, and feel in the highest spirits, which is the effect of the air. […] I shall not come back here again – having created an impression I shall retire on it before they begin to find me out. (Letters, 213, 217)
She also affectionately tells Somerville off for not having come with her to Scotland (she was once more away at her art studies): “[w]hy aren’t you here to take your share?” (Letters, 215) “It will be your turn next. Though Mrs. Jackson [her host] says she will not rest till she has had us here together.” (Letters, 217)

Martin was all the more amazed when a celebrated author like Andrew Lang expressed his admiration for the novel, especially for its eponymous protagonist, and “told [Martin] that Charlotte treated of quite a new phase – and seemed to think that that was its chiefest merit.” (Letters, 215) Lang had put a notice of the novel into an American magazine for which he wrote, and was eager to discuss it with Martin when they were introduced to each other at a dinner. However, in front of a man of culture such as Lang, Martin found herself at a loss, and wrote to Somerville half-jokingly:

I haven’t the face to discuss Charlotte. […] Talking to Andrew Lang has made me feel that nothing I could write could be any good – He seems to have seen the end of perfection – I will take my stand on Charlotte I think and learn to make my own clothes – and so subside noiselessly into middle age. (Letters, 209, 210)

During her stay in Scotland, Martin and Lang developed a friendly relationship. She soon re-acquired her confidence, and they met several times, went sightseeing, and visited the offices of Blackwood’s Magazine, from which Martin was trying to get a review (even during a leisure stay, she could not forget her role as promoter of the duo).

After their respective stays in Scotland and Paris, Martin and Somerville reunited in London in February 1895. They immediately decided to write another novel, a second “ferocious narrative,” (IM, 252) this time focused on the contrast between the Anglo-Irish and the English. It was settled that the new novel should appear in weekly instalments in the Badminton Magazine, a choice that did not fit Somerville and Ross’s writing, as publication in instalments involved a steady rate of production, which was not compatible with their lives. Moreover, the novel resented from the strict limitations and the conventions of a serial publication.161 The Silver Fox was written in a hurry, among the usual interruptions, and was finished in 1896. As soon as the serial publication was over, it was sold to Lawrence and Bullen, and appeared in book form in October 1897.

By the time they had started to write The Silver Fox, Somerville and Ross aimed at making a living for themselves out of literature. To this purpose, they decided to avail themselves “of all of authorship’s new institutional structures:” (London 1999, 110) they were among the first women to join Besant’s Society of Authors, and among the first writers to hire a literary agent. After the success

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161 “He [the publisher] said that as we purpose to run the story serially we ought to arrange it to be no more than between 70 & 72,000 words, to be equally divided into 12 parts, not necessarily chapters, & to arrange a curtain for each part.” (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 25 April 1897, Letters, 243)
of The Real Charlotte, Andrew Lang had advised Martin to hire an agent to help their career. He suggested A.P. Watt (who was also Besant’s agent) and “a man for people whose position was assured.” (letter from Martin to Edith, 29 January 1895, Letters, 220) After some consideration, in 1897 Somerville and Ross instead chose James B. Pinker, who was, along with Watt, one of the leading agents of the time. The decision of hiring an agent points to Somerville and Ross’s self-perception as professional authors. The two girls writing a shilling shocker hiding in the kitchen garden had turned into professional women writers. Now, they “had a taskmaster, a little man of iron determination, a Literary Agent (which is the modern equivalent for an Egyptian taskmaster) […].” (Somerville, Happy Days 1946, 9). The choice of hiring Pinker was significant as well. Gillies (2007) takes Somerville and Ross as a case study to investigate Pinker’s professional relationship with his clients. He was well-known for choosing to represent young writers and female authors. If Watt was the man for already established writers, for those “whose position was assured,” Pinker made himself a name for his championing of new names in literature and of women.\footnote{On Pinker’s client list we can find, among others, Conrad, James, Wells, Bennet, Katherine Mansfield, Alice Williamson, Rebecca West, Dorothy Richardson, George Egerton, and D.H. Lawrence.} His attitude towards women’s suffrage was something that Somerville and Ross appreciated and used to discuss with him. (Gillies 2007, 93) Jamison (2016, 83) stresses that Pinker thus distinguished himself from the model of agenting established by Watt in the 1870s by pursuing a completely different kind of client. Moreover, differently from Watt, who acted as an agent for both authors and publishers, Pinker worked only for authors. In this way, he made himself a name for defending authors’ rights against the snares of the publishing trade. (Gillies 2007, 90-93) Pinker managed to secure for Somerville and Ross some of their most lucrative publishing deals. Before picking him, Somerville and Ross had largely relied on their own circle of acquaintances to promote their work, and they had often begged male members of their families to intervene with publishing issues on their behalf. This took up a lot of their time. Although they often met with success, Jamison (2016, 83) underlines that they also fell foul of rogue middlemen, as well as editors and publishers who were tardy with their payments. In 1890, Somerville and Ross had sold all the rights of Naboth’s Vineyard for £20 to a middleman who sold it on a profit to Spencer Blackett. In 1893, the publishers Griffith and Farran had produced a cheap paperback edition of the novel to which Somerville and Ross could make no claim. Somerville’s letters to her brother Cameron, reported by Jamison (2016, 85-87), provide us with many examples of problems connected with poor marketing of their works, underpayments and delayed payments. It is not surprising that, when they finally hired Pinker, one of the first tasks they assigned him was to recover a debt owed by a magazine.
As a matter of fact, money was an increasingly pressing issue. Need of cash had always been a major preoccupation in the lives of Somerville and Ross, as their letters at the time of the writing of *The Real Charlotte* clearly show:

the sooner you can come, without seeming unkind to your family, the better. I must make money – so must you. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 18 September 1890, *Letters*, 164)

I am also very poor, only for the Art Journal – as yet unpaid – I should be bankrupt. [...] [*The Real Charlotte*] is our best chance and you will honestly tell me if you are able to work as we ought to work. Not if you are willing, I know you are that, but genuinely able? [...] I would rather die in the work house than kill you by making you work when you are not fit for it. The only thing that occurs to me is that if you don’t work with me you will be toiling about the vile house and I don’t know which is worse for you. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 29 September 1890, *Letters*, 165)

By the end of the 1890s, Somerville and Ross were in their mid-30s, were not married, and had their big houses to run. The desire of the two women for financial independence was stronger than ever. Glimpsing at the possibility of achieving it, they did not lose any opportunity to try and get it:

you must come back to Drishane or else meet me in a desert place as soon as possible [...]. Some other Irish Devil who can hunt and write will rise up & knock the wind out of our sails, & we can’t afford to be jockeyed like that – *The Silver Fox* money will make us fairly independent. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 25 April 1897, *Letters*, 244)

One can feel the urgency in this passage. Somerville exhorts her literary partner to set to work (the desire for ‘a desert place’ expresses, once again, the cry for a ‘room of their own’ to write without being interrupted), before someone ‘stole’ their style – which would actually occur when in 1913 two Irish men published a heavily plagiarised version of their R.M. stories.

This chapter argues that this turn in Somerville and Ross’s career – from amateurs to professionals – might be what, ironically, ‘limited’ their subsequent literary output. The fact is that, after *The Real Charlotte*, the duo’s production took a very precise turn. Despite their wish to keep writing what they called ‘serious’ literature, their agent, their editors, their publishers and their families all encouraged them to write instead humorous hunting stories set in the Irish countryside, as they sold well, were quicker to write, and were a unique trait of their work:

[t]hey then all – including the little Pinker – swore we had got hold of a very good thing in this serio-comic hunting business – ‘To use literary slang,’ said Pinker, ‘this is your own stuff & no one else does anything like it –’ [...] ‘No one on earth could write incessantly about hunting & keep it amusing & interesting [...]’ (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 25 April 1897, *Letters*, 243)

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As seen above, Martin and Somerville recognised *The Real Charlotte* as their best work. Yet its writing had been a struggle and a source of anxiety for many years; Martin referred to it as “an awful business.” Also, they had been puzzled by its mixed reception, and hurt at the harsh criticism. Lewis (1989) suggests that “it is almost as if they shrugged their shoulders and moved away into the safer territory of funny short stories.” (264) This conclusion, however, seems dismissive. Somerville and Ross did not simply ‘shrug their shoulders:’ reading their correspondence and Somerville’s autobiography, their frustrated aspiration to write ‘serious literature’ repeatedly comes to the surface. However, circumstances led them to temporise, to do what was easier and required less effort, and they ended up writing what was requested of them and not what they really wished to write.

From a literary point of view, this did not affect their production positively. *The Silver Fox* started from a good basis, but somehow did not fully develop. After it, they did not embark upon the writing of any other novel for more than a decade. Their next and last joint novel, *Dan Russel the Fox. An Episode in the life of Miss Rowan*, appeared only in 1911, and in reading it one has the feeling that something is missing; the novel somewhat betrays lack of concentration, and basically results, as the subtitle recites, “an episode.” The reason for the long silence between *The Silver Fox* and *Dan Russel the Fox* is that, just after the publication of the former, Somerville and Ross had devoted themselves to the production of the short stories that were to give them money and long-lasting fame, *Some Experiences of An Irish R.M.* They followed the example of Martin’s brother Robert, who had published with some success a few hunting stories some time before. (Cahalan 1999, 69) The twelve R.M. stories were published monthly in London’s *Badminton Magazine*, and their writing, coinciding

163 The presence of the noun ‘fox’ in both titles is not a coincidence. Like the comic hunting stories, they present several scenes of fox-hunting and horse-riding, two features much appreciated by the coeval public of Somerville and Ross’s. To put ‘fox’ in the titles was probably a marketing strategy to reassure readers that the novels had the same qualities of the short stories. Also *An Irish Cousin* has some scenes of fox-hunting (one very long), on which Somerville and Ross were keen, but they did not need to advertise them then. When fox-hunting scenes became their hallmark, they became somewhat bound to this particular aspect and had to emphasise it.

164 The stories first appeared in the *Badminton Magazine*, and its publishers, Longmans and Green, immediately encouraged book publication of the stories and the sequels, resulting in a total of three volumes (1899, 1908, 1915). The closest earlier Irish analogue to the Irish R.M. was W.H. Maxwell’s *Wild Sports of the West* (1832). The first story of the R.M. series, entitled “Great Uncle McCarthy” and published in 1898, starts when Major Sinclair Yeates, an Anglo-Irish man, is sent from England to remote southwestern rural Ireland as a resident magistrate; there he and his wife Philippa meet a list of unforgettable Irish characters, in particular Flurry Knox, a local squire whose main aim in life is horse dealing and fox hunting, his grandmother Mrs. Knox, and Mrs. Cadogan, the ever-dramatic cook. The adventures of the Resident Magistrate became so famous that copies of the books were distributed to soldiers during WWI to cheer them up. The stories also became well-known to many people through the British Channel 4/UTV/RTE television series based on the books, shot in the early 1980s. Since they were by far Somerville and Ross’s most popular works, the R.M. stories have triggered a wide range of critical responses. A very good discussion has been provided by Cahalan (1999, 65-104), who explores how the stories interrelated with the cultural world of their time, as reflected in their reception history. Crucially, Cahalan also deals with the persistent misrepresentations of the R.M. stories, which have classified them as ‘stage-Irish’ tales, misunderstanding and marginalising Somerville and Ross’s fiction.
with Martin’s hunting accident in the autumn of 1898, was “a nightmare effort.” (IM, 262) Once more, to respect the strict publication times of serialisation cost much energy to the two cousins, who, by the end of it, were mentally exhausted: “[l]ooking back at the writing of them, each one, as we finished it, seemed to be the last possible effort of exhausted nature. […] By the time the last bundle had been dispatched Martin and I had arrived at a stage when we regarded an ink-bottle as a mad dog does a bucket of water.” (IM, 262) The invention of the R.M. rescued them financially, giving them a steady stream of income, also thanks to continuous re-editions and its sequels (Some Further Experiences of the Irish R.M., 1908, and In Mr. Knox’s Country, 1915). Somerville admitted to her brother Cameron that the stories were “such good business that we can’t afford to fall out with them” and that “only that we both want money so badly we would chuck them for the present.” (qtd. in Jamison 2016, 102) Pinker had a key role in pushing Somerville and Ross towards writing comic hunting stories, and encouraged them to make such stories their hallmark: “I asked his advice about the next book. He still says that a short story volume would do just as well as anything else. […] We could take characters out of Dan Russel or anything else.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 25 October 1911, Letters, 292) In reply to Somerville and Ross’s request to look for publishers for a more serious line of work – potentially a new novel – Pinker wrote: “I think your happiest work is in this semi-sporting vein, and, moreover, there is, so far as I know, no one who can touch you […] I should say from all points of view, that is the work to do.” (qtd. in Jamison, 102). The appetite of the public for the humorous stories of Irish life and fox-hunting was great, and continued well into the twentieth century. Jamison illustrates how Somerville and Ross were bombarded with more and more frequent requests for “Irish humour;” (103) their “thoroughbred Irish shorthand” was “worth millions in the English market.” (Lewis 2005, 79-80) The “dirty Irish realism” (Lewis 1989, 25) of The Real Charlotte had not sold as much.

This new direction in their literary production, therefore, gave the cousins all sorts of benefits. Yet there was the other side of the coin to consider: it also turned into a hindrance to their literary ambitions. For years, the two women were so absorbed in the writing of the successful R.M. stories that they neglected what to them was ‘serious literature.’ To write other ‘serious’ novels would remain an unfulfilled, though frequently expressed, desire for both cousins, as their letters testify. Moreover, when it came to an overall evaluation of their professionalism, their reputation as humorous writers

165 Despite the general striking success, there were some harsh reviews that claimed that the Irish R.M. stories gave a “depressingly squalid and hopeless” picture of Irish life, and lamented the lack of “romance, seriousness, or tenderness.” (IM, 291). The stories were deemed “unfeminine” and “devoid of any sentiment or refinement.” (IM, 291) Such criticism was frequent for Somerville and Ross’s works. For a discussion of misogyny in critical responses to Somerville and Ross’s comic stories, see Cahalan 1999, 71-104.
somewhat demeaned them. The debasing of Somerville and Ross’s professional and artistic status is well exemplified by Jamison (2016, 92-104) in her account of the two cousins’ legal allegations of plagiarism against the authors of a collection of Irish comic short stories, *By the Brown Bog*, written clearly after the model of Somerville and Ross’s R.M. tales. Jamison shows how Somerville and Ross found little support in the matter, even by their agent, and eventually had to give up their claims. Interestingly, the language used by Pinker, by their publishers and by those around them suggests that Owen Roe and Honor Urse, the authors of *By the Brown Bog*, had simply written within the same ‘class’ of writing, thus denying Somerville and Ross’s tales any original and artistic quality. Jamison concludes that while Somerville and Ross

wholeheartedly believed in the personal and professional value of their collaboration, public, legal and critical thinking on joint authorship, women writers and conceptions of high art in the late nineteenth century variously worked against the two authors’ literary ambitions and, repeatedly, influenced the direction that those ambitions would take. (Jamison 2016, 103)

Many of Somerville and Ross’s contemporaries and subsequent critics denied them the status of professional authors worthy of serious consideration. Nationalist commentators such as Ernest Boyd, author of the canon-forming book *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance*, gave them only backhanded notice, praising *The Real Charlotte* but lamenting the “subsequent squandering of the authors’ great talent upon the trivialities of a superficial realism.” (1922, 90) Such disregard, in the light of the present research, can be ascribed to two main factors: firstly, to the comic tone of their short fiction for which they became largely popular; secondly, to the fact that they wrote in collaboration. Significantly, in a not-so-strange coincidence, Somerville and Ross’s “own stuff,” as Pinker shaped it, was the type of stuff – satire, fun, humour – at which collaboration was seen to excel. This feeds back into the discourses that delegitimise coauthorship as both a professional and an artistic practice. Furthermore, Jamison (2016, 90) aptly comments that women “appear to be doubly

166 Lady Gregory’s and Yeats’s ambiguous attitude towards Somerville and Ross’s R.M. stories, for instance, is significant: in Gregory’s last letter to Martin, written in July 1915, Gregory expresses her and Yeats’s “uninterrupted enjoyment” of the final instalment of *In Mr. Knox’s Country*, praising the cousins for their “laughter-calling-gift.” She writes that the stories “help heavy hearts to put by their troubles for a while” in war times such as theirs (qtd. in Jamison 2016, 89) Both Lady Gregory and Yeats considered the R.M. stories as lacking serious value, and dismissed them as just entertainment. In a literary discussion at Coole Park, Yeats urged Martin to go back to the writing of serious novels: “[h]e thinks we have the love of sincerity which makes great novelists and that we should write a big novel without delay, and if we did there would be no holding it. But he doesn’t approve of humour for humour’s sake.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 8 August 1901, *Letters*, 252) Martin defended the value of humour, and wrote of herself: “here Miss Martin said beautiful things about humour being a high art.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 8 August 1901, *Letters*, 252) Yet, despite fiercely defending their humorous fiction, Somerville and Ross themselves wished to go back to the writing of serious novels, an activity they found increasingly difficult to reconcile with their daily lives.
167 See Besant’s and Matthew’s declarations on the value of the works produced in collaboration discussed in infra, chapter two.
damned in this respect by virtue of their gender and, within this aesthetic hierarchy which removes collaborative work from the realms of ‘great art,’ female collaborators are further demoted amid their male counterparts.”

With those around them advising them to keep writing humorous pieces and after Martin’s riding accident of 1898, it was simply easier to go on that way. After the accident, Martin’s already weak health never fully recovered, and she could write only desultorily. For the following years “it was impossible for her to undertake any work that would demand steady application, and it was out of the question to bind ourselves to any date for anything.” (IM, 294) The stories were quick, easier, lighter. The two women started to spend long periods in health spas, often in France, also because Somerville was beginning to suffer from the rheumatism that eventually crippled her. As a result of the injury caused by her horse rolling over her (or so her doctor thought), a tumour formed at the back of Martin’s brain. When she died on 21 December 1915, they had not – despite their repeated wishes – written any other novel.

In the last chapter of Irish Memories, Somerville went back once again to the frustrated desire of writing ‘serious novels’:

[to return to our work, which for us, at all events, if for no one else, was serious. […] I suppose it was the result of old habit, and of the return of the hounds, but, for whatever reason, during the years that followed the appearance of ‘Dan Russel the Fox,’ Martin and I put aside the notions we had been dwelling upon in connection with ‘a serious novel,’ and took to writing ‘R.M.’ stories again. (IM, 325, 327)

A sentence like “our work, which for us, at all events, if for no one else, was serious” in an autobiography written in a light and humorous tone is remarkable. This passage betrays a certain, not-even-too-veiled indignation on Somerville’s part towards the treatment their literary work had received. Her apparently good-humoured resignation tastes more like bitterness. But Somerville’s

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168 “One of the pummels of the saddle had bruised her spine, and the shock to a system so highly-strung as hers was what might be expected. […] The effects of the hunting accident, and the strain of writing, too soon undertaken, were […] beginning to come to their own. Neuralgia, exhaustion, backaches, and all the indescribable miseries of neurasthenia held her in thrall. […] We wrote, desultory, when she felt equal to it, and I worked [in a Paris studio].” (IM, 260-63) Martin’s riding accident has been mentioned by biographers and critics as a postscript to Francie Fitzgerald’s fatal fall from horse in The Real Charlotte, underlining the disquieting coincidence.

169 Somerville’s rheumatism in her right leg that grew worse and worse as she got older probably developed as a consequence of the many hours spent on horseback riding sidesaddle (as the repressive Victorian decorum code prescribed), with her right leg swung across to the same side of the saddle as her left, as can be seen in the photographs in Lewes 1989.

170 In 1903, Somerville had followed her brother Aylmer in the mastership of the West Carbery Hunt. She was the first Irish woman to be master of foxhounds. This role took up much of Somerville’s time, and added to the already numerous daily occupations she had as mistress of Drishane House.
resentment is not only towards others: not having written more novels with Martin probably remained the major regret of her life.  

London (1999, 92) observes that Somerville and Ross “made themselves authors by writing together.” Except for the Findlater sisters, who became collaborators after establishing themselves as single authors, London points out a similarity in the cases of many women writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; she notices that many women towards the turn of the century became authors thanks to their literary partnerships: “under the guise of collaboration’s […] amateurism, a number of women were able to slip into a professional position.” (London 1999, 92)

Indeed Somerville and Ross, like other women collaborators, did not set out to write professionally when they took up the idea of collaborating: they started their shared activity almost jokingly. For instance, the Gerard sisters narrated to their biographer, Helen Black, to have begun their first novel because they were bored by Hungarian country life. In 1877, the twenty-two-year-old Dorothea was living with her elder sister Emily and her husband in a small town in Hungary; if we are to believe the biography by Black, they started to write together out of the necessity of having “something to do.”

[i]t was not until 1877, that, being consigned to the deadly monotony of a little Hungarian country town, where the landscape was a desert and the society nil, the idea of writing a novel as ‘something to do’ was suddenly and almost without premeditation born in upon them. […] Up to that time there certainly was in neither sister ‘a deep poetic voice,’ anxious to utter anything in particular. They simply wanted an occupation. (Black 1896, 155)

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171 She tried to make up for this after Martin’s death, writing some novels worthy of attention such as Mount Music (1919) and The Big House of Inver (1925), in both cases drawing on the correspondence she had had with Martin before her death. Somerville’s post-Martin novels would be fascinating material for further research, as they are largely understudied (a good analysis so far has been made by Robinson 1980).

172 When her brother Robert died in 1905, Martin was asked to write an account of him for a memoir a group of his friends was preparing. She had a meeting with one of the men in charge of the project; Martin was embittered and disappointed by the way she was treated: “[h]e said ‘about twelve columns of The Times – but you write all you like, and we can select what is wanted’ – I at once said that I was too busy to write stuff that might not be wanted, and he seemed quite surprised – I don’t think he at all realises the position, or that I am a professional writer. I shall not put you in a passion by telling more of his recommendations and advice.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 10 July 1906, Letters, 278)
From this account, the practice of collaboration emerges as a form of private entertainment, a
distraction from the lack of any other diversion, something to contrast idleness. Black continues:
“With the beautiful audacity of youthful inexperience […] they plunged head foremost into the
gigantic task of a three-volume novel, at first merely by way of amusement, without thought of
publication.” (156) According to Black, the sisters began their first novel without any serious literary
intent, certainly without the ambition of becoming professional authors. Their declarations are
strikingly similar to those by Somerville and Ross, and their attitude is different from the one with
which Besant and Rice set out on their collaboration. The difference, however, is easily explained:
since Victorian respectability required that women should be modest, it would have been too bold to
declare that they had ambitions of any sort. It was easier to say that their literary beginnings were a
game, a simple, unpretentious pastime. The amateur quality of the Gerard sisters’ literary experiment
is highlighted by the fact that they kept it secret, even from the other members of their family, until
it was completed. It was only after showing the novel to one of their brothers and receiving his
encouragement that they first seriously thought of publishing it.

In the course of their career, Somerville and Ross repeatedly described their literary partnership as
both work and play, “both arduous business and personal self-fulfillment” (London 1999, 98):
“writing together is […] one of the greatest pleasures I have. To write with you doubles the triumph
and the enjoyment, having first halved the trouble and anxiety,” declares Martin to Somerville at the
eve of An Irish Cousin’s publication. (IM, 134) However, very soon, they dreamt of counting
themselves among professional authors. The struggle of their letter-writing to critics and booksellers
to push their book, and of pestering their family members to do the same, is not what a simple amateur
would do; when they finished their debut novel, they had already matured professional ambitions.
However, differently from other cases of women coauthors like the Gerard sisters, the collaboration
of the two Irish cousins survived the transition from amateurs to professionals. Neither Somerville
nor Ross, even after they had acquired a large readership, ever expressed the wish to enjoy fame on
her own and went on to write and publish jointly. Just after the appearance on the market of An Irish
Cousin, Martin reflected on the peculiar circumstances of its writing and on the future of their
partnership, encouraging Somerville to write with her again for both professional and personal
reasons: “you shall write another story with me or without me. It would be too bad to let go such an
opening as we now have [Bentley’s proposal for a three-volume novel], and I am not man enough for
a story by myself.” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 6 September 1889, Letters, 153) From the

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173 Jamison (2016, 69) comments this passage by noting that “having entered the literary marketplace under male
pseudonyms, Ross playfully situates their female doubling up as a means of equaling masculine strength in the literary
marketplace, but she also subtly invokes the felt potency of her and Somerville’s personal and intellectual bond.”
moment they started to collaborate, the two cousins only produced coauthored fiction: their popularity came *entirely* from being part of the duo ‘Somerville and Ross.’ In his coauthorship-as-marriage metaphor, Brander Matthews divides authors who collaborate into monogamists and polygamists. (Matthews 1891, 23) To exploit Matthew’s metaphor, then, Somerville and Ross can be considered literary monogamists, as they never collaborated with anyone else. The fact that they never married, and that their friendship-partnership declaredly remained the major relationship they experienced in their lives, has contributed to the halo of mystery and weird fascination that still surrounds their collaboration.

After the Irish R.M. stories, Somerville and Ross’s names became a trademark, and they accomplished what in business is the ultimate professional achievement: brand-name recognition. The “Ireland of Somerville and Ross” achieved “the status of a minor culture industry.” (London 1999, 92) As is well known, after Martin’s death, Somerville went on for another thirty-four years to publish fiction under their double signature. The name ‘Martin Ross’ is still present in every single piece written after 1915 (even *Irish Memories*). Sixteen books appeared with their trademark signature before 1915, and another fourteen came out after this date – almost the same number. In “Two of a Trade,” Somerville gave voice to her unwillingness to give up the joint names: “[b]ut our signature is dual, as it has ever been, and I recognize no reason why I should change it.” (185) At the beginning of *The Big House of Inver* in an Author’s note Somerville justified her choice thus:

> An established firm does not change its style and title when, for any reason, one of its partners may be compelled to leave it.
> The partner who shared all things with me has left me, but the Firm has not yet put up the shutters, and I feel I am justified in permitting myself the pleasure of still linking the name of Martin Ross with that of
>  
> E.G. SOMERVILLE
>

Somerville refers to her and Ross’s literary partnership as “the Firm,” as Besant had done before her: they both use the vocabulary of the commercial field, which well conveys the professional and financial aim of their partnerships, beside the artistic one. Besant too, on one occasion, had deployed the dual signature after Rice’s death. When he published his first solo novel after his partner’s death, his publishers advertised it as a ‘Besant & Rice’ work. Only after being reassured that Besant’s books would be successful anyway, they dropped Rice’s name. (Eliot 1987, 27-30)

Differently from Besant’s case, Somerville and her publishers were convinced that the trademark signature was an essential factor for the success of the books she continued to write, as their

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174 See the Preface of *RMM* 1887, x. Besant too wrote ‘Firm’ with capital F.
partnership had become a source of endless fascination. However, Somerville did not limit herself to the use of her dead partner’s name: taking coauthorship beyond the limits of plausibility, she repeatedly claimed that Martin’s death had not interrupted their collaboration. She argued that their friendship and literary partnership were going on as before, as her partner continued to communicate with her from the other side. She explained that their writing method only had had to be modified (“Two of a Trade,” 185) and started automatic writing practices, referring to them as ‘writing with Martin.’

It is difficult to establish how much of this can be attributed to Somerville’s eye for business and how much, instead, to a genuine belief that her partnership had not ended. She kept reporting various messages by Martin from the afterlife, and put it as a condition that the honorary degree from Trinity College Dublin should be awarded to her deceased partner as well. These extravagancies did not help Somerville and Ross’s already underrated partnership, which came to be seen as even less worthy of serious study. London (1999, 116-117) points out that “these theatrical gestures opened the collaboration to ridicule […], casting doubts on the partnership’s earlier professionalism and ensuring its lasting reputation as a cultural curiosity.” So much was collaboration a defining characteristic of her public and private image, that Somerville ultimately risked her professional reputation over it.

Decollaborating collaborators

To me then Andrew Lang with a sort of offhand fling – ‘I suppose you’re the one who did the writing – ’ I explained with some care that it was not so – He said he didn’t know how any two people could equally evolve characters etc. – that he had tried, and it was always he or the other that did it all – I said I didn’t know how we managed, but anyhow that I knew little of bookmaking as a science. He said I must know a good deal – On which I had nothing to say – and talked of other things. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 16 January 1895, Letters, 209)

On their first meeting during Martin’s stay in Scotland, Andrew Lang tried to make her admit that she was “the one who did the writing.” Lang had peacefully assumed that there was one ‘main’ author in Somerville and Ross’s collaboration, or at least that the tasks of authorship were clearly split between them. He was speaking from his own experience: by saying that “he had tried and it was always he or the other that did it all,” Lang classified his collaborative experiments as failures. He had also previously declared that “in most collaborations one man did all the work while the other

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175 The present work does not deal with Somerville’s post-Martin automatic writing, as this thorny issue has already received a lot of attention. See Collis 1968, 177; London 1999, 5, 116-117; and Jamison 2016, 131-165.

176 Lang engaged in occasional collaborations with many popular writers of the period, producing parodies (e.g. *He*, 1887, with Walter H. Pollock, a parody of *She* by H. Rider Haggard), adventure novels (e.g. *The World’s Desire*, 1890, with H. Rider Haggard, see infra chapter four) and sensation novels (e.g. *Parson Kelly*, 1899, with A.E.W. Mason).
man looked on.” (Matthews 1891, 5) He expected Somerville and Ross’s partnership to be no different. Taking for granted that their coauthorship (actually, that any coauthorship) was a façade, he tried to make Martin privately confess the truth. When she answered that they actually did things together, Lang – still half in disbelief – asked for an explanation, a revelation of the mysterious method. To Martin’s reply that she was not able to explain their method (“I said I didn’t know how we managed”), he provocatively remarked that she “must know a good deal.” Lang admired Somerville and Ross’s work, but he could not understand their collaboration; he saw the intertwining of two different hands in one single text as a mystery to be solved.

He was not the only one. Somerville and Ross’s partnership led during and after their lifetime to incessant interrogations as to the ‘mystery’ of it. Pepinster Greene (2016, 198) observes that their collaboration has remained “cloaked in mystery” up to our days. Indeed, these two women’s literary partnership has been referred to in every critical study as something mysterious, hard to explain, confusing. At the end of her study of the ‘uncanny’ in Somerville and Ross’s novels, Laird (2000, 125) notes that “[t]he fact of their collaboration itself counted among the more uncanny of their stories.” Laird remarks that the various ‘mysteries’ regarding Somerville and Ross – their sexuality, their spiritualist post-mortem intercourse, and their writing process – have become oddly linked to one another in biographers’ and critics’ accounts, and remain points open to discussion. “Like the first novel Somerville and Ross wrote,” goes on Laird, “these three inextricably intertwined features of their relationship were (and remain to this day) ghoulish ‘shockers.’” (Laird 2000, 126) She asserts that commentators on Somerville and Ross usually attempt to explain “both Somerville and Ross’s ability to write together and Somerville’s belief that they remained in communication beyond the grave by attributing these things to the intense love the writers had for each other.” (Laird 2000, 126)

Similarly, Pepinster Greene (2016, 198) laments that ‘the ‘mystery’ of the writing process has been fused with the commentators’ inability to understand the exact nature of the women’s relationship, also characterised as mysterious and scandalous, and she attempts to “demystify the writing collaboration, not by examining the personal relationship between the two women, but by grounding [her] argument on collaborative writing theory.” (Pepinster Greene 2016, 199) She declares that her focus is solely Somerville and Ross’s “writing process or method.” (Pepinster Greene 2016, 200)

However interesting Pepinster Greene’s approach, from the perspective of the present study it is impossible to understand Somerville and Ross’s collaborative writing method without taking into consideration their personal relationship. Their extremely close friendship formed the bedrock of their

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177 See also Collis 1968, 64-65; Cronin 1982, 21-23; Lewis 2005, 73-74, 108.
178 Pepinster Greene is referring to the rhetoric and composition studies by Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1990).
coauthorship: the latter sprang from the former. It is pointless to study one without considering the other. I argue that without the private emotional and intellectual bond, Somerville and Ross’s writing method would not have worked. It would not have even existed. In this light their writing process does not appear mysterious anymore.

The problem with the study of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration is that Andrew Lang and his many successors insisted on seeing their coauthored texts from the same perspective one would adopt when looking at a single-authored work. York (2006, 299-300) aptly notes that commentators usually set out to “decollaborate” coauthors, that is, to identify who wrote what and who is the better writer of the two. Collaboration, indeed, was associated with either a clear-cut, almost industrial division of tasks, or with the dominance of one of the partners over the other. The latter was a solution to achieve textual cohesion openly adopted by some popular Victorian collaborators such as Walter Besant and James Rice. Famously, in Besant and Rice’s case, it was Besant who “did the writing.” People assumed that for Somerville and Ross it was the same, and one or the other had necessarily to be the ‘true’ writer. After the success of *An Irish Cousin*, a relative of Somerville and Ross declared that she “found it impossible to believe in the jointness of the authorship, though she admitted her inability to discern the joints in the writing.” *(IM, 133-34)* This lady further commented:

> [b]ut though I think the book a success, and cannot pick out the fastenings of the two hands, I yet think the next novel ought to be by *one* of them. I wonder by which! I say this because I thought the conception and carrying out of ‘Willy’ much the best part of the character drawing of the whole book. It had the real thing in it. If Willy, and the poor people’s talk, were by one hand, that hand is the better of the two, say I! *(IM, 134)*

The speaker here considered collaboration, successful as it might be, as a stepping stone: now that the authors had gained confidence, they could – or better, “should” – go on independently. Of course, since the lady thought of coauthorship as a division of tasks, the most probable to succeed would be the one who managed certain parts of the novel (the character of Willy and the “poor people’s talk”). It seemed pointless that the authors should continue writing together, if they could do it alone. Not only pointless, but almost “psychologically unnatural,” as if the coauthors were “breaking the laws of authorship,” as Karell writes *(2008, 36).*

A few years later, Somerville reported another telling conversation with a woman she met at a tea party:

> [l]ater on in the conversation, which lasted, most enjoyably, for half an hour, ‘Are you the Miss Somerville who writes book with Miss Martin? Now! To think I should have been talking to you all

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179 “A collaborative relationship that consciously disperses power and authority appears not only unusual but psychologically unnatural.” *(Karell 2008, 36)*
this time! And is it you that do the story and Miss Martin the words?’ (etc. etc., for some time). ‘And which of you holds the pen?’ (To this branch of the examination much weight was attached, and it continued for some time.) (Letter from Edith to Martin, fragment, winter 1894, reported in IM, 132-33)

Not only the reading public, but also people in the publishing trade were curious to find out ‘who did what.’ In 1897, the publisher Mr. Bullen (of Lawrence and Bullen) and the sub-editor of the Badminton Magazine both attacked me [Somerville] to know which of us wrote which parts – by chapters or how – the usual old thing. – I assured them that we did it all together – ‘Well’ says H.P.180 ‘I have formed a theory, comparing these stories, & I think the person of these sentences” here he whirled to the G.F.181 ‘wrote these’ and here to the 19th Cent. Mag. I was very arch and told him he was quite wrong, as they also were joint stock […]. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 25 April 1897, Letters, 243)

Not to mention that Somerville’s and Ross’s mothers were each “comfortably aware that her own daughter had done all the work.” (IM, 208)

Such approaches to collaboration – the mechanical division of labour and the predominance of one partner over the other – were fiercely rejected by Somerville and Ross. However, as with Lang’s provocative assertions, they offered no explanation in reply: “I said I didn’t know how we managed,” “[h]e said I must know a good deal – On which I had nothing to say – and talked of other things.” Indeed, Somerville and Ross were reticent to speak about how their collaboration worked. As long as Martin was alive, they limited their answers to a few remarks.

A non-verbal but telling comment was devised by Somerville in the shape of a monogram. Inspired by their Irish heritage, Somerville combined hers and Ross’s initials (E.Œ. S. on the left, M.R. on the right) so that they remained apart and distinct on the page, but connected by the Celtic interlacing motif. The monogram reflects the intermingling of two distinctive styles into a larger, united whole, and perfectly expresses the heart of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration (figure 13).182

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180 Hedley Peek, Art Editor and Sub-Editor of the Badminton Magazine.
182 The monogram is present in some editions of Somerville and Ross’s novels, but never in first editions published before 1900, so we may suppose that Somerville devised it after the turn of the century. For instance, we find it in the 1919 Longmans re-edition of The Real Charlotte, on the cover and on the page before the first chapter.
It was only two years after her partner’s death, in *Irish Memories*, that Somerville ventured to spend some words on the dynamics of their collaborative work. The following extract is the clearest description of their writing process Somerville ever gave. She explained that it was wholly based on what she called a ‘conversational method:’

[t]he question […] as to which of us held the pen, has ever been considered of the greatest moment, and, as a matter of fact, during our many years of collaboration, it was a point that never entered our minds to consider. To those who may be interested in an unimportant detail, I may say that our work was done conversationally. One or the other – not infrequently both, simultaneously – would state a proposition. This would be argued, combated perhaps, approved, or modified; it would then be written down by the (wholly fortuitous) holder of the pen, would be scratched out, scribbled in again; before it found itself finally transferred into decorous MS. it would probably have suffered many things, but it would, at all events, have had the advantage of being well aired. (*IM*, 133)

Somerville claimed that their collaboration drew heavily on conversation, and accorded special significance to the act of *talking*. According to her, the act of writing came secondary; writing was not as important as the discussion that preceded and followed it. In this way, Somerville subverted the common assumption that associates authorship with writing: the putting of pen to paper, she affirmed, is not the defining act of authorship. Moreover, the role of the “holder of the pen” was
neither hers nor Martin’s: it was “wholly fortuitous.” Once they had made up their minds upon the course of a chapter, or any other issue, it was by chance that one or the other wrote it down. Somerville’s statements echo Matthews’s words: “when a final choice was made of what seemed to us best, the mere putting on paper was wholly secondary.” (Matthews 1891, 27) Against the significance accorded in the Victorian imagination to the writer with his pen in hand – “that autocratic, commanding pen, which has – as is so generally known and believed – so much in its power!” (“Two of a Trade,” 186) – Somerville bluntly proclaimed that the holder of the pen in her and Ross’s partnership was a matter of pure chance.

Most importantly, it simply did not matter who had written what, because they used to plan and to revise everything together: after one had written a part, the other would always revise it, and suggest corrections and alterations; then they would write all down once again, and so on, until they both agreed on everything. As a result, the identification of who first wrote something lost all its value in the process of mutual revision. Since until 1909 they did not live continuously together, a large amount of this process was carried out via letters, by sending drafts back and forth between Drishane and Ross House. Reading Somerville and Ross’s letters is illuminating in this sense, as they provide evidence of the lengthy and taxing procedure of mutual revision.183 Somerville and Ross’ letters started as the space to get to know each other, as recorded at the beginning of this chapter; their friendship commenced because Martin had decided to write letters to her fascinating, cosmopolitan cousin, who was at first little interested in the acquaintance but then gradually saw Martin’s qualities. Later the letters had the role of cementing their mutual affection in the long periods they spent apart; but they were also used as the textual space for the plotting and composition of their works, for the sharing and debating of ideas and for mutual criticism. Criticism and debate were crucial ingredients of the collaboration, and the letters are evidence of this. Their criticism was unrelenting, and ranged from minutely detailed suggestions of alterations to phrasing and ideas, to plot changes and practical

183 Jamison (2016, 68-79) exhaustively explores Somerville and Ross’s correspondence with each other, from which their personal and professional bond comes to the surface. Jamison precedes the examination of Somerville and Ross’s letters with a digression on women letter-writing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a socially accepted practice that “offered a sanctioned and shielded textual space in which women could […] pursue literary and other artistic career paths.” (63) She argues that letter-writing acted as a site for rebellion. Also, the letters are provisions of raw-life material for their fiction. The much-quoted exhortation by Martin “let us take Carbery and grind its bones to make our bread!” (Letters, 135) well expresses their purpose. For instance, the account of the suicide of a local boy in the bogs near Ross House in December 1893 was dramatised into the tragic life and drowning of Tom Quin in The Silver Fox. Martin’s letter to Somerville containing the account of the tragedy says: “[i]t is the making of a story almost,” and “[i]t fills my mind in its dramatic aspects mostly and perhaps after a talk with you it might take shape.” (3 January 1894, Letters, 198) Perhaps the most famous example is one of the last surviving letters from Martin to Somerville, which contains a long account of her visit to Tyrone House and the illicit relations of its inhabitants. The letter ends with the exhortation “if we dare to write upon that subject!” (Letter from Martin to Somerville, 18 March 1912, Letters, 293-94) Somerville eventually used that letter after Martin’s death as a starting point to compose The Big House of Inver.
comments on publishing. The letters usually accompanied the drafts, and explained the changes that had been made, or praised/refused the adjustments that had been received. An example from the composition of *An Irish Cousin* will give an idea:

> for pity’s sake try and write by return of post to say if you like pages 71 and 72. I have always felt something like that there – don’t say it is premature – it isn’t – and I do think that that is the kind of thing that seems to me probable. Of course add, if you like, but I would not sweep or modify – don’t anyhow till you have given it good consideration. […] I know you must loathe my sticking in these putrid things and then fighting for them. […] Please goodness we will have many a tooth and naily fight next month – but don’t let us combat by post; it is too wearing. (Letter from Somerville to Martin, 21 January 1888, *Letters*, 63)

Drafts manuscripts, on their part, reveal the extent of the authors’ revisions, but we can learn nothing from them about the creative process. Somerville and Ross used to write on the right-hand page, with the left-page left blank for annotations; (Pepinster Greene 2016, 203) the drafts do not help ‘decollaborating’ Somerville and Ross, also because their handwritings are virtually indistinguishable (London notes that collaborators notoriously come to write like each other, often displaying handwritings that are strikingly similar, 1999, 73). As one would expect, the manuscripts are chaotic, but, significantly, “the fluency with which they are written indicates […] that most of the early invention and composition stages were done conversationally and not written down.” (Pepinster Greene 2016, 203). So, apart from some passages in the surviving letters, we can have no written testimony of Somerville and Ross’s ‘conversational method.’ Orality bears no witness for posterity. By virtue of its very nature, the ‘conversational method’ of Somerville and Ross is lost with them. Going back to the question of the holder of the pen, Somerville insisted that not only was it impossible to try and sort out their hands – it was also pointless. If one thinks again about the canonical image of the author, the pen holds a central part: according to sanctioned ideas about authorship, the pen is what makes a common man a writer. What is worth underlining here is that Somerville and Ross utterly debunked such assumption: by putting the emphasis on the act of talking, Somerville reshapes common notions of authorship.184

Also, from the description of their writing method in *Irish Memories* as well as from their letters, the recurring image of coauthorship as the site for conflict emerges. Somerville goes as far as using a war metaphor (“combated” *IM*, 133).185 The passage in the letter “[p]lease goodness we will have many a tooth and naily fight next month” attests to the combative nature of their collaboration. Another letter, written by Martin shortly after the completion of *An Irish Cousin*, pinpoints the “often

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184 This last point will be discussed in detail in chapter six.
185 A much more intense term than that employed by Besant (“wrangle” *MFB*, 11-14, see infra, p. 70).
dissonant process” of “two imaginations trying to work as one,” to use Jamison’s suggestive words. (2016, 77) Somerville and Ross never tried to conceal the practical difficulties of collaboration, and the language of collision repeatedly characterises their self-reflections on their writing. In “Two of a Trade,” Somerville ironically treated “the question as how two people can write together, without battle, murder, and sudden death ensuing immediately,” (180) and reported Martin’s comment about the letter of the woman who refused to believe in the jointness of their writing:

> never mind what she says about people writing together. We have proved that we can do it, and we shall go on. The reason few people can, is because they have separate minds upon most subjects, and fight their hands all the time. I think the two Shockers have a very strange belief in each other, joined to a critical faculty. (Letter from Martin to Somerville, September 1889, IM, 134)

To this, Martin adds that the collaboration with Somerville was, as already underlined, “one of the greatest pleasures” she had. (IM, 134) Also, Somerville’s statement “[p]lease goodness we will have many a tooth and nail fight next month” anticipates with a sort of excitement their moments of oral debate. Somerville and Ross’s partnership thus confirms York’s theory (2002, 5) that all successful collaborations are, of necessity, relationships both motivated and enhanced by discordance: “difference and disagreement strengthen rather than disable collaboration.” For Somerville and Ross, coauthorship implied fighting and certainly did not shorten composition times – contrary to the conception of collaboration as the industrial division of work – but it also was about having fun together, and finding intellectual stimulation. The fact was that, as combative and critical as they could be, they had faith in and respect for each other (“the two Shockers have a very strange belief in each other” IM, 134) as women, friends and authors. Thanks to their profound personal bond, criticism was allowed full exertion, but was always without rupture; it was based on mutual affection and respect, and always remained constructive. This “very strange belief in each other” was what kept the collaboration going for almost thirty years, differently from most cases of collaboration.

Recognition of these dynamics deflates the assumption, made by many, that Somerville and Ross’s partnership was at all times harmonious, and that their imaginations instantly became one when they wrote.186 For instance, a few years after Somerville’s death, her nephew Nevill Coghill fostered the view of Somerville and Ross’s partnership as something involving a ‘miracle:’

> the nature of their collaboration is as simple as any other miracle. Anybody can understand it at once and nobody can explain it. […] I once asked Dr. Edith which of them held the pen. She replied: ‘I’m sick to death of that question!’ […] As a matter of fact they talked their stories and their characters

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186 Somerville herself, in Irish Memories and in “Two of a Trade,” though never negating the combative nature of their joint writing practice, sometimes indulges in rose-coloured declarations of their harmony.
and their every sentence into being. As soon as anything was agreed it was written down and not a word was written down without agreement. So they would sit in the studio, or in a Railway carriage or wherever it might be; the two imaginations became one, working with the equal harmony of a pair of hands knitting a scarf” (Lewis 1989, 145) [my emphases]

Somerville and Ross’s collaborative writing is here compared to the domestic image of knitting a scarf. This simile goes back to a series of metaphors employed by reviewers in Somerville and Ross’s lifetime. For instance, a suggestive metaphor for their coauthorship was proposed by the Graphic in a review of The Real Charlotte (reported at the end of the 1903 Longmans re-edition of the novel): “the authors have united their work without leaving a single visible seam.” This is a very material, practical image, suggesting the idea of the two women working together on the same novel with the same perfect harmony as if it were a piece of knitwear; it also conveys the strength of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration: although the joint product of two people, the completed work is perfectly melted and defies any untangling of the two hands involved, with no “visible seam” left. Yet, the choice of the traditionally female activity of sewing seems to relegate once again the two authors within the walls of amateurism and domesticity, thus depriving them in some way of the professionalism they were trying so hard to build for themselves.

In Coghill’s much-quoted account, the two women’s imaginations ‘miraculously’ become one and, like two hands belonging to the same person engaged in knitting, they proceed simultaneously and without any friction. As we have seen, reality was very different, not because there was no harmony – on the contrary – but because harmony persisted notwithstanding disagreements and criticism. Once this notion of the miraculous unity of thought has proved wrong, the mystery of Somerville and Ross’s collaboration becomes less cloudy: we can picture two women, totally open with each other, engaged in constant, sometimes highly combative but always rewarding conversation. It is important to note that by ‘conversation’ their letter-writing is meant as well. Lewis (1989) points out that Somerville and Ross often referred to their letters as ‘talking,’ and Jamison (2016, 78) remarks that letter-writing “actively manifests itself as an imagined conversation between Somerville and Ross.” For example, when her mother died, Somerville sought consolation in writing a letter to Martin: “I can’t go to sleep, I have tried but it is no use, so I have lighted my candle and will try to think that I am talking to you.” (December 1895, Letters, 227) This was due to the fact that a great part of their relationship was developed via an extensive correspondence. The critical debate involved in Somerville and Ross’s collaborative writing process also affected their individual creative efforts. Writing to Somerville about an essay on education she was individually engaged in, Martin automatically imagines that her partner is at her side, and an imagined lively debate starts in her head: “I got a sort of grip of the ‘Education’ thing today […] I feel you saying ‘Well, but I don’t see’ – and
then I don’t see either. But it is good for me.” (18 May 1889, Letters, 135) Even when writing on one’s own, then, collaboration would remain an invisible but constant presence, like a ghost. The dialogue would never end. Somerville’s claim that she was ‘writing with Martin’ after 1915 is ascribable to this perpetual inner dialogue as well.\(^{187}\) Therefore, such – real or imagined – ongoing conversation not only shaped Somerville and Ross’s literary collaboration, but also their individual identities. The collaboration arose from these two cousins’ friendship, but, at the same time, the joint writing process ended up affecting each individual’s sense of self. We can thus assert that friendship and literary collaboration were almost indistinguishable in the case of Somerville and Ross.

After the explanation of their writing process in Irish Memories, and as the years went by, Somerville increasingly recoiled from further comments on how the collaboration (had) worked. She declared how “abhorrent” it was to her “all the senseless curiosity as to which hand holds the pen,” (qdt. in Robinson 1980, 47) and in “Two of a Trade” (1946) she dismissed all questions by stating that their collaboration was “what can never be explained,” (186) thus enveloping it in a provocative veil of mystery. She only gave one more suggestive, though vague, image:

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\text{[s]ometimes the compelling creative urge will come on both, and we would try to reconcile the two impulses, searching for a form into which best to cast them – one releasing it, perhaps as a cloudy suggestion, to be caught up by the other, and given form and colour, then to float away in a flash of certainty, a completed sentence – as two dancers will yield to the same impulse, given by the same strain of music, and know the joy of shared success. (186)}
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Somerville also suggested an evocative way to describe hers and Ross’s joint style by drawing on her painting background: she argued that their styles were as different as blue and yellow on the mixing palette, but that the final product was neither blue nor yellow, but green, which constituted a proper style on its own. Exactly as green is a secondary colour resulting from the merging of two primary colours, so was Somerville and Ross’s joint style: the “resultant green” obscured the individual colours that went into its composition and stood on its own, defying any untangling of the two hands involved. (186)

In this way, Somerville herself, after Martin’s death, contributed to feed the aura of mystery that surrounded their collaboration with her few evocative and vague comments, despite the insistence that there was no secret. Somerville’s attitude was ambiguous: at the beginning of “Two of a Trade,” she seems to cut short that “[u]nfortunately, much as I should enjoy giving away a secret, there is none to tell.” Laird (2000, 125) reflects that Somerville probably meant that “[t]here is no secret in

\(^{187}\) Jamison (2016, 134-35) concludes that “the conversations that Somerville produced with Ross in her automatic writing transcripts are, in reality, only an internal dialogue with the self” and “[u]nable to relocate Ross as a living friend, the latter [Somerville] became confined in an idealised and internal dialogue that Somerville carried out with her own self.”
that there is no special trick and, above all, no hidden reality of separate authorship; they simply ‘do it.’” However, Somerville’s reticence to – even abhorrence for – talking about their writing method, together with her declarations that their partnership was “what can never be explained” provoked contrasting reactions; moreover, Somerville and Martin wrote of themselves as having an almost religious faith in each other (that already quoted “very strange belief in each other”), and the exact nature of their relationship itself is surrounded by mystery. The fact that all the post-Martin texts continued to be co-signed (“Two of a Trade” as well) adds to all this, and becomes “the last of a series of uncanny spiritual phenomena in the story they told of themselves.” (Laird 2000, 125) At the end of “Two of a Trade,” Somerville ingenuously reproached herself of having “done little or nothing in elucidating this difficulty of two minds and two hands, and only one pen.” And yet this was precisely what she had wanted to do, and Somerville and Ross’s collaboration – despite all studies – has since then remained a source of curious fascination.
Somerville and Ross: a chronology

1858 On 2 May, Somerville Ænone Somerville is born in Corfu.
1862 On 11 June, Violet Martin is born at Ross.
1872 Martin’s father dies, and her brother Robert closes Ross House, letting it on a fifteen-year lease the following year. Mrs. Martin and her younger children go to live in Dublin.
1884 Somerville goes to Düsseldorf with her cousin Egerton Coghill, five years older than she, to study painting.
1886 In January, Martin comes to Castletownshend and first meets Somerville. In March, Somerville goes to Paris to study painting. Martin starts a correspondence with Somerville, who is at first uninterested but then sees her talents. Emily Herbert, the model for The Real Charlotte, dies at The Point in Castletownshend. Martin goes to visit her with her mother in May. In the summer, Somerville returns to Drishane. They spend the summer together and become friends.
1887 In spring, Somerville is in Paris and Martin visits her. She thinks that studio life and its motley people are not a proper company for Somerville. Somerville illustrates comic stories for journals like the Graphic. In the summer, they are at Drishane and compile the Buddha Dictionary. Somerville suggests that they might write a story together. In October, they begin An Irish Cousin.
1888 In May, An Irish Cousin finished, and sent off. In the summer, Mrs. Martin and Martin return to Ross after sixteen years of absence. Ross is in an appalling state. Martin begins to work to restore Ross to its ancient glory. In December, Bentley accepts to publish An Irish Cousin.
1889 From February to May, Somerville goes to Ross for the first time. In the summer, An Irish Cousin is published by Bentley. In November, The Welsh Aunt (the future Real Charlotte) is begun at Ross.
1890 The Lady’s Pictorial commissions Somerville and Martin to tour Connemara. In the summer they travel and publish in instalments Through Connemara in a Governess Cart. Martin’s eldest brother Robert moves back to Ross with his wife and children.
1891 Naboth’s Vineyard published in instalments in the Lady’s Pictorial. In October, Naboth’s Vineyard published in one volume by Spencer Blackett. Tour of Bordeaux; In the Vine Country published.
1892 In the early summer, The Real Charlotte is finished. Through Connemara in a Governess Cart published by W.H. Allen.
1893 In February, *The Real Charlotte* finally sent off to publishers; sold to Ward and Downey for £250 (for *An Irish Cousin* they had got £25). In June, tour of Wales and writing of *Beggars on Horseback*. In September, tour of Denmark.


1895 In January, Martin goes to Saint Andrews, Scotland, where she first experiences being treated as a literary celebrity. Here she meets Andrew Lang. Somerville goes to Paris. In May-June, they visit the Aran Islands. *Beggars on Horseback* published by Blackwood. Somerville’s mother dies.

1896 *The Silver Fox* published in weekly instalments.

1897 In October, *The Silver Fox* published in book form by Lawrence and Bullen.

1898 In Summer, in Cazin, the Irish R.M. stories are born. In October, Somerville and Martin go to Drishane. Here Martin has a serious hunting accident, whose consequences will afflict her for the rest of her life. From winter 1898 to August 1899 they write the Irish R.M. stories, published monthly in the *Badminton Magazine*, 12 stories in total.

1899 In August, the Irish R.M. stories end, with much relief of Somerville and Martin, who struggled to keep up with the monthly deadlines. In November, *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* published in volume by Longmans.

1903 Somerville becomes Master of the West Crabery Hunt: she is the first Irish female master of foxhounds. *All on the Irish Shore* published.

1905 Death of Robert Martin.

1906 Death of Martin’s mother. From now on, Martin will reside at Drishane with Somerville. *Some Irish Yesterdays* published by Longman.

1909 *Dan Russel the Fox* finished. *Some Further Experiences of an Irish R.M.* published.

1910 With Martin as her Vice-President, Somerville founds the Munster Women’s Franchise League (MWFL)

1911 *Dan Russel the Fox* is published.

1915 *In Mr. Knox’s Country* published by Longmans. Summer in Kerry. On 21 December, Martin dies of brain tumour in Cork, at the age of 53. Somerville lives for a further thirty-four years, continuing to publish books under their joint names.

1917 *Irish Memories* published.

1925 *The Big House of Inver* published.

1949 Somerville dies, at the age of 91. Somerville and Martin are buried beside each other in the graveyard of the castle in Castletownshend.
Chapter Four: Fashionable Collaborations

This chapter deals with some occasional collaborative relationships that characterised the British literary market of the last ten years of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, by the 1890s literary collaboration had become a fashionable practice and a great number of writers of the time experimented with it at least once. Occasional collaborations were generally the product of already established authors who before and after the collaboration pursued independent literary careers. Moreover, they did not collaborate exclusively with one partner, but in the course of their life often took part in different occasional collaborations with different people, sometimes even simultaneously.

Just to give an example, in 1877 Alexander J. Duffield coauthored a novel with Walter H. Pollock (editor of the Saturday Review), who in the late 1880s wrote four novels with Andrew Lang, who was himself a coauthor with H. Rider Haggard in 1890 and with A.E.W. Mason in 1899. Besides, the novels Lang coauthored with Pollock were parodies of Haggard’s solo works. Pollock was involved in collaborations with other writers beside Lang and Duffield, including his own son Guy Cameron Pollock and Walter Besant (with whom in 1885 he coauthored a collection of short stories, Uncle Jack). The sum of all these collaborative experiences gave origin to a series of intricate nets of collaborators that characterised the popular literary market of the late Victorian period.

In these cases, coauthorship was no longer a means to face and conquer the literary market, a stepping stone, a tool to gain the confidence needed to pursue, eventually, an independent career. Instead, it came to be regarded as something experienced out of curiosity and/or economic gain. The originality of the practice, the attention it attracted, its publicity potential, along with the doubling of one’s audience, induced authors to try collaboration out. Collaborative novels sold well: indeed, the possible economic benefits of a collaboration between best-selling authors was a strong motivation.

The fact that a great part of the coauthored novels that appeared in the early 1890s were published by either F.V. White or Longmans could point to a possible role played by such publishers in coupling popular authors in order to produce easy-to-sell coauthored novels.188

The idea that collaboration was a recipe for success and instantly led to notoriety was very widespread. A paper in 1888 commented: “[p]eople can collaborate either for business purposes or for pleasure, and the result is notoriety. […] Literary collaboration in all its branches […] has most

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188 In 1889 most coauthored novels were published by Longmans, Green & Co, but in the 1890s the leadership in the publication of collaborative fiction passed to F.V. White & Co. This publisher was very productive throughout the 1890s, and it seems to have been a promoter of coauthored novels, publishing the first edition of almost all works by F.C. Philips in collaboration with both C.J. Wills and Percy Fendall, Justin McCarthy and Mrs Campbell Praed, and Lady Constance Howard and Ada Fielder-King, and re-publishing a lot of other coauthored fiction. The most successful novels were re-published by F.V. White in the series “One volume novels by popular authors” at the price of 2s 6d each.
frequently been attended with considerable success.” (Glasgow Evening News, 15 Feb. 1888, no.5665, p.6) The article further reflects that, if two authors are successful separately, “[i]n collaboration they should make success doubly sure.”

In order to fully understand the phenomenon of the occasional collaborations of the 1890s, it is necessary to highlight the weight of the names of the authors involved. Indeed, by the period we are considering, authors’ names had become crucial selling factors: they had become commodities. Until the 1890s the names of the coauthors almost never appeared on covers: of all the coauthored novels in the present corpus, no cover appearing before 1889 bears the names of the authors. During the last decade of the century, instead, the cover gradually became the primary site for exhibiting authorial names. The case of Francis Charles Philips is exemplary. Although virtually unknown nowadays, Philips enjoyed great fame in his day. Between 1889 and 1891, he coauthored four novels with C.J. Wills,189 and, at the same time, three other novels with Percy Fendall.190 A brief look at the novels F.C. Philips coauthored with Wills (figure14) and at those he wrote with Fendall (figure 15) is sufficient to notice that the names of the authors are always printed clearly, in big letters, on covers, title pages and spines. In particular, on the covers of the works written with Fendall, the names are almost as big as the title, thus pointing to their importance in the selling strategy.

Francis Charles Philips (1849-1921) had been an army officer, a theatre-manager and a journalist before becoming a barrister, a profession he pursued while also turning out a ceaseless, impressive number of short stories, novels and plays. Starting from his first solo novel, As in Looking-Glass (London: Ward and Downey, 1886), Philips wrote one book after the other, gaining an immense popular readership. He experienced coauthorship with different writers. Those with Wills and Fendall were not Philips’s only collaborations: in 1892 he took part, together with twenty-three other authors, in the multiple collaboration whose final product was The Fate of Fenella, and between 1911 and 1914 he coauthored three novels with A.R.T. Philips.191

189 Charles James Wills (1842-1912) was a doctor who, after living for some years in Persia, had made himself a name by writing travel books about the Middle East.
190 Percy Fendall (dates of birth and death are not known) had published few but quite successful novels before collaborating with the much more famous Philips. Fendall’s independent novels had been published by Ward and Downey, the same publishing house of Philips, which may suggest a role of the publisher in their acquaintance (however, all their collaborative novels came out with F.V. While & Co.). Philips and Fendall coauthored a number of novels, some of which were adapted for the stage, like Margaret Byng (London: F.V: White), published in 1890 and staged the next year. (Wearing 2014, 95) Although their literary partnership was not continuous, it spread through twenty years: in 1908 and 1910, Philips and Fendall coauthored two other novels, Disciples of Plato and A Honeymoon – and After, both published by Eveleigh Nash.
191 Life (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1911); Man and Woman (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1912); Judas, the Woman (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1914).

Figure 15 Covers of some novels by F.C. Philips and Percy Fendall. From left to right: *A Daughter’s Sacrifice* (London: F.V. White & Co., 1890); *Margaret Byng* (London: F.V. White & Co., 1890); *My Face is My Fortune* (London: F.V. White & Co., 1891).
In 1896, Helen Black included F.C. Philips in her collection of *Biographical Sketches*, but, surprisingly, without mentioning his collaborations in fiction. A passing comment on Philips’s coauthored plays appears towards the end, where the name of Percy Fendall is mentioned, but only in connection to their collaboration on a farcical comedy, and not to the three novels they had co-written so far. That Helen Black should spend one and a half page on an anecdote about Philips’s meeting with actress Sarah Bernhardt and her lion cubs, and not even mention his several collaborations in novels, is quite astonishing. Such omission implicitly pushed Philips’s collaborative books to the position of inconsequential episodes, mere experiments made out of fun and good business sense rather than interesting literary texts.

This chapter will not go through every occasional collaboration present in the corpus in the Appendix. The reason is that the products of most of the 1890s occasional collaborations were ephemera, meant to entertain the public and be put aside to make space for the next ones. They did not aspire to literary greatness: they were made for the public to consume. What is relevant is, first of all, the very existence of these books, and the fact that they bear witness to the extreme liveliness of the literary market of the time. Moreover, most of these novels were immensely famous, and scored big sales. I will discuss in detail three cases, one for each kind of occasional collaboration, all issued more or less in the same years: the fantasy novel *The World’s Desire* (1890) as an example of an occasional collaboration between two already prominent authors, Henry Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang; the realistic novel *A Widower Indeed* (1891) as a case of an occasional collaboration between a very famous novelist, Rhoda Broughton, and an unexperienced young journalist, the American Elizabeth Bisland; and the sensation novel *The Fate of Fenella* (1892) as an instance of a multiple collaboration involving twenty-four well-established authors.

**“Two sworn friends” having fun: Henry Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang**

In 1890, a much-talked-about novel by Henry Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang, called *The World’s Desire*, appeared in the marketplace. The association could not have been odder. Henry Rider Haggard (1856 - 1925) was a prolific author of popular adventure novels, and was among the most widely read writers of the time. He had spent his early twenties in Africa, serving for six years as a secretary to the governor of Natal. His stay in Africa provided him with the setting and the material

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192 The same where we find the biographies of the Gerard sisters. (Black 1896, 127-134)
193 In 1889, Sarah Bernhardt was a success in the character of Lena Despard in a French stage adaptation of Philips’s novel *As In A Looking Glass*. (Black 1896, 130-132)
194 “Those two sworn friends Mr. Rider Haggard and Mr. Andrew Lang have conspired together to produce a book.” (*Dundee Advertiser*, 4 Dec. 1890, no. 9266, p. 2)
for most of his future fiction. His first book, *Cetywayo and his White Neighbours* (1882) was an attack on Britain’s South African policies. He achieved fame with swashbuckling adventure novels, all set in the African continent: *King Solomon’s Mines* (1886) and *She* (1887) earned him a wide readership and a high income. Walter Besant – one of the friends Haggard used to meet at the Savile Club\(^\text{195}\) – did not hide his pleasure at reading Haggard’s tales, and, on the publication of *She*, wrote to him assuring that he was “at the head – a long way ahead – of all contemporary imaginative writers.” (letter from Besant to Haggard, 2 Jan. 1887, reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. X)\(^\text{196}\) Among his friends Haggard also counted Kipling, with whom he never collaborated, and the Scottish writer, folklorist, anthropologist and critic Andrew Lang.

Lang (1844 - 1912) had studied first at St. Andrews and then at Oxford, where he became a fellow of Merton College, a position he left in 1875 to go to London and become a writer. He was a Greek scholar who devoted himself to Homer: he published prose versions of the *Odyssey* (in 1879, together with S.H. Butcher) and of the *Iliad* (in 1883, together with W. Leaf and E. Meyers); he wrote a sonnet called “The Odyssey,” and studied the Homeric question. His *Tales of Troy and Greece*, which he would publish in 1907, were long regarded as a children’s classic. (Birch 2009, 572) To the general public he became known as a collector of folk and fairy tales,\(^\text{197}\) although he also wrote poems and melodramatic novels.\(^\text{198}\) Before collaborating with Haggard, Lang had written, in collaboration with Walter H. Pollock, parodies of *King Solomon’s Mines* and *She*, respectively *King Solomon’s Wives* (Vizetelly & Co., 1887) and *He* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1887).\(^\text{199}\) Unfortunately, not much has

\(^{195}\) “[T]he Savile was a very pleasant club in the late ‘eighties. There was a certain table in the corner, near the window, where a little band of us were wont to lunch on Saturdays: Lang, Gosse, Besant, A. Ross, Loftie, […]” (Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI) In his autobiography, Haggard remembers with deep emotion Besant and his “genial talk.” “[s]urely he was one of the best and kindest-hearted gentlemen that ever wrote a book. Long may his memory remain green in the annals of literature for which he did so much.” (Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

\(^{196}\) Besant did not miss the chance to express his usual contempt for critics even in his letter of congratulations to Haggard: “I do not know what the critics will say about it. Probably they will not read more than they can help and then let you off with a few general expressions. If the critic is a woman she will put down this book with the remark that it is impossible – almost all women have these feelings towards the marvelous.” (letter from Besant to Haggard, 2 Jan. 1887, reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. X)

\(^{197}\) Lang’s best known books on folklore are: *Custom and Myth*, 1884; *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, 1887; and *The Making of Religion*, 1899. His fairy stories include *The Gold of Fairnlee* (1888), *Prince Prigio* (1889) and *Prince Ricardo of Pantouflia* (1893); in their compilation he was helped by his wife Leonora. Lang’s works stimulated a wave of interest in fairy-tales. (Birch 2009, 572)

\(^{198}\) *The Mark of Cain* (1886) and *The Disentanglers* (1902) are among his melodramatic novels.

\(^{199}\) In *He*, Lang and Pollock reverse the sexes of all the characters in *She*, turning She into He, Holly into Polly, and Leo into Leonora; they also turn Queen Victoria into a man (in the dedication they write “His Majesty is a Merry Monarch.” They replace She’s matriarchal kingdom of Kôr with the world of men’s literary clubs: *He* is set in Grub Street, London, instead of Africa. Another parody of *She*, also entitled *He*, appeared in the same year by John De Morgan. De Morgan wrote also another parody of *King Solomon’s Mines* (also called *King Solomon’s Wives*) and of *Jess* (which he entitled *Bess*). As Koestenbaum points out, these writers enjoyed changing one letter of a name to switch the sex. (1989, 195, note 55)
arrived to us concerning the relationship between Haggard and Lang; in this respect Haggard’s autobiography, *The Days of My Life* (1926) proves valuable. Here, the bond between the two emerges clearly. Lang’s name comes out continuously. Before the collaboration, Haggard and Lang were already in the habit of writing letters to each other minutely commenting each other’s work. Lang had helped Haggard plan and revise *She, Allain’s Wife, Beatrice, Eric Brighteyes, and Nada the Lily*, and had added poems to *Cleopatra*, about which Haggard had written “Perhaps Lang and I shall collaborate in the final copy.” (Higgins 1981, 118) When, in the late 1880s in a moment of crisis, Haggard was considering giving up literature (he had become “sickened of the novel-writing trade and despondent as regards my own powers” Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI), Lang supported him: “[i]f you jack up Literature, I shall jack up reading. […] I was infinitely more anxious for your success than for my own, which is not an excitement to me.” (letter from Lang to Haggard, undated, reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI) Besides, they had dedicated to each other some of their works: Haggard had included Lang in his dedications of *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*, and had dedicated *She* to him alone; in 1887, the Scottish writer had composed a warm dedication to Haggard at the beginning of a collection of essays, *In the Wrong Paradise*. The two friends started to think about *The World’s Desire* (whose original title was *The Song of the Bow*, referring to Ulysses’s ‘magical’ bow) in early 1888. In *The Days of My Life* Haggard gives only a brief account of their collaboration and how it worked:

> [r]oughly the history of this tale, which I like as well as any with which I have had to do, is that Lang and I discussed it. Then I wrote a part of it, which part he altered or rewrote. Next in his casual manner he lost the whole MS. for a year or so; then it was unexpectedly found, and encouraged thereby I went on and wrote the rest. (Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

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200 Haggard wrote his autobiography between 1910 and 1912 – as he states explicitly in it – but left instructions to publish it after his death.

201 Some letters by Lang about *Cleopatra* are reported in Haggard’s autobiography, ch. XI. In them, Lang exhorts his friend to make some cuts and alterations in his novel in a very precise way. Haggards also says that he wrote the preface to *Cleopatra* having Lang’s criticism in mind.

202 “Dear Rider Haggard, – I have asked you to let me put your name here, that I might have the opportunity of saying how much pleasure I owe to your romances. They make one a boy again while one is reading them.” (Lang 1887) Koestenbaum (1989) suggests some homoerotic tension between Lang and Haggard. He underlines that Lang’s widow destroyed her late husband’s correspondence, and that in the remaining letters “any statements of mutual affection are restrained.” (153) Lang once wrote to Haggard: “You have been more to me of what the dead friends of my youth were, than any other man, and I take the chance to say it, though not given to speaking of such matters.” Haggard answered: “My dear Lang, that friendship to which you make such touching allusion has always been, is, and will be returned by myself. I will say no more.” (Haggard 1926 II, 78) Before he died, Lang asked his wife to give Haggard a ring once belonging to the Egyptian Queen Taia, and Haggard always wore it. (Haggard 1926 II, 82)
Apparently, some time after its beginning, Lang lost the manuscript and, “not having the heart to recommence the book, the idea of writing it was abandoned.” (Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI) “It appears that he thrust the MS. into a folio volume, which was replaced among his numerous books, where it might have remained for generations had he not chanced to need to consult that particular work again.” (Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI) So the writing began again, mainly done by Haggard (at least according to his autobiography), with Lang providing a lot of material, revising, and writing some parts. A good amount of the collaboration was carried out by letter, with the two coauthors sending the manuscript back and forth, along with letters that commented it. The collaboration was also interrupted by Haggard’s journey to Iceland in the summer of 1888. Furthermore, as it was the case with most occasional collaboration, both Lang and Haggard were engaged in other, independent projects during the composition of *The World’s Desire.* (Haggard 1926 II, ch. XIII, p. 1)

From a letter from Lang we learn that Haggard wanted to set the story in Egypt from the very beginning, while Lang suggested that the protagonist should be Ulysses, and that he should first be introduced in his homeland, Ithaca, and only later travel to Egypt:

I’d have begun with Odysseus in a plague-stricken Ithaca and have got on to Egypt. And I’d have written in modern English. However, as it stands, I don’t care quite for the way the Wanderer is introduced. He comes rather perfunctorily and abruptly on the scene to my feeling. It is a subject that wants such a lot of thinking out. It would be jolly if one had more time in this world of ours. Also, if the public had, for after ‘Cleopatra’ they would not rise at Egyptological romance for a long time. I can’t help regretting my veteran Odysseus – I don’t think he would have been too ‘grey-eyed.’ If we

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203 In his homoerotic reading of Lang and Haggard’s novel, Koestenbaum suggests that “[t]wo men writing about Greece – a homosexual utopia […] – is an act calculated to reassert the masculinity of British fiction and to steal fire back from women writers.” (1989, 151) Koestenbaum affirms that Lang and Haggard shared reactionary and anti-feminist values (152-53) and that their writing of ‘romances’ is to be understood in terms of a “return to pure romance,” a revolt against “the more complicated kind of novel” with its “minute manners-painting and refined character analysis.” (153) Such “complicated and realistic novels” were either by women – like George Eliot – or they focused on women’s lives and marriage. (Koestenbaum 1989, 153) On the contrary, Haggard’s romances, like Stevenson’s, “slighted women altogether.” (Koestenbaum 1989, 153) Also, “[t]he world of pure romance offered men a refuge not only from women’s fiction, but from an England that they imagined Queen Victoria had feminized.” (Koestenbaum 1989, 153) In the year of the Queen’s Jubilee, 1887, Lang wrote poems hailing Stevenson and Haggard as savours “who brought the castrated novel back to life:"

*King Romance was wounded deep,*
*All his knights were dead and gone […]*
*Then you came from South and North […]*
*Blazoned his achievements forth,*
*King Romance is come indeed!*
*(qtd. in Cohen 1960, 11)*

Koestenbaum argues that Lang and Haggard collaborated “to flee an emasculated modernity,” and that the “purpose of their collaboration was to toy with flirtations they dared not pursue except in fiction, and to undermine gender polarities which, as British men, they felt bound to uphold.” (Koestenbaum 1989,156-57)
really collaborated, as we proposed originally, I'd begin with him; bring him in your way to Egypt, introduce him to the old cove who'd tell him about Hatasu (as in yours) and then let things evolve [...]. (reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

From Lang’s next letter we understand that it was him who wrote the first chapter of the novel:

> Having nothing to do this afternoon I did a lot of Ulysses. I brought him home from the people who never saw salt in a boat of Dreams, and I made him find nobody alive in Ithaca, a pyre of ashes in the front garden and a charred bone with Penelope's bracelet on it! But the bow was at home. If you can make it alive (it's as dead as mutton), the "local colour" is all right. Then I'd work in your bit, where the Sidonians noble him, and add local colour. (reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

It also appears that it was Haggard who first conceived the idea of inserting the Exodus of the Jews into their already crowded narrative, with Lang expressing his concern about his collaborator’s overwork: “[j]ust had your letter on the Jews. Do you think it worth while, if it won't run easily? You have so much on hand, and I am afraid you will tire out your invention. The idea of Odysseus and Helen is a good one, but don't thrash a willing and perhaps weary Pegasus.” (reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

Another point of concern was the style the book should be written in. It seems that Haggard insisted for a more mock ancient style, but Lang did not agree: “keep all the English modern, except in highly-wrought passages, incantations, etc. I dare say it would make a funny mixture.” (reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI) Eventually Lang won the battle and they opted for his solution. However, the Scottish writer lost another battle, that of serial publication: he was decidedly against it, as can be seen from this letter from the summer of 1889:

> I have been turning over ‘The World's Desire,’ and the more I turn the more I dislike the idea of serial publication. It is emphatically a book for educated people only [sic], and would lower your vogue with newspaper readers if it were syndicated, to an extent beyond what the price the papers pay would make up for. I am about as sure as possible of this: it is a good deal my confounded style, which is more or less pretty, but infernally slow and trailing. (reported in Haggard 1926 I, ch. XI)

Yet *The World's Desire* was first serialised in the *New Review* from April to November 1890, and then published in one volume by Longmans (Charles Longman was a good friend of Haggard). Since both Haggard and Lang were established names – although in very different fields – the novel raised expectations. Their collaboration was broadly advertised, and its product expected with curiosity. “It is a remarkable conjunction, the issue of which will be watched with a wide and peculiar

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204 Ulysses’s magic bow that only he can bend.
interest [...] We expect there will be a great rush for The New Review this month,” wrote the Northampton Mercury when the novel began to be serialized (5 Apr. 1890). The fact that Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang were going to write together sufficed to raise interest: “[a]ny work emanating from the joint pens of the above named gentlemen necessarily commands the attention of all interested in literary matters.” (Northern Wing, 29 Nov. 1890, no. 25.681, p.6) “[The novel will] of course, be widely read, for both authors have a considerable clientèle, and their united admirers should make an almost incalculable gathering,” pointed out the Globe (18 Nov. 1890, no. 29.787, p.3) However, this strange literary alliance also brought about a lot of doubts: the main perplexity was due to the fact that the two authors had very different styles and usually dealt with completely different topics, and this point was one of the most discussed in the reviews of the novel.

When it finally came out, The World’s Desire was a commercial success. (Leibfried 2000, 7) On the first edition’s title page, Haggard and Lang’s names are shown, and they are not identified by previous works: under “Henry Rider Haggard” there is no “author of King Solomon’s Mines etc.,” nor is any novel by Lang listed. This can be ascribed to the fact that at the time both names were very popular, and did not need further identification. On the cover, the names of the authors are well highlighted through the choice of colours: the cover is dark-blue, while their names are printed in gold letters.

Figure 16 Cover of The World's Desire by H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1890).
The World’s Desire is a fantasy novel set in ancient times and far away spaces. The title alludes to a passage in Tennyson’s In Memoriam, in which the poet, addressing the late Arthur Hallam, imagines a divinely gifted man who, “moving up from high to higher,/ Becomes on Fortune’s crowning slope/

The pillar of a people’s hope, / The centre of a world’s desire.” (Tennyson 2006, stanza LXIV, lines 13-16) Tennyson, too, had written about Ulysses in his eponymous poem of 1833 (published in 1842): there Odysseus, back from his adventures, feels restless and yearns to set out for another journey; in the final stanza of his dramatic monologue, Tennyson’s Ulysses addresses his sailors and encourages them “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” (Tennyson 2006, line 70) Haggard and Lang’s Ulysses would not be very different.

Summoning Ulysses from the dead was not uncommon: Lang and Haggard’s choice of subject and the popularity of their novel responded to the late-Victorian renewed interest in classical – especially Greek – literature. Even more than Latin, in the course of the nineteenth century Greek had come to be the stamp of authenticated culture and social prestige. Greek culture appeared more ancient and yet newer and more exciting than the canonical Latin. Purged of its frank paganism and sensualism, the savage greatness of ancient Greece – spontaneous, grand, archaic and untamed – held a special appeal. Homer was generally assigned supremacy among all others, and the Victorians were familiar with the Iliad and the Odyssey, which they encountered from their infancy, thanks to Chapman’s translation (felt to be more faithful to the Homeric spirit than Pope’s), Newman’s 1856 archaic one, and a number of various if less authoritative versions – in the middle of the century, twelve complete verse renderings of the Iliad were available. The Albert Memorial celebrated the Victorian passion for Greek culture: enthroned in the place of highest honour is Homer; Shakespeare, Dante, Milton and Virgil all recline modestly at the foot of his central throne. In reading Victorian novelists, “one is usually aware of a classical culture as part of the background of English life.” (Jenkyns 1980, 113) Homeric phrases sank deep into the minds of educated Victorians – mostly men, as Greek was a masculine territory, even though some ambitious women like George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett studied it on their own. Among cultured men there was a common stock of Homeric lore which could be shared and enjoyed; a passing reference would be recognised and understood. Haggard and Lang made no exception.

205 Koestenbaum (1989, 158) maintains that In Memoriam is a poem of homosexual love, and so “Lang’s and Haggard’s allusion to it suggests that a similar passion moves their novel.”

206 In Britain, ancient Greece had remained a relatively uncharted territory until the mid-eighteenth century, when a series of expeditions started to make it fashionable. The society of the Dilettanti played a pivotal role in encouraging and financing early interest in Greece, supporting first Lord Sandwich’s and later James Stuart and Nicholas Revett’s tours.
Their book is basically a melting pot of an impressive number of historical, mythological and supernatural elements, all mixed up together: characters from Heroic Greece, from the Egypt of the Ramessids, and biblical elements are all heaped up, so that the result is quite confused and intricate. The coauthors wrote a preface in which they affirmed that “recent discoveries […] have shown that there really was much intercourse between Heroic Greece, the Greece of the Achæans, and the Egypt of the Ramessids,” (The World’s Desire, 1) but the way in which they structured the story is far from realistic. The story adds a third journey to Ulysses’s wanderings. Coming back to Ithaca from his second journey, Ulysses finds it empty and desolate: first a pestilence, then an earthquake, have destroyed everything and killed the population, including Penelope and Telemachus. Desperate, Ulysses rambles around the island, till he finds himself at the temple of Aphrodite. Here the goddess of love appears to him: she is irritated because Ulysses has never really loved any woman, and thus has never served her; she commands him to set out on a third journey, on the quest of Helen of Troy,

In the nineteenth century, Greek authors came to be renowned and the knowledge of their language and work was perceived as a sign of gentility and pursued in the major public schools “with a zeal that could approach fanatism.” (Evangelista 2009, 9) A turning point for the fashion of Greek authors was Matthew Arnold’s 1857 lecture On the Modern Element in Literature. His title was paradoxical, as he dealt mainly with the fifth century B.C.; Arnold argued that Sophocles and Thucydides were essentially more modern than Shakespeare and Raleigh, that Homer was the greatest of the Greek poets, and he encouraged Victorian writers to imitate the Greek. “Seeming to possess romantic sublimity without romantic indiscipline, [Greek authors] held a special attraction for the Victorians, who were half the heirs of the romantics, half in rebellion against them.” (Jenkyns 1980, 98) It is striking how many public men engaged in Homeric studies and in amatorial translations. For the social and political elites, a classics degree was an almost necessary requirement for a career in Parliament, in the Civil Service, or in the Church. In a competitive age such as the Victorian one, Homeric ideals of courage, sacrifice, and physical strength were particularly appreciated. (Evangelista 2009, 9) Jenkyns links the Victorian passion for Homer with the spirit of competition in British schools and universities, where excelling in sports held a central position. (1980, 215) Heroic literature was read as the textbook of the ethical codes of perfect masculinity. Furthermore, this myth of correspondence fed into British imperial rhetoric: “like Victorian Britain, ancient Greece had been a successful nation built on commerce and colonial enterprise. And just like the modern English gentleman, the ancient Greek had been a responsible citizen and a good sportsman, loyal to the nation and to his friends, brave in war and generous in peace.” (Evangelista 2009, 9) Some critics, among whom Martin Bernal (1987), argue that the intensification of the study of ancient Greece in the nineteenth century was complicit with the development of the myth of white supremacy and racist and nationalist discourses. Although this is generally true, Evangelista points out that writers of the Aesthetic movement, on the contrary, transformed the study of ancient Greece into a field of progressive thinking: Pater, Swinburne, and Michael Field – to name but a few – turned Greek, the language of the academic, moral and political establishment, into a language of dissent, through which they explored new ways for social criticism and artistic innovation. For instance, in 1889 Michael Field published Long Ago, a collection of poems in which a series of Sapphic fragments were extended into lyrics and which takes readers back to ancient Lesbos in order to explore an eroticism that rejects prescribed limitations on desire and experience. Other studies (Prins 1999, Reynolds 2003) have drawn attention to the importance of Sappho for the nineteenth-century poetic tradition, so that Michael Field’s work needs to be read in its intertextual relationship with the work of other Romantic and Victorian poets such as Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, Swinburne and Pater. Field’s widely noted eccentric practices (e.g. their private mythology of wine, the Bacchanalian dances performed to celebrate the arrival of good news, the erection of an altar to Dionysus in their garden) “deliberately departed from a masculine, solitary, and text-based study of the classics, in favour of a feminine and perhaps lesbian model in which understanding is generated through collaboration and performance.” (Evangelista 2009, 124) For a discussion of Greek influence on Victorian culture, see, among others, Jenkyns 1980, Bernal 1987, Evangelista 2009, and Hurst 2010.
whom she promises shall be his. Aphrodite makes Ulysses forget his sorrows and breathes love for Helen into his heart. As Ideal Beauty’s incarnation, Helen represents ‘the World’s Desire,’ that is, what every man wants. Aphrodite poses only one condition for the accomplishment of Ulysses’s happiness: he must be faithful to Helen, and have no other woman while he searches for her. Thus, Ulysses sets out for a new adventure. He is captured by Sidonian buccaneers, and is carried by them down the Nile, but he manages to slay the whole crew and become master of the ship.

He arrives at Tanis, where the sea is red with blood and the land is plagued with frogs and locusts; also, an additional plague afflicts the city: a new goddess, called the Hathor, has taken up residence in the temple, to which all men are mysteriously attracted, but as soon as they gaze at the beautiful divinity they drop dead, killed by invisible swords. Under a false name, Ulysses is welcomed at the

Figure 17 Ulysses slaying the Sydonians, p. 34 (The World’s Desire, London: Longmans, 1894).

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Pharaoh’s court. Here Meriamun, the Pharaoh’s wife (who is also his half-sister), instantly falls in love with Ulysses – this is also the result of a prophecy by the gods. The Queen hates her brother-husband and is also a sorceress: she has visions, can communicate with the dead, use the spirits at her pleasure, change her physical appearance, and so forth.

A sort of epic love triangle begins, as Meriamun wants Ulysses as her lover, while Ulysses only longs to find Helen. Meanwhile, Ulysses gains the Pharaoh’s trust by defending him during an uprising, and becomes Captain of a legion of the Egyptian army. After the death of his son (the death of the firstborn, another biblical plague), the Pharaoh lets the Israelites go, and Meriamun curses Moses’s people, condemning them to never see the land they are heading to. By this time, Meriamun has discovered her host’s real identity, falling even more in love with him, while Ulysses has gone to the temple and has realised that the Hathor is actually Helen of Troy. Haggard and Lang present Helen...
as immortal, daughter of the Gods (which ones, they do not say) and a tragic halo surrounds her. Ulysses and Helen reveal to each other their mutual love, and he promises to take her away from the temple and elope together.

Crazy with jealousy, Meriamun – who has spied on Ulysses thanks to her magic tricks – plans her revenge: on the night planned for the elopement, she assumes Helen’s shape and deceives Ulysses, who spends the night with her, while the Pharaoh is away chasing the Jews, as it is the night of the Passing of the Red Sea. Ulysses’s vow to Aphrodite is thus broken: the prophecy will remain unfulfilled. The Goddess appears once more to Ulysses and makes a new prophecy: he will die in battle, and he shall never marry Helen. The next day, Meriamun poisons the Pharaoh, blaming the Hathor for it, so that all women of the reign proceed to attack Helen by setting fire to her temple; she is saved by Rei, a faithful priest who has become Ulysses’s trusted confidant. Rei also tells Helen that Ulysses did not abandon her, but that he was deceived by the Queen. By this time, the Achæans attack Egypt (the reason why is not clear), and Ulysses is sent to fight against them: this will be his last fight, and a whole chapter describing Ulysses’s heroic deeds in battle follows, in which he also kills a giant. Helen follows him to the battle field, and they reunite for a last kiss just before he is killed by Telegonus, the son he has had with Circe. Thinking to have Paris in front of him (since he wears the Trojan prince’s golden armour which he took at the sack of Troy), Telegonus strikes Ulysses to death. He dies in the arms of Helen, and is then cremated with all the honours by the Greek. The final scene sees Meriamun throwing herself in desperation onto Ulysses’s pyre, and Helen remaining on earth wandering for eternity.

The story is indeed intricate and confusing, even if at moments engaging. However, it is all action: the characters are flat, stereotyped and they do not evolve. Ulysses is and remains the strong, upright hero, never faltering, never doubting. Helen is the good, helpless, angelically beautiful heroine, always waiting for someone to save her, totally lacking a will. Meriamun – who on the contrary has a will, and quite a strong one – is presented as stubborn, lascivious, and uncontrollable: obviously all dangerous qualities for a woman according to the Victorian mindset. Meriamun demands to be the equal of the Pharaoh, and is extremely powerful. The fierce queen is an embodiment of the independent New Woman that Lang and Haggard despised. (see Koestenbaum 1989, 159) The only two women depicted in the book are either the wicked Meriamun or the holy Helen. The novel was (proudly) called by Lang a “rather misogynistic book on the whole.” (qtd. in Green 1946, 129)

The novel tries to evoke Homer’s epic language, for instance by employing repeated epithets (for Ulysses: “Ulysses, Laertes’ son,” or “The Wanderer;” for Helen, “The Golden Helen” or “Argive Helen;” for Meriamun, “Meriamun the Queen,” and so on) and by inserting poetic pieces inside the narration.
The World’s Desire sold well, and fired the imagination of the public. It inspired sequels and prequels, like The Weird of the Wanderer, published in 1912 by Frederick Rolfe and C.H.C. Pirie Gordon under the pseudonyms Prospero and Caliban. However, the (many) reviews were contrasting – to say the least. Some were enthusiastic, some lukewarm, others utterly negative. As Haggard remembers in his autobiography, the novel “was violently attacked […]. All that I remember about them [reviews] is the effort of its assailants to discriminate between that part of the work which was written by Lang and that part which was written by myself – an effort, I may add, that invariably failed.” (Haggard

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207 Frederick Rolfe was a homosexual aesthete that wrote under the pen name Baron Corvo. He was engaged in several collaborations, usually with his lovers. With his friends Pirie-Gordon he wrote, besides The Weird of the Wanderer, another novel, Hubert’s Arthur. For a discussion of this partnership, see Koestenbaum 1989, 162-63.
As a matter of fact, the main business of the press was to discover and expose who had done what. Due to the fact that both Haggard and Lang had already established careers behind them, and were famous for very specific areas of interest, the two hands were easily distinguishable. Almost unanimously, the Egyptian setting, the adventure parts, the battles, and the magic were attributed to Haggard (he was fresh from the studies he had made for *Cleopatra*), while the Greek parts, the mythological and biblical elements, the ethnology and the poems (universally praised as graceful and musical) were ascribed to Lang. The archaic, embroidered language was appreciated by some reviews, while others deemed it tiresome and intolerable. Lang’s style was generally said to have improved Haggard’s usual exaggerations: “Mr. Lang’s delicate style is an effective curb on long, sententious dissertations.” (*Kerry Evening Post*, 4 June 1890, vol. cxvi, p. 3)

Despite the two different contributions, the novel was universally judged to be at least beautifully united and flowing, as for instance the *London Evening Standard* remarked:

> [a] volume to which two such writers have obviously devoted serious, and even loving, care could not possibly be dull or crude. [...] The book is full of sorcery and enchantment, and it is just possible that the two authors, like some of the marvelous beings they portray, have had a transforming and assimilating effect on each other. (*London Evening Standard*, 10 Nov. 1890, no. 20.699, p. 2)

However, the choice of the subjects divided the press. The decision to bring Ulysses once more back to life, along with the complicated maze of mythology and Egyptology, was seen by some as showing a formidable mixture of erudition (Lang) and imagination (Haggard), which could have been attained only through collaboration. The *St. James’s Gazette* enjoyed the boldness of the subject, called it fascinating, and advanced the hypothesis that “[p]erhaps neither Mr. Rider Haggard nor Mr. Andrew Lang would have ventured to do it alone.” (*St. James’s Gazette*, 2 Dec. 1890, no. 3271, p. 6) “The authors have shown a large measure of courage” in the choosing of their characters, commented the *Globe*, and Lang “might be better occupied, many may think, than in the invention of romance; but the experiment was daring and not uninteresting.” (18 Nov. 1890, no. 29.787, p. 3) Also the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* (24 Dec. 1890, no. 13.569, p. 3) praised the original experiment: “[t]his addendum to an old story is wrought out with marvelous skill, and shows that the art of collaboration is by no means lost.” The *London Daily News* (27 Nov. 1890, no. 13.930, p. 6) called Haggard and Lang the “two literary enchanters of today” who “have summoned the phantom of Odysseus,” so that “we have every reason to be grateful for their incantations.” In a review of the novel in the *British Weekly*, James M. Barrie wrote that “collaboration in fiction, indeed, is a mistake, for the reason that two men cannot combine so as to be one.” (20 Nov. 1890, no. 9, p. 54)
Let us now see in detail one review entitled “An Awful Warning,” which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The reviewer lamented the association of a man of culture like Andrew Lang with a writer of cheap adventure fiction such as Haggard. According to the reviewer, Lang is guilty of having let a passion for ‘Haggardism’ take hold of him: one thing is to read tawdry, gory novels as a guilty pleasure, another thing is to actually write them. The review ironically chronicles the Scottish folklorist’s descent “into the lowest depth of Haggardism,” and tries to find an explanation for his fascination with Haggard:

> [t]he spectacle of Mr. Andrew Lang’s name on the title-page of such a book as *The World’s Desire* should serve as an awful warning against the sin of paltering with one’s literary conscience. […] The stages of Mr. Lang’s descent into the lowest depth of Haggardism are not difficult to trace. […] Attracted by inborn sympathy towards all that is primitive and spontaneous in literature, he [Lang] steeped himself from his youth upwards in epic, ballad, and saga. Then dissatisfaction with [...] mythology led Mr. Lang to the study of folklore, and brought him into contact with modern as well as ancient savagery. When Mr. Rider Haggard’s earlier stories appeared, they naturally attracted Mr. Lang’s attention. He found in them primitive manners, bloodshed, galore, and a certain grotesquely grandiose imagination which appealed to the schoolboy element in his character. He dwelt as little as possible on the weaknesses of the new romancer – the appalling triviality of his humour, for example, and the slovenly pretentiousness of his style. In other words, he paltered with his literary conscience by omitting to distinguish between a freakish personal predilection and a sober and serious critical judgement. [...] This whimsical taste, indulged at first in sheer wantonness, almost in bravado, has grown upon Mr. Lang until it has become a sort of monomania. And now we find Mr. Lang not only accepting but openly aiding and abetting a similar degradation of the great Ulysses. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1890, no. 8004, p. 3)

After that, the reviewer tries to tell the two hands apart:

> [w]hat pleasure can Mr. Lang have found in transporting the hapless Odysseus from the great free air of Homeric myth and melody into the garish, gassy theatre of Mr Haggard’s imagination? For it is pretty clear that Mr. Haggard’s imagination has been mainly concerned in the bodying forth of *The World’s Desire*. It resembles his former achievements too closely to leave any room for doubt. Helen and Meriamun are re-incarnations of two different aspects of ‘She-who-must-be-obeyed’ [...]. We have the usual scenes of carnage (if possible gorier than ever) and the inevitable hocus pocus of incantation. If Mr. Haggard has not the chief share in all this, why then Mr. Lang must have had chief share in *Cleopatra* and *She* – an alternative we shrink from considering. Mr. Lang, we fancy, has contributed to the classical details, and possible the general notion of jumbling up Ulysses and Moses and Aaron, and adding an eleventh affliction to the plagues of Egypt in the person of Helen of Troy. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1890, no. 8004, p. 3)

The final assessment of the novel is that, “[d]espite this lavish use of picturesque material and mythical and magical machinery [or maybe because of it?] *The World’s Desire* remains a dismally unimpressive performance.” The reviewer reflects that
[a] myth even if grotesque and repulsive, is interesting because it is a myth, a genuine document in the history of human mind. But when two literary gentlemen sit down in the year 1890 to let their imagination ‘bombinate in a vacuum,’ we have a right to demand the result shall be either beautiful in itself or very beautifully presented. *The World’s Desire*, on the other hand, is as stodgy as it is sanguinary. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1890, no. 8004, p. 3)

The only positive note concerns the style of *The World’s Desire*, mainly ascribed to Lang’s writing talent:

> [i]n only one respect is this romance superior to Mr. Haggard’s former production – it is notably better written. Mr. Lang’s has succeeded in chastening his collaborator’s ‘poetic prose,’ and almost entirely eliminating his philosophy and his humour. There are some passages of very pretty writing in the book, the echo of a Homeric turn of phrase being introduced now and then with happy effect. *(Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 Nov. 1890, no. 8004, p. 3)

Some other reviews, however, appreciated the unusual mixture and the association of two writers with so different styles. The *London Evening Standard* conceded that “the general result is bizarre, and almost touches the grotesque,” but it concluded the book was greatly entertaining and that “[t]he association of two writers of such dissimilar genius is justified by the result.” *(10 Nov. 1890, no. 20.699, p. 2)* Another review advanced a culinary metaphor to describe literary collaboration:

> the gourmet who appreciates roast venison and cureant jelly, the boumelier goose and apple sauce, or lamb and fragrant mint may perchance wonder what daring wight was first inspired to couple such apparently incongruous elements. Yet, once allied, there is no denying their quality. Quite as startling a literary juxtaposition is that of Mr. Rider Haggard and that of […] Mr. Andrew Lang. Yet here, again, the result has justified the experiment. *The World’s Desire*, now current in the *New Review*, says much for the success of that queer business known as literary partnership. […] *The World’s Desire* is a dreamy and fascinating romance […]. *(Kerry Evening Post*, 4 June 1890, vol. cxvi, p. 3)

Another criticism to *The World’s Desire* was the alleged immorality of some of its pages, especially the direct reference to the night Meriamun spends with Ulysses; the figure of Helen too was said to inspire nothing but lust. Haggard was mainly held responsible for this aspect:

> the story […] although powerfully told, […] is a very unpleasant one, and […] he [Haggard] allows himself a license in some of his scenes which compels us to warn our readers that it is not a book which should be placed in the hands of the young. It is a pity that the talent and the erudition used in the composition of the work could not have been turned to more profitable purpose than the writing of a sensational and not too wholesome romance. *(Derby Mercury*, 19 Nov. 1890, no. 9175, p. 6)

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208 This conforms to the general idea on Haggard’s style, which was often criticised and debased.
R.L. Stevenson appreciated Haggard and Lang’s novel, and sent them a letter of congratulations, together with a humorous poem, whose first three stanzas I report here:

1.
Awdawcious Odyshes,
Your conduc’ is vicious,
Your tale is suspicious
An’ queer.
Ye ancient sea-roamer,
Ye dour auld beach-comber,
Frae Haggard to Homer
Ye veer.

2.
Sic veerin’ and steerin’!
What port are ye neerin’
Aa frae Egypt to Erin
Ye gang?
Ye ancient auld blackguard,
Just see whaur ye’re staggered
From Homer to Haggard
And Lang!

3.
In stunt and in strife
To gang seeking a wife –
At your time o’ life
It was wrang.
An’ see! Fresh afflictions
Into Haggard’s descriptions
An’ the plagues o’ the Egyptians
Ye sprang!

(reported in Haggard 1926 II, ch. XIII, 8)

After the publication of this controversial novel, Haggard and Lang remained life-long friends. They continued to comment on each other’s solo works, as Haggard’s many letters attest. They often thought of collaborating again, but never actually did it, probably because they were “a bit discouraged about the ‘W. Desire’ because a lot of ignorant fools slated it.” (letter from Haggard to Lang, 28 Dec. 1907, reported in Haggard 1926 II, 77) In 1907, they seriously considered a new joint project in the same line of *The World’s Desire*, as this letter from Haggard to Lang attests:
[c]an you not think of something ‘big and beautiful,’ something that has an idea in it? Something for choice that has to do with old Greece (which you know) and with old Egypt (which I know)? Something with room in it for a few of your beautiful verses […]. In short, a real poetical romance such as we might both be proud of. […] You know all the old world legends: there must be some that would lend themselves to this general scheme. […] Now don’t be discouraged, for though we are both antique, I know that we can do it, if only we can find the theme.” (Letter from Haggard to Lang, 28 Dec. 1907, reported in Haggard 1926 II, 77)

Lang suggested “one of the old Greek legends that ended in the most horrible all-round tragedy,” (Haggard 1926 II, 76), a proposal Haggard refused since, in his opinion, “a twentieth-century audience would require something a little more cheerful.” (Haggard 1926 II, 76) Some years later, in 1911, Haggard tried to stimulate Lang, by then increasingly melancholic, by offering a new collaboration: “it occurred to me to try to cheer Lang up and take him out of himself a little by getting him to collaborate, or at any rate to think about collaboration, in another romance.” (Haggard 1926 II, 75) The suggestion was supported by Longmans, but Lang refused: “I don’t think that I could do more.” (Haggard 1926 II, 75) In his autobiography, Haggard narrated extensively of his friend’s slow decay and death, and mourned his loss greatly: “among men my best friend perhaps, and the one with whom I was most entirely in tune.” (Haggard 1926 II, 80) Their mutual friend, Charles Longman, referred to Haggard and Lang’s relationship as “an unclouded friendship of five-and-forty years.” (Haggard 1926 II, 80)

“A lady who is impertinent to her Creator” and “a travelled American:” Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Bisland

At the end of the year following the publication of The World’s Desire, a novel came out by two occasional coauthors: A Widower Indeed (London: J.R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, 1891) by Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Bisland. At the time, the queen of English “sensuous sensational excitement” (The English Lake Visitor, 3 November 1883, no. 337, p. 4) Rhoda Broughton (1840-1920) was fifty-one and an established author at the height of her career. She was the niece of Sheridan LeFanu, who in 1867 had published her first novel, Not Wisely But Too Well, in the Dublin University Magazine, which he edited. LeFanu had also introduced her to the publisher Bentley, who at first refused the novel as it was considered too transgressive, but accepted the next one, Cometh Up As a Flower, published it in the same year, and proceeded to publish most of her subsequent work. Her reputation for audacity, outspokenness and caustic wit had at first advised circulating libraries

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209 Haggard had spent long periods of time in Egypt.
210 Edinburgh Evening News, 13 November 1884, p. 3; Glasgow Evening News, 2 May 1891, no. 7208, p. 2.
not to stock her novels; nevertheless, she became a firm favourite with readers. After living in various parts of the country, Broughton moved to London in 1890. (Wood 1993) The year before her collaboration with Bisland, she had received her highest ever payment for a novel, *Alas!* (London: Bentley, 1890), which had proved, however, a commercial failure. After this, Broughton turned to one-volume novels, which she preferred to the bulky three-decker, and some critics consider her shorter, sharp novels of the 1890s and 1900s as her best ones.211 Was it a chance that her next move after her failure with *Alas!* was to try a collaboration? And was it a chance that the collaboration occurred with a much younger, fresh partner?

While Broughton had an established career as a novelist, the American Elizabeth Bisland (1861-1929) had never written fiction before. She was an “adventurous young lady journalist” (so the *Bristol Magpie* described her, 16 August 1890, no. 423, p.7) who in 1889–1890, at the age of twenty-eight, had attracted worldwide attention for her seventy-six-days race around the world. Her journey was reported in a number of articles she wrote for the monthly New York magazine *Cosmopolitan*, for which she worked as a literary editor, later collected by Harper and Brothers in a book entitled *In Seven Stages: A Flying Trip Around the World*, issued in June 1891. The globe race had been a sensational event at the time. On 14 November 1889, Bisland had embarked on her journey at a few hours’ notice, in order to compete with another New York young woman journalist, Nellie Bly, who had left that same morning for a world-tour, aiming at setting the record for the fastest trip around the world: sixteen years earlier, Jules Verne had imagined that such a trip could be accomplished in eighty days; now Nellie Bly hoped to do it in seventy-five. The magazine Nellie Bly worked for, *The World* (whose publisher was Joseph Pulitzer) greatly advertised the enterprise, and on the morning of her departure a great crowd had gathered to see her embark upon a steamer bound to England. John B. Walker, editor of *Cosmopolitan*, immediately smelled the potential publicity value of such a race, and, summoning Elizabeth Bisland to his office that same morning, asked her if she could also go on such a journey, travelling in the opposite direction. She had to set off immediately, if she was to have any chance of returning to New York before Bly. Thus, at six o’clock that evening Bisland was on a train from New York Central heading West. From San Francisco, she took a steamer to Japan, then she proceeded to Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, the Suez Canal, Italy, France, England, and Queenstown, Ireland, where she finally embarked on a ship that took her back to the United States after seventy-six days from her departure. Her voyage would have been the fastest one ever recorded – if only Nellie Bly had not arrived four days before. Indeed, Bly had completed her race in seventy-

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211 *Mrs. Bligh* (1892), *Dear Faustina* (1897), *Lavinia* (1902), and *A Waif’s Progress* (1905). See Birch 2009, 162. For a complete biography and bibliography of Broughton, see Wood 1993.
two days, and set the record.\(^{212}\) \((\text{Shields Daily Gazette, 1 Jan. 1890, p.3; Pall Mall Gazette, 27 January 1890, no. 7756, p.4; Graphic, 1 August 1891, no. 1.131, p.21})\)

Both Bly and Bisland gained immense notoriety during and after their spectacular race. However, Bisland did not enjoy fame. Genteel and elegant, she was born into a Louisiana plantation family ruined by the Civil War and its aftermath; although her education was mainly conducted at home by her mother and through what survived of her father’s library (their house had been used as a military base by the Confederate troops during the war), she was “highly literary, with refined tastes and wide-ranging interests.” \((\text{Goodman 2013, 42})\) She began her career by writing poems, like her mother, but she soon turned to journalism, in particular feature articles and reviews. At the age of twenty she moved on her own to New Orleans to work as a journalist to both pursue her passion for literature and to help support her family.

At twenty-seven, tired with what she considered to be the parochialism of the South, she moved to New York, where she started to contribute to a variety of magazines, such as \textit{Harper’s Bazar}, \textit{Illustrated American}, \textit{Puck}, \textit{The World} and \textit{Cosmopolitan}; she also hosted a literary salon in the apartment she shared with her sister, where members of the New York’s creative set gathered. Bisland became a self-supporting, independent professional woman, who succeeded in carving out a

\(^{212}\) Nelly Bly was the pen name of Elizabeth Jane Cochran (1864 - 1922). Born in Pennsylvania, from the age of twenty she worked as a reporter for the \textit{Pittsburgh Dispatch}. After spending five months in Mexico as the paper’s correspondent, she felt she had outgrown women’s pages, and sought new possibilities for her career in New York: she found them in the offices of \textit{The World}, which, under the leadership of its publisher, Joseph Pulitzer, had become the largest and most influential newspaper of the time. Bly became known for being the first female reporter to put herself, undercover, in dangerous situations in order to expose social problems: for instance, under a false name she pretended to be insane so that she might report firsthand on the mistreatment of the women patients of an asylum. Many other women followed her example, and for some time she embodied a role model for young female journalists, who called the new category to which they belonged “stunt girls.” It was Bly’s idea to embark on a world race, and she had to convince her editor to let her try. After her return in early 1890, she became one of the most famous women in the United States: songs and board games inspired by her adventure came out in great numbers; the first edition of ten thousand copies of her book \textit{Around the World in Seventy-Two Days} (New York: Pictorial Weeklies Company, 1890) was sold out within a month. In the same year, Bly undertook a lecture tour through the nation, for which she lost the favour of the public: apparently, “it was one thing for a young woman to go around the world, and […] quite another for her to attempt to profit from it. There seemed also to be something distasteful in the notion of a woman presuming to speak, uninterrupted, for an entire evening.” \((\text{Goodman 2013, 339})\) She was later involved in a trial related to an article she had published in \textit{The World}. Now too widely recognizable to go back doing the undercover reportage that had launched her career, she got a contract for writing serial fiction for \textit{The New York Family Story Paper}, but she left it unfulfilled: she simply was not a novelist. After that, she disappeared from sight, only publishing occasional feature articles and interviews for \textit{The World}. In 1894 she married Robert Season, the owner of the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company of Brooklyn, a millionaire forty years older than she, and she turned to the life of the New York wealthy wife. When her husband died in 1904, Bly took over the business and seemed to do extremely well, but in 1914 she had to declare bankruptcy and flee the country because of legal charges against her. After the years of WWI, where she lived in Austria, she returned to New York, penniless, and started to work for the \textit{Evening Journal} until her death in 1922. For a detailed biography of Bly, see Goodman 2013.
successful career in the hypercompetitive, male-dominated world of big-city newspapers. (Goodman 2013, 42-60)

Figure 20 A drawing of Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland, in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 1890 (The New York Historical Society).

When she undertook her race around the world, she found herself popular almost overnight, as the papers of the time are witness to. Annoyed by life in the limelight, in the spring of 1890 she accepted the invitation of an English aristocrat she had befriended when they stayed at the same hotel in Colombo to spend the upcoming London season with her. Through her hosts, Lady and Lord Broome, she was introduced to London’s literary society, where she met, among others, Herbert Spencer, Rudyard Kipling (who apparently was impressed with her), and Rhoda Broughton. (Goodman 2013, 349) Bisland and Broughton met again in Oxford, where the former took lodgings at the close of the London season. One of her neighbours was the popular novelist. Notwithstanding their twenty-one years difference, the two women became friends and set out to coauthor a novel.
As the title suggests, *A Widower Indeed* features the “hapless widower” *(Pall Mall Gazette, 15 Feb. 1892, no. 8394, p.3)* Edward Lygon, a bursar of an Oxford college, who has just lost his beloved wife Anne, and lives alone with their two little children. He has lost all interest in life, and lives a melancholy existence in the memory of Anne. The fact that Anne’s family – her parents and her sister – live nearby does not help him go on with his life, as they all live idolizing the angelic, everlasting dead woman. However, he soon meets the new lodger at his neighbour’s house (on Holywell Street, the same address where Bisland was living at the time), a young, lively woman from the South of the United States named Georgia Wrenn. Miss Wrenn has independent financial means and is travelling on her own through Europe. Thanks to her enthusiasm and optimism, she gradually encourages Edward to enjoy life again. However, on realising he is falling in love with her, guilt overcomes Edward; to make things worse, rumors begin to spread all over Oxford and Edward’s mother-in-law accuses him of making himself ridiculous, running after an American frivolous woman without showing respect to the memory of his deceased wife. Confused and overwhelmed, Edward cuts all relations with Miss Wrenn, who, outraged, expresses all her indignation at what she calls “your English manners and customs.” (126) The unhappy widower runs away with his children to a country house for the summer, intending to live a secluded life taking long walks. Nevertheless, he ends up from the frying pan into the fire, as he falls into the trap of a mother-and-daughter plan to catch him: he is repeatedly thrown into the company of a distant cousin, the superficial Albertina Crichton, whose cunning mother has decided that Edward shall marry. During a walk, Albertina has an accident and twists her ankle; the unsuspecting victim helps her get up in what could look as an embrace. At that moment, they run into Miss Wrenn, who is making an excursion. Being of a generous and forgiving disposition, she behaves as cordially as ever and helps Edward, who feels relieved at her appearance, and for a moment things look promising again. Yet, later that night Albertina goes to Edward’s room and makes a hysterical scene: accused by her mother of having ruined the girl, he is forced to marry her. The novel ends – quite abruptly – with Edward getting “raving mad” (228) on his wedding night, and with his death three days later: “at the end of the week, Anne – she must have heard him after all – makes room for him beside her!” (228)

The character of Georgia Wrenn is obviously modeled on Elizabeth Bisland herself: she is American, from a Southern state; she is resourceful, confident, spontaneous, and independent; she is travelling alone, causing scandal among the conformist Oxford community for refusing to share lodgings with her respectable connections, and has rented a little house only for herself; her age is not specified in the novel, but she is described as a young woman; marriage is not the first of her interests, but she is not a cold woman and follows her natural inclinations. All these qualities and attitudes Georgia shares with her author. The novel also depicts Georgia’s (and probably Bisland’s) astonishment at English
rigid conventionalities and reserve, and, by comparing them to the more direct and progressive American ways, it provides a critique to them. Her observations, at times amused, at times witty, other times outright frustrated, express an amazement at English middle-class society, especially at its slavery to rumors and the fear of losing one’s reputation, which leads to avoiding what could make one happy. The American point of view is quite strong, and the novel offers an interesting insight into the mind of an American woman visiting England – most likely, Bisland’s mind. At Edward’s expressing his despair in front of the gossip concerning them, an incredulous Georgia bursts out:

‘And you mind? You care what a lot of old chumps say? You mind about an old cat like Mrs. Pennington Bruce, who probably does not know enough to come in when it rains? Why, you are perfectly silly,’ cries she, with as fighting a light flashing in her eyes as ever shone in those of her countrymen when they gripped each other’s throats in that most murderous of all recorded wars of theirs. He [Edward] would be deaf indeed if he failed to hear the withering contempt in her tone; a contempt that envelops himself no less than the objects of his reprobation.” (129)

When *A Widower Indeed* came out, the general feeling among critics was that Bisland’s main contribution was to provide character details about the American woman, along with the occasional bits of Southern dialect. The press saw Miss Wrenn as a charming and fresh character, “wholesome as a summer morning,” although a little too “American” in her speech, which it perceived as exaggerated. (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 15 Feb. 1892, no. 8394, p.3) Overall, *A Widower Indeed* received mixed reviews: some called it a tedious and disappointing book, others conceded that the plot was engaging, but the end was generally felt as unnecessarily bleak; the fact that the melancholy, weak protagonist is the architect of his own misfortunes did not prepare readers for his sudden death as a raving lunatic, and in such a short time too. The *Pall Mall Gazette* described it as “grim, pitiful tragicomedy,” but appreciated “the delicate insight, the humour, the sympathy with which the situation of the hapless widower is depicted.”(15 Feb. 1892, no. 8394, p.3) However, most papers agreed that neither author was at her best.

Differently from Georgia Wrenn, Elizabeth Bisland’s English stay ended up with an engagement.213 In 1891, she went back to America, where she got married, and her book *In Seven Stages: A Flying* 

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213 Bisland married the American attorney Charles Wetmore, who had graduated at Harvard Law School and who worked in a Wall Street law firm. They had met in New York before her race, and he came to visit her while she was staying in England. They got married in October 1891. They had no children. In 1910, Wetmore was stricken with an illness not clear to us (Bisland never identified it in any of her essays or letters, noting only that it affected the nerves). In the face of a sudden uncertain future, Wetmore put aside his job and he and Bisland travelled together for a year through Japan, China, Singapore, Ceylon, and India, revisiting many of the places she had first seen during her world race in 1889-1890. In 1913, the couple moved to England, looking for rest amid what Bisland remembered as the peaceful English countryside. However, the next year the First World War broke out, and Bisland volunteered in the local hospitals for a year before returning to the USA. In June 1919, Wetmore died in a sanatorium after months of suffering. Elizabeth spent
Trip Around the World was published and sold well. Bisland and her husband settled first in Long Island, then in Washington, D.C., where she continued to work as a journalist and published collections of essays on various topics, from gardening to the pleasures of literature to the rights of women.\textsuperscript{214} Her only fictional work after the collaboration with Broughton was an autobiographical novel, A Candle of Understanding (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903) which was highly regarded at her time. Bisland never wrote other novels. When Helen Black compiled Broughton’s biography for her Notable Women Authors of the Day, (37-44), she did not even mention that Broughton ever collaborated – just as she had ignored F.C. Philips’s collaborations – and the episode, together with its outcome, was soon forgotten.

A “literary crime,” or, “a very indigestible pie:” The Fate of Fenella\textsuperscript{215}

In 1892 a large amount of coauthored fiction was published. A remarkable case was the epistolary novel A Fellowe and His Wife (London: Osgood & McIlvaine) by Scottish writer William Sharp (1855-1905), who later published independently under the pen name Fiona Macleod, and best-selling American author Blanche Willis Howard (1847-1898), who had settled in Germany and had become Baroness von Teuffel. A Fellowe and His Wife is a fictional exchange of letters between two aristocrats, Count Odo von Jaromar and his wife, Countess Ilse. The authors openly declared that they split their parts, with Blanche Willis Howard writing the letters of the Count, and William Sharp those of the Countess. At least, this is what is plainly stated in the first right-hand page after the title page of the book.

\textsuperscript{214} “The oldest of all empires is that of man; no royal house is as ancient as his,” wrote Bisland in her collection of essays The Secret Life: Being the Book of a Heretic. (Bisland 1906, 189) Women’s condition always attracted Bisland’s attention: while still in her early twenties and living in New Orleans, she established the New Orleans Woman’s Club, whose goals were equal salaries for women and assistance when a member was out of work or ill. (Goodman 2013, 55) The opening essay of her collection At the Sign of the Hobby Horse (1910), entitled “The Morals of the Modern Heroine,” observed that female characters in books written by men had basically been reduced to two main types: “the passionless goddess and the greedy child […] and, tucked in between these extremes of virtues and vices on the heroic scale, an endless chain of rosy, smiling, comfortable young persons, with the morals of rabbits and the mentality of butterflies.” (5) Her last collection of essays, The Truth About Men and Other Matters, appeared in 1927 and dealt once again, among other issues, with relations between the sexes: “[t]he record of the race, hitherto accepted as the truth about ourselves, has been the story of facts and conditions as the male saw them […] No secret has been so well-kept as the secret of what women have thought about life.” (1)

\textsuperscript{215} The Graphic, 9 July 1892, no. 1.180, p. 23; Aberdeen Evening Express, 21 April 1892, no. 3908, p. 2.
In the same year, two collaborative novels appeared in print, each written by a would-be canonical author together with a relative of his: *The Naulahka* (London: William Heinemann) by Rudyard Kipling and his (almost) brother-in-law Wolcott Balestier, and the *The Wrecker* (London: Cassell) by Robert Louis Stevenson and his step-son Lloyd Osbourne. The collaborative works by both Stevenson and Kipling are among the most neglected and underrated texts of their production, and even though they have recently received more critical attention than most of the coauthored novels explored here, they would need further re-evaluation.

Kipling (1865-1936) and the American agent Wolcott Balestier (1861-1891) had started to write the novel in mid 1890, and by the following spring the work was practically planned, with Kipling responsible for the Indian scenes and Balestier for the American ones. However, Balestier died in December 1891, while *The Naulahka* was still appearing in instalments in *The Century Magazine*; after the fourth instalment, then, everything was revised for the press by Kipling. (Mallett, 2003) This was the only time Kipling collaborated, except for a collection of tales and a little book of parodies written with his sister Trixie in India. Before becoming acquainted with Kipling, Balestier had published three unsuccessful novels in America. Apparently, Balestier had previously asked Mrs Humphry Ward to write a novel with him, a proposal she had rejected. (Seymour-Smith, 1989) From this account, it seems that the American writer knew he needed a literary ally, a talented partner who
could help him achieve success, as James Rice had done with Besant. Surprisingly, there is no mention of Balestier in Kipling’s autobiography.

R.L. Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne (1868-1947)’s *The Wrecker* was preceded by *The Wrong Box* (London: Longmans, Green & Co. 1889) and was followed by *The Ebb-Tide* (London: William Heinemann, 1894). Buckton’s hypothesis that Stevenson and Osbourne’s literary partnership was a direct consequence of their “partnership of travel” seems convincing: the sharing of close, often uncomfortable quarters and the common experience of adverse situations in foreign lands “led to their merger as authorial figures.” (Buckton 2007, 249-50) As for their method, apparently each one was responsible for specific chapters, with Stevenson taking responsibility for the overall structure of the novel. (Buckton 2007, 250) *The Wrong Box* was originally a draft by Osbourne, then just above twenty, with which Stevenson was so impressed that he decided to develop it; his step-son commented on Stevenson’s re-handling of his draft in Frankenstein-like fashion, saying that “he breathed into it his own great creative power […] and made the narrative live.” (Buckton 2007, 41) At the same time, Stevenson’s correspondence reveals that his creative energies were renewed by the collaboration with his young partner. Thus, this peculiar partnership between two men so distant in age (Stevenson was eighteen years older than Osbourne) seems to have benefited both. The very short preface to the first edition of *The Wrong Box* plays with this age difference:

‘Nothing like a little judicious levity,’ says Michael Finsbury in the text: nor can any better excuse be found for the volume in the reader’s hand. The authors can but add that one of them is old enough to be ashamed of himself, and the other young enough to learn better.

R.L.S.
L.O.

The thing to be “ashamed of” was the macabre subject of the narration, which they knew would be offensive to Victorian sensibility. The authors anticipate critiques and find excuses in a good-humoured way: Stevenson declares himself too old to write this kind of novels, while Osbourne is said to be excused by his young age, with the prospect of reforming in the future. 1892 also saw the publication of the product of an experimental coauthorship which caused a weave of sensation, and took coauthorship to a further level. The novel was coauthored by twenty-four

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216 In *The Wrong Box*, Stevenson and Osbourne defied cultural taboos about death. Critics of the time saw it as a kind of tasteless practical joke. See Buckton 2007, 39-41.

217 Although interesting, *The Wrong Box* and the other coauthored novels by Stevenson and Osbourne, as well as those by Kipling and Balestier, will not be discussed in this work which is mainly devoted to non-canonical authors.
popular writers\textsuperscript{218} and it was entitled \textit{The Fate of Fenella}. The coauthors, both men and women (writing in alternated chapter), were all well-known to the coeval public, and three of them – Justin McCarthy, May Crommelin\textsuperscript{219} and F.C. Philips – had already taken part in collaborations. Despite their popularity in their day, only two out of twenty-four have entered the canon: Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. Some others, like Florence Marryat, have been reevaluated only lately. Beside the striking number of collaborators, what is peculiar about the novel is its compositional method: each author wrote one chapter simply continuing the preceding ones, then passed it on to the next author, without any initial planning or communication with fellow-authors. The scheme of having many famous writers collaborating on a novel without planning was the consequence of a previous experiment carried out in the same magazine. The year before, an experiment to involve the readers had produced \textit{A 'Novel' Novel}, which had been written by twenty women, all amateurs and readers of \textit{The Gentlewoman}.\textsuperscript{220} In the same number where we find the announcement of the beginning of the serialisation of \textit{Fenella}, there is also a blurb for the book edition of \textit{A 'Novel' Novel}. Naturally, the compositional method deeply affected the development of the plot of \textit{Fenella}. Having just the space of one chapter to shine, each coauthor tried his/her best to impress the readers; thus an accumulation of increasingly shocking events was gradually built. Also, as there was collaboration but not consultation between the coauthors, it happened that some of the plot got lost or distorted in the novel. Each chapter ends with a cliff-hanger, and the plot is very dense, boasting an assassination, a hypnotic trance, an abduction and a following pursuit across the Atlantic, an evil Frenchwoman, prophetic dreams, a shipwreck, and visionary fire. The novel follows the story of a young woman, “slangy and lively,” (\textit{London Evening Standard}, 6 June 1892, p.2) named Fenella Ffrench, who is separated from her husband, Frank Onslow, and lives alone with their child Ronny. She has a scandalous reputation: she and her husband broke up because of mutual jealousy over each other’s very public flirts. She has a relationship with Count de Murger, while Frank has a mistress, Madame de Vigny.


\textsuperscript{219} May Crommelin had coauthored a novel with James Moray Brown: \textit{Violet Vvivian} (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1889).

\textsuperscript{220} Lady Constance Howard, Miss Lane, Mrs Laughton, Mrs Sparshott, Miss Ernestine Tate, Mrs G.B. Burgin, Miss Emma Wylie, Miss D. Bellerby, Miss Eva Roos, Miss Kathleen Watson, Mrs J.M. Bull, Mrs J. Alexander Kennedy, Miss Ethel Mackenzie, Mrs Vallance, Miss Minnie Laud, Miss Hilda Somers, The Countess of Munster, Miss Edith Ostlere, Mrs Lena M. Horsford, Miss Daisy Moutray Read.
Figure 22 Blurb of A ‘Novel’ Novel, in The Gentlewoman, 28 November 1892.

Figure 23 Jacyinth's declaration of love to Fenella, ch. II (The Fate of Fenella, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892).
The story begins when Fenella and Frank run into each other at a hotel in Harrowgate, and find that they still love each other, but are too proud to admit it. One night, Frank goes to Fenella’s room to slip a love letter under her door, but sees that the German count is with her. Desperate, he is overtaken by a sudden state of trance, or sleep-walking, and kills the count. Frank does not remember anything of what he has done; when he comes back to himself, he is in his own room, and it is early morning. Thinking of having lost his ex-wife forever, he runs away to Paris, also abandoning Madame de Vigny. Meanwhile, the police arrive at the hotel, and Fenella, in order to screen Frank, takes the blame on herself: she declares that the count had tried to rape her, and so, in order defend her honour, she had killed him. She is thus tried for murder, but is released thanks to the help of the loyal Mr. Jacynth, a barrister who is in love with her. After the trial, a wretched, redeemed Fenella retires to the quiet, secluded life of Guernsey, in the Channel Islands, leaving the care of her child to Jacynth’s sister. In the meantime, Frank’s abandoned mistress finds a love letter Frank had intended to give Fenella the night of the murder: on discovering that he still loves his wife, she seeks revenge; she accepts the marriage proposal of an American politician, then abducts Fenella and Frank’s son and takes him with her to New York. Frank and Fenella meet (again) by chance in Guernsey, when he learns of the terrible trial she has endured. Fenella, too stressed by the memory of recent events, has a breakdown. From this point onwards she plays a passive role, while Frank crosses the Atlantic to rescue little Ronny; however, Madame de Vigny manages to have him shut up in a lunatic asylum. The situation is solved by Jacynth, who followed in the pursuit and succeeded in having Frank’s evil mistress arrested. While they are returning to Europe, however, there is a fire (caused by Madame de Vigny) and a consequent shipwreck, of which Jacynth, Ronny, Frank and Madame de Vigny are the only survivors. In Guernsey, Madame de Vigny’s ex-husband sees her and tries to kill her, but Frank saves her life; she is arrested again, this time for good. Fenella and Frank can finally reunite, but a few moments later he has a heart attack and dies. The novels ends with Fenella going out of the house, moments after her husband’s death, together with Jacynth, on whom she has been increasingly relying and with whom she feels she will be happy again.

*The Fate of Fenella* was originally composed for *The Gentlewoman. The Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen* (price sixpence) where it was serialised in twenty-four weekly installments from December 1891 until April 1892. The fact that Fenella appeared in this paper tells us the kind of readers it was aimed at: as the name of the paper suggests, it was a magazine concerned with fashion, beauty, household matters, and gossip, and it was targeted at middle-class women.

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221 The opening chapter of *The Fate of Fenella* was the special feature of the Christmas number of 1891.
As it was the norm with this kind of papers, the instalments of *Fenella* were accompanied by beautiful illustrations, usually three per chapter, so that there are over seventy in total. The opening chapter was matched with a satin panel reading Tennyson’s lines “Her eyes are home of silent prayer.” Such extra feature was advertised as an opportunity not to be missed. “Being on satin, it is not only useful as a picture, but may be worked into a screen or cushion,” suggested an article in the *Tottenham and Edmonton Weekly Herald* (27 Nov. 1891, no. 1.579, p. 3)

After the end of the serialisation, *Fenella* was published in three volumes by Hutchinson & Co in May 1892. The first volume edition was carefully designed to emphasise the multiple authorship: in the title-page, all the twenty-four names are listed in the order in which they wrote the chapters. (figure 25)
The names of the authors are also mentioned in the table of contents at the beginning of each volume. Each chapter is separated from the preceding and the following one by a blank page, in order to stress that each one stands on its own. Also, at the beginning of every chapter, together with its title, the name of its author is repeated. The cover is probably the most interesting paratextual element (figure 26): it bears the facsimiles of the signatures of the twenty-four authors and it was clearly designed to make the potential buyer notice at just one glance the multiple collaboration.
The names of the authors are thus insistently repeated in many places, as they constituted the most important selling factor. They were also used to effectively advertise the novel. In the ad present in the number of 28 November 1891 of *The Gentlewoman* (figure 27), the names of the coauthors are emphasised and listed in bold, capital letters; each collaborator is defined “a well-known writer of fiction” and *Fenella* is described as the “most extraordinary novel of modern times” and “a literary curiosity.” The original compositional method was also a part of the advertising strategy, as it – together with the names of the authors – would probably stir the curiosity of readers. The sentence at the bottom of the page, “orders will be executed with strict impartiality and in the order as received,”
besides being informative fulfils also an important marketing function, as it suggests the image of a crowd of readers pushing and shoving to get the latest instalment by their favourite novelists.

Figure 27 Blurb of The Fate of Fenella, in The Gentlewoman, 28 November 1891.
Interestingly, at this stage not all the authors had been enrolled yet: indeed, no precise number of coauthors is specified in the blurb. Only twenty-one writers are listed here as “authors already engaged.” Of this list, the first eleven would actually write the first eleven chapters, while the other names are not listed in the order in which their chapters would appear; besides, five of the final writers are still missing, and there is one person, “F.C. Burnand,” who will not write any chapter at all. This reveals that the novel was produced as a work in progress as it was being serialised. Many ads of the novel appeared in the winter of 1891, all recommending the novelty of the experiment. “This Christmas number should be ordered at once, [...] and few ladies will like to miss the opportunity of having this extra number.” (Sussex Agricultural Express, 28 Nov. 1891, no. 5.573, p.2)

The volume edition presents an ‘EDITOR’S NOTE’ by J.S. Wood, the editor of The Gentlewoman, and dated April 1892 – the month in which the last instalment appeared. As most original allographic prefaces, this is a presentation and a recommendation of the novel it precedes. Interestingly, the recommendation of the novel draws exclusively on the ‘double’ originality of its compositional method. No word is spent on the content of the novel, on a possible message, or on the reception when first published in instalments. Apparently, the multiple authorship and the experimental way in which it was carried out were thought sufficient ways to catch the interest of the potential buyer. The beginning goes as follows:

\[
\text{that 24 well-known writers should each be able to affirm that ‘I wrote a twenty-fourth part of that novel’ is sufficiently striking even in these days of literary collaboration. (Wood 1892, v)}
\]

The fact that it took twenty-four people to make a collaboration “sufficiently striking” speaks volumes for the popularity of the practice at that time, which Wood significantly calls “these days of literary collaboration.” The second original feature of the novel that Wood emphasises is the peculiar way in which the authors collaborated – or rather did not collaborate in the ordinary sense of the word, as he explains:

\[
\text{but that each [author] should further be able to say that ‘I did so without any collaboration whatever, without a word exchanged, or a reference made, to my twenty-three fellow-workers’ will, I think, be regarded as somewhat startling. (Wood 1892, v)}
\]

Wood justifies the choice of not letting the coauthors talk to one another by arguing that collaboration as it is generally intended brings along many arguments, and, with such a crowd of people involved, it would have been madness to undertake such an enterprise. He ironically declares that, if he is alive to write this preface, it is thanks to this choice. Again, coauthorship emerges as inevitably connected with fights:
had it been otherwise [...] [the collaboration] must have produced a literary ‘Frankenstein’, which would have fallen upon and pulverised me, as soon as life was breathed into it, by twenty four persons discussing plot, plan, and characters from twenty-four points of view. (Wood 1892, v-vi)

After that, the editor reports that Walter Besant had declared “in reference to collaboration in novel writing” that “there must be one dominant mind responsible for the production of the work of two or more collaborateurs,” but he adds that, given the particular modality in which Fenella was developed, “it would be a little difficult to apply the theory in this case.” (Wood 1892, vi) He then challenges “the intelligent reader” to find out who had been the dominant mind in the composition of Fenella – which sounds like a veiled hint to himself. This hypothesis could make sense as it was Wood, the editor of the paper for which it was created, who arranged and coordinated the entire project in “ten months of patient labour” spent in “matching off a dozen pairs of authors and authoresses.” (Wood 1892, v)

Fenella proved a popular success: one year after its first publication, a fourth edition was already being issued (ad present in the St. James’s’ Gazette, 22 June 1893). However, reviews tore the novel to pieces. The London Evening Standard (6 June 1892, no. 21.191, p.2) called the experiment “a grotesque idea” and declared that “The Fate of Fenella provokes our curiosity, but is emphatically not amusing.” The reviewer writes that the result might have been amusing had the coauthors preserved their individualities, and “each to contribute a chapter after his or her own manner;” on the contrary, they have “carefully smoothed away their own characteristic styles in order to dovetail their manner as well as their matter with what has gone before, till the whole of the book is one commonplace level.” The main problem with the book, according to the reviewer, is that there is not “a grain of commonsense” in it: although the first chapters are brisk and entertaining, after Frank’s hypnotic trance and Fenella’s trial the story loses all compactness and coherence; until chapter VII, “the story progresses fairly. We have the separated husband and wife, the distinguished barrister, the offending attaché, the foreign adventuress […]” but then “we [readers] feel ill-used. We are accustomed having our credulity played upon by one author at a time: but to have four-and-twenty of them set upon us at once, all the same story, and doing their worst, is rather too much.” In chapter IX, the story is already hopeless, “so that when Mrs. Lovett Cameron begins her chapter she has hardly a fair field,” by chapter XI, when little Ronny gets abducted, “we have lost all curiosity in the story,” and “in the middle of the second volume it falls to pieces, and everybody seems solely put to

222 A review criticised this passage: “[w]hat can be the meaning of this? Frankenstein was a perfectly harmless and ingenious person. Can it be that the editor fancies that the name of Frankenstein’s monster was also Frankenstein?” (Belfast News-letter, 18 May 1892, no. 23.985, p. 7)
it to carry it on at all.” “Mr. Richard Dowling [ch. XIV], Mrs. Hungerford [ch. XV], Arthur A’Beckett [ch. XVI], and Jean Middlemass [ch. XVII] all try, and all fail.” In the third volume, “Clement Scott, Clo Graves, H.W. Lucy, Adeline Sergeant, George Manville Fenn, and Tasma are as dull as may be, and lastly comes F. Anstey to finish up.” F. Anstey, the writer of chapter XXIV, is attacked for having ended the story in the most absurd way:

The final assessment of the London Evening Standard is utterly negative: “[i]f The Fate of Fenella is meant for a joke, it is […] a dreary one enough. As a literary experiment it is a failure […] and it is often heavy as well as foolish reading.” The reviewer concludes that the twenty-four coauthors have committed “four-and-twenty literary crimes. They ought to be tried, convicted, and sentenced to read each other’s works for four-and-twenty months.”

That Fenella was to be considered a literary crime was an opinion shared by many. For instance, the Graphic wrote:

The St. James’s Gazette remarked that, actually, it was not so much the compositional method to be striking, as promoted in the Editor’s note, but rather “to find that as many as two dozen well-known writers could lend themselves to such an ineptitude.” (7 June 1892, no. 3739, p. 6) In a highly ironical review entitled “The Fun of Fenella,” the Pall Mall Gazette imagined that the collaboration that led
to the creation of *Fenella* would become exemplar in Walter Besant’s new Academy of Fiction, where “The Fate of Fenella might be proposed as a text-book in the art.” (21 July 1892, no. 8528, p. 3) The *Belfast News-letter* (18 May 1892, no. 23.985, p. 7) described the novel as a “patchwork” and compares it to the ‘crazy quilts’ of America, made of many different fabrics all patched up together: “[o]ur American friends have a cover which they call a crazy quilt. The *Fate of Fenella* is a literary crazy quilt.” The novel was also defined “an indigestible pie” by the *Aberdeen Evening Express* (21 April 1892, no. 3908, p. 2). A slightly more positive opinion was expressed by the *Dundee Corrier* (8 Oct. 1892, no. 12.251, p. 6), which, on the occasion of the publication of *Fenella’s* cheap edition, recommended the novel to “those who delight in curiosities of literature,” if only for “the novelty of the work” and as “a criterion of what may be achieved in this direction.” However, it admitted that the result “conveys the impression of being […] a story without a soul,” and that “the reader can hardly escape the conclusion that the opening chapter is undoubtedly the best.” Similarly, *Freeman’s Journal* wrote that the peculiar compositional method had “destroyed the artistic merit” and that “the only interest of the novel is the attempt which the lover of modern popular fiction may make to read into each chapter the peculiarities of the novelist to whom it is assigned.” (3 June 1892, p. 2) On the whole, *Freeman’s* concluded that “we do not think the work, though it has its good points, justifies any repetition or imitation. At the best it is a tour de force, and in an age of startling novelties it will doubtless attract many readers, who will, at least, have a sufficiently diversified menu to suit their palate withal.” (*Freeman’s Journal*, 3 June 1892, p. 2)

The change in Fenella’s personality – her ‘redemption’ – was largely perceived as the most incoherent feature of the novel. The *Pall Mall Gazette* (21 July 1892, no. 8528, p. 3) points out how the protagonist passes almost overnight from being a “lively young lady” quite ready to flirt with any man at hand, who carries cotton-wool in her purse to be stuffed in coach-drivers’ ears, and who shamelessly winks at her ex-husband, to becoming in the course of a few chapters the perfectly modest and quiet Victorian wife, who dresses with Quaker-like simplicity.

Indeed, at first Fenella is presented as a *femme fatale*: the choice of her surname, Ffrench, is not a chance; she pretends to be a widow and flirts with Jacynth without telling him that she has a husband; her reputation is on everyone’s mouth. As the novel progresses, she gets increasingly sobered and turns into the Victorian angel of the house; her role becomes more and more passive, as Jacynth starts to act on her behalf; after the trial, she falls ill of brain fever, too exhausted by the events, and she basically waits at home while her husband and Jacynth go around the world solving problems. By chapter XXIII, Fenella has been reduced to the role of the anxious mother; now Jacynth likes her even better, and appreciates the fact that she cannot take decisions by herself:
 Could she belong, he [Jacynth] asked himself, to the order of women of whom Dumas, fils, speaks, when he says that in certain natures the instinct of maternity overcomes the instinct of wifehood, and that the woman ceases to be wife and mother, and becomes mother and wife, or possible mother only? […] She was amazingly reasonable now, and might develop into a delightful companion for a man of sense. […] Another point connected with the present state of affairs, which it was pleasant to be reminded of, was the way in which Fenella seemed to lean upon him. She would open the door […] at all hours of the day to ask him to decide this or that question for her. (The Fate of Fenella, Hutchinson 1892, vol. III, p. 164)

Figure 28 Frontispiece of The Fate of Fenella (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892).

Figure 29 Jacynth and Fenella, ch. II (The Fate of Fenella, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1892).
At the beginning of the novel, Fenella’s eyes are associated with those of a tiger; the first sentence of chapter I is indeed connected with this image: “[h]er hair, gloves, and shoes were tan-colour, and closely allied to tan, too, was the tawny, true tiger tint of her hazel eyes.” (The Fate of Fenella, Hutchinson 1892, vol. I, p. 3) But then the tiger gets tamed, she is more and more compared to a child. From her initial fierce independence, living alone with her child apart from her estranged husband, she becomes progressively child-like and dependent upon the barrister’s help and presence: “Fenella allowed herself to be guided by him; she had got so much into the habit of depending entirely upon him lately that somehow it felt the natural thing to do.” (The Fate of Fenella, Hutchinson 1892, vol. III, p. 226) The final image of Fenella, in chapter XXIV, is that of a person with “childlike, appealing eyes,” (The Fate of Fenella, Hutchinson 1892, vol. III, p. 229) who asks Jacynth what she is to do next.

As the coeval press remarked, The Fate of Fenella and similar experiments are remarkable more for being freaks of literature than for an intrinsic artistic value. The year before Fenella’s publication, Brander Matthews had theorised that multiple collaborations were “mere curiosities of literature,” and that “[n]othing of real value is likely to be manufactured by a joint stock company of unlimited authorship.”223 (Matthews 1891, 4) In his opinion, “the only collaboration worthy of serious criticism, the only one really pregnant and vital” is “the association of two, and of two only.” (Matthews 1891, 5) The American coauthor went as far as to proclaim that “literary collaboration might be defined, fairly enough, as the union of two writers for the production of one book.” (Matthews 1891, 5) His argument has indeed a point, especially when the collaboration was carried out under the same circumstances of Fenella. Still, the existence of these literary ventures, and of all the other collaborative experiments of the time, is significant as they testify to the vivacity, the energy and the playfulness of the popular literary marketplace at the end of the nineteenth century. As a matter of fact, the dominant tone of fin de siècle collaboration was playfulness.

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223 Matthews’s choice of words (“joint stock company of unlimited authorship”) highlights the commercial aspect of such multiple partnerships.
Chapter Five: Literary Collaboration and the Late Victorian Imagination

So far, we have investigated the activity of some of the most significant coauthors of the late Victorian period, analysed how they worked together, and how they perceived collaboration. Now, it is time to take into consideration another crucial aspect, the other side of the coin: how coauthorship was perceived not by coauthors, but by literary critics and the reading public. As collaborative writing gained popularity, the press gradually started to pay more and more attention to it. The sharing of the textual space and the dispersion of authorial control over the text implicit in collaboration triggered a lively debate in the press over the benefits and the limits of ‘writing in double harness.’ Also, and crucially, the idea of a shared writing practice had become very popular and yet very difficult to explain; the ways to collaborate were so numerous, the levels of ‘actual’ collaboration varied, and the accounts of former agents in the practice ranged from stories of idyllic companionships to acrimonious literary divorces. The fact was, collaboration eluded definite understanding. The more popular the phenomenon became, the more people felt the need to discuss it and definitely dispel the mystery. So, as the previous chapters have taken into consideration the relationship between literary collaboration and those who practised it, this chapter tries instead to answer some questions concerning the relationship between literary collaborators and their audience: how did the Victorian reader look at a shared creative act? Which were the most frequent questions people asked themselves about collaboration? Which were the aspects of joint authorship the public was most curious about? In brief, how was literary collaboration perceived and represented in the late Victorian imagination, and how did the discourse change over the years, as the popularity of coauthorship increased, reached its peak, and eventually declined?

A way to answer these questions may be to look at the periodical press of the time. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, newspapers and magazines were so many and so widespread that they played a prominent role in the lives of educated Victorians. The Victorian era was indeed the great age of periodicals. From the beginning of the nineteenth century to about 1850, periodicals were still few and intended for a minority public. For instance, the Edinburgh Review and the Quarterly sold about 14.000 copies in the early 1820s; Leigh Hunt’s Examiner at best sold 7.000 copies; the Westminster Review did not go beyond a circulation of about 3.000, while Cornhill never did better than a circulation of 110,000 copies in 1860. All these magazines were bought and/or read by a middle-class minority. Even the Athenaeum, which appeared in 1831 as a fourpenny with hopes of attracting working-class readers, stopped at 18.000 copies. There was no mass market yet. The same
happened with newspapers: in the early 1830s, only 630,000 newspapers were sold each week, a proportion of one copy to every thirty-six inhabitants. *The Times* was still selling just 60,000 in 1853. However, in that period things changed dramatically: in 1853 a new legislation abolished advertising duties, and in 1855 the newspaper stamp duty was finally repealed. These were key changes that allowed for the publication of newspapers and magazines at much-reduced prices. The new legislation, along with the expansion of the reading public thanks to the Education Act of 1870 and the steady increase of the population led to the proliferation of periodicals. Technical progress played a crucial role as well. In 1800 hand presses could produce no more than 5,000 copies in a day; at half-century, steam power could make 40,000 in four hours; by 1900 web press printing from continuous rolls, and other innovations, allowed for the production of 200,000 per hour. New chemical pulp processes increased the production of paper from 11,000 tons, hand-made, in 1800, to 652,000 tons, machine-made, in 1900. There were also technical improvements in the reproduction of illustrations and in the means of distribution. As a consequence, the prices of newspapers dropped from an average of 1s. 6d. in 1800 to 3d. at the end of the century. Penny dailies appeared, like the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* and the *Liverpool Daily Post*, the *London Evening News*, the *Daily Telegraph and Courier*, and so on. By 1875, the *Daily Telegraph and Courier* claimed the largest circulation in the world: 200,000 copies. The *Daily News* was second with 150,000. Halfpenny papers moved onto the scene as well, particularly with evening editions; from the 1870s there were also a few papers selling at a farthing. A glimpse at the sheer increase of the periodical press: at mid-century there were about 500 newspapers and magazines in the country; by 1870, there were 1,390 newspapers and 626 magazines; ten years later, 1,986 newspapers and 1,097 magazine; by 1890, 2,234 newspapers and 1,778 magazines; and by the turn of the century, 2,488 newspapers and 2,446 magazines. And many of these sold by hundreds of thousands (for example, in 1900 the *Daily Mail* had a circulation of 700,000 daily) (Saunders 1964, 199-201) This had truly become the mass market.

Late Victorian newspapers and magazines thus offer us an insight into what can be easily called the ‘public opinion’ on a certain topic within a certain time span. They were the natural home for discussions of the ‘hot’ topics of the moment. “[P]eriodicals not only were the representatives and creators of public opinion but also were to a very large extent [...] in fact – the public,” aptly comments Mays. (1998, 167-68) By looking at coeval articles and reviews, this chapter thus delves into the discourse that developed in the British press about literary collaboration from the second half of the nineteenth century to 1900.

The present research has drawn mainly on two resources: the *British Newspaper Archive* (https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/) and the archives of the British Library in London.
Browsing for articles containing the words ‘literary collaboration’ in the *British Newspaper Archive (BNA)*, precious data emerge.\(^{224}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Number of articles on literary collaboration in the BNA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850-1859</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860-1869</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870-1879</td>
<td>244</td>
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<tr>
<td>1880-1889</td>
<td>1,546</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890-1899</td>
<td>3,851</td>
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<tr>
<td>1900-1909</td>
<td>2,754</td>
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<tr>
<td>1910-1919</td>
<td>1,147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-1929</td>
<td>1,125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By putting these data into a graph, the hottest years in terms of metadiscourse promptly emerge:

Predictably, the peak in the publication of articles on collaboration corresponds to a peak in the publication of coauthored novels. A crucial year in terms of critical interest is 1892. This is not a chance: in February 1892 Besant published his commentary “On Literary Collaboration,” in which, as discussed in chapter 2, he addressed some controversial points about coauthorship. Besant’s article sparked a series of reactions, and its echoes were felt during the subsequent months in a huge number of periodicals.

\(^{224}\) It is necessary to note here that not all articles are about collaboration in fiction; many are concerned with collaboration on plays or, more rarely, on poetry. Consequently, they could be misleading for my purpose; however, some general notions on the practice of collaborating remain valid and interesting, and are to be taken into account. Since my aim is to delve into the discourse on collaboration, these articles are useful as they help us get a wider perspective on how collaboration was generally perceived.
As for the papers that dealt preeminent with collaboration, *The Era* was a leading title during the 1880s and the 1890s. Founded in 1838, it was originally a Sunday paper much concerned with politics, which, after mid-century and various changes of editors, grew into a far more commercial success, and gradually sports and theatre became the main focus. More and more space was allotted to theatre, so that *The Era* eventually became known as ‘The Great Theatrical Journal.’ In the last decades of the century it was regarded as perhaps the most important theatrical paper in London, “a status symbol, even, for those walking down the street with a copy clutched in their hand (due in part to the lofty price proving that one was serious about the theatre), but also because its content was generally considered to be of a higher quality than its rival papers.” (britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

The price of sixpence tells us that this journal was targeted at an upper middle-class readership, since it was much higher than the average price of newspapers. A direct, cheaper competitor of *The Era* was *The Stage*, which also presents a lot of articles on literary collaboration. It began being issued in 1880 as a monthly, priced 3d, but in the following year it became a weekly; by 1890 its price has dropped to 2d, and it remained unchanged through all the last decade of the nineteenth century. As the title suggests, it reported on entertainment news, in particular about the London theatre scene. It is not surprising that *The Era* and *The Stage* present an impressive number of articles on collaboration: coauthorship had a long tradition in playwriting and to coauthor a play was extremely common. Although they dealt primarily with theatre – and my interest, instead, lies in collaboration in fiction – *The Era* and *The Stage* prove to be valuable resources: as a matter of fact, their articles usually start discussing a specific collaboration on a play and most of the times end up with general reflections on coauthorship.

The daily *London Evening Standard* also published a great deal of articles on collaboration, almost as many as *The Era*, especially in the 1880s. It had started publication in 1827 as *The Standard*, and by 1860 it had a morning and an evening edition, the latter eventually becoming the only edition under the name of *The Evening Standard* due to its greater popularity. Generally conservative, it was known for its domestic and foreign news coverage, and also its attention to the arts. From an initial price of 5d., it dropped first to 3d. and, from 1858, to just one penny, thus becoming accessible to virtually everybody. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, the *St. James’s Gazette*, the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Globe* and the *Morning Post* also frequently discussed collaboration in this period.²²⁵ Significantly, only the *Globe* dealt primarily with art and literary topics. The *Globe* was a London evening newspaper founded in 1803 as a booksellers’ trade journal, originally supporting the Whigs. However, in 1866, under the ownership of reactionary Conservative Dudley Docke, it adopted a Conservative stance and

²²⁵ For more details, see infra Appendix B.
presented itself as a literary paper for London’s educated classes. From an initial price of sixpence, in 1860 it was still sold at 4d; then it became progressively cheaper, until, in 1870, it was finally priced at one penny. The *Globe* remained an important advertising platform for booksellers. All the other journals of my list were popular penny dailies that reported general news, tackled a great deal of issues, and were aimed at the large lower and middle class readership. The *Pall Mall Gazette* (which in 1923 merged with the *Evening Standard*) started publication in 1865 at the price of two pence, dropping to one penny from 1882; it enjoyed contributions from notable authors as George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, and Robert Louis Stevenson, and dealt with the issues of the day (for example, as editor, William Stead reported on child prostitution in London, which led to a change in the legal age of consent from 13 to 16). The *St. James’s Gazette* first appeared in 1880 as a London evening newspaper, at the initial price of one penny, and, like the *Pall Mall*, it eventually merged with the *Evening Standard* (in 1905). The *Morning Post* and the *Glasgow Herald* were newspapers with a long tradition: both had been established at the end of the eighteenth century (when the *Morning Post* had defended the French revolution and had attracted writers such as Coleridge and Paine), and were respectively priced six and seven pence; their prices steadily decreased in the course of the nineteenth century, until in the early 1870s the *Glasgow Herald* started to be sold at one penny, while the *Morning Post* became a penny daily only in 1881. During the 1880s and 1890s, the *Morning Post* maintained its blend of news from home and abroad, but also devoted much attention to fashionable society and advertisements. The *Glasgow Herald* started to give more space to literature and art from the late 1870s, thanks to its editors James Stoddart and his successor Charles Russell, who greatly improved the paper’s literary and artistic sections.226

This brief overview of the periodicals presenting the highest number of articles on literary collaboration points to the fact that it was a subject that appealed to the wide public, and that it was not at all confined to the sole attention of an elite of upper class readers or intellectuals. On the contrary, it was mostly dealt with by the regular, widely-read newspapers of the time, for which it was a common thing to include an article on coauthorship in their literary sections. Therefore, as this chapter hopes to prove, collaboration was a serious topic for discussion in the late Victorian age. This chapter will also present some real-life cases, reported in the news sections of newspapers, which bear witness to the fact that literary collaboration had penetrated deep down into the layers of Victorian society, so much so that it was used in various ways and gave origin to some curious cases.

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226 All information so far about newspapers is taken from the website of the *British Newspaper Archive*. 219
Another aim of the present section will therefore be to show that literary collaboration was a truly middle-class phenomenon.\textsuperscript{227}

**The rise of collaboration**

At the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, literary collaboration was as a rule associated with theatre. Collaboration had indeed a long tradition in playwriting: Elizabethan authors had collaborated largely and famously. As Jeffrey Masten (1997) points out, coauthorship was the dominant mode of textual production in Renaissance theatre. According to him, virtually two-thirds of the plays written by professional dramatists of the period reflect the participation of more than one writer, as also Gerald Eades Bentley (1986) maintains in his analysis of the profession of dramatist from 1590 to 1642. From the celebrated case of Beaumont and Fletcher\textsuperscript{228} to now-forgotten plays,

\textsuperscript{227} Part of this chapter was published in *Il Confronto Letterario* 71 (2019, II): 93-116.

\textsuperscript{228} John Fletcher (1579-1625) and Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) collaborated on plays from about 1607 to the latter’s early death. Beaumont studied at Oxford, while Fletcher was educated at Cambridge. Their close personal and professional relationship appears to date from about 1606-1607, but there is no record of the circumstances under which they first met; Jonson may have introduced them to each other, but nothing certain is known. For most of the years of their collaboration, they lived together on the Bankside of Southwark, near the Globe, and they shared everything: “[t]here was a wonderfull consimility of phansy between them […] They lived together on the Banke side, not far from the playhouse, both bachelors, lay together, had one wench in the house, between them, which they did so admire, the same cloaths and cloake, &c. between them.” (Aubrey, *Letters*, II, part I, p. 236, quoted in Stephen and Sidney 1960, vol. II, p. 55) They also used to stay together for occasional periods at Beaumont’s family seat, Grace-Dieu, in Leicestershire. Their literary partnership, born of close intimacy, “was not one of the sordid arrangements made between needy playwrights […]; it arose at their own, not at any theatrical manager’s prompting.” (Stephen and Sidney 1960, vol. II, p. 55) In 1613 Beaumont married an heiress and had two daughters, but the married life was a brief one, as he died at 32 in 1616. Initially they wrote five plays for boys’ companies. The earliest of the plays attributed to ‘Beaumont and Fletcher’ was the *Woman Hater*, which was entered at the Stationers’ Register in 1607 and published anonymously in the same year. The chronology of their work is uncertain, but at some point between 1608 and 1610 they began to write plays for the King’s Men. (Birch 2009, 107) Among their most famous and most frequently performed plays: *The Faithful Shepherdess* (considered among the best English pastoral plays), *The Scornful Lady* (which went into ten editions during the seventeenth century only), *The Maid’s Tragedy*, *Philaster*, *A King and No King*, *Cupid’s Revenge* (based on material in the second book of Sidney’s *Arcadia*, which was published in 1615 as the work of Fletcher, but from internal evidence many critics maintain it is clear that Beaumont was concerned in the authorship), and *The Coxcomb*. Stephen and Sidney suggest that in most plays Beaumont’s share outweighs Fletcher’s: “Beaumont had the firmer hand and statelier manner; his diction was more solid; there was a richer music in his verse. Fletcher excelled as a master of brilliant dialogue and sprightly repartee.” (vol. VIII, 305) Beaumont and Fletcher’s plays were first collected in 1647, fol., prefaced by various copies of commendatory verses. A fuller collection appeared in 1679, fol. Fletcher was engaged in other, even if less prolific, collaborations. Especially after Beaumont’s marriage, he worked frequently with Philip Massinger. He also collaborated with William Rowley, Thomas Middleton, Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and Shakespeare. (Birch 2009, 378; Trussler 1994, 102) According to some, Fletcher coauthored *Two Noble Kinsmen* with Shakespeare, even if its authorship is uncertain; it was entered in the Stationer’s Register and published in 1634 as by Fletcher and Shakespeare; later it was published as by Fletcher and Beaumont in their 1679 folio of their works; (Oliphant 1911, 426-27) it seems that Massinger had a hand in it, and that Shakespeare’s contributions may have been written towards the close of his career for a revival of the old play of *Palamon and Arsent*, and these additions may have come into the hands of Fletcher and Massinger after Shakespeare’s death. *Henry VIII* appears to be a joint production of Fletcher and Massinger, some Shakespearian passages having been incorporated.
the dramatic practice of early modern England was predominantly collaborative. A dramatic text was usually the joint accomplishment of different people, from its conception to its staging:

[T]he construction of meaning by a theatrical company was polyvocal – often beginning with a collaborative manuscript, which was then revised, cut, rearranged, and augmented by book-holders, copyists, and other writers, elaborated and improvised by actors in performance, accompanied by music and songs that may or may not have originated in a completely different context. (Masten 1997, 14)

Collaboration remained a regular practice in playwriting through the centuries. Around the 1850s and 1860s, the phrase ‘literary collaboration’ in British papers appears most frequently, if not exclusively, connected with dramatists and vaudeville authors. An article in the Graphic entitled “Collaboration, old and new,” reflected that “the providers of our daily dramatic diet have hardly produced one play a-piece single-handed” and that collaboration on plays had produced “the greatest comic masterpieces of modern days.” (13 Sept. 1884, no. 772, p. 22)

Collaboration started to be connected with fiction by the British press mainly thanks to Emile Erckmann (1822-1899) and Alexandre Chatrian (1826-1890), a popular pair of French coauthors that signed their joint works ‘Erckmann- Chatrian.’ They met in their twenties in Phalsbourg, in 1847, became friends and spent the summer roaming in the Vosges. Their first novel was serialised in 1849, but they achieved fame only ten years later (their drama L’Alsace en 1814, 1850, was a success but was banned after only two days) with L’Illustre Docteur Matheus, and in the course of their forty-year long partnership they wrote an impressive amount of fiction and drama, a great part of which was translated into English. Their production involves tales of supernatural horror and more importantly historical novels and plays. Emile Zola and Victor Hugo publicly praised them, and they enjoyed international fame in their days. (http://www.alalettre.com/erckmann-et-chatrian-bio.php)

This literary alliance was considered by the British press to have set the example for later British coauthors. Erckmann and Chatrian were often compared to Walter Scott, and their work was said by the Aberdeen Free Press to “have done for that region [Alsatia] what the Waverley novels did for Scotland.” (22 Aug. 1889, no. 6409, p. 4) When collaboration is mentioned in British newspapers during the 1860s and the 1870s, it is frequently in connection with Erckmann and Chatrian. However, from the early 1870s British coauthored fiction started to be discussed as well, thanks to the novels of Besant and Rice. Even if their first five novels came out anonymously, they all read ‘from the

A comedy, the Widow, was printed as the joint work of Jonson, Fletcher, and Middleton (but apparently it belonged wholly to Middleton). He died during the plague of 1625. Together with Shakespeare and Jonson, Fletcher formed the ‘triumvirate of wit’ of Jacobean London. (Trussler 1994, 102) Critics have long tried to sort out the different hands in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. The notion of authorship in the Renaissance and its later interpretations will be better discussed in chapter six.
authors of *Ready-Money Mortiboy*’ on their title pages. From 1872 to 1881 the works of the ‘firm’ Besant and Rice appealed to readers and critics alike, and coauthorship on fiction started to seriously enter the public discourse through the periodical press. Their works were widely reviewed, their literary partnership extensively commented. As we have seen in chapter two, neither Besant nor Rice published anything on their own while the collaboration was still on: their partnership worked so well that only Rice’s death interrupted it. Besides, while the collaboration was still on, neither of the two partners made any declaration as to how it worked: there was space enough for the press to speculate. They were virtually held to be among the best novelists of their days: the *London Evening Standard* (28 Oct. 1878, no. 16.931, p. 2) referred to them as “the prolific joint authors of some of the shrewdest and cleverest novels of the day,” and, reviewing *The Monks of Thelema*, wrote that “there are only a very few living authors who have written one as good […] the fun and the satire [are] […] infinitely better than the fun and satire of most other living novelists.” They were called “writers […] of contents of unrivalled reputation, so far as interest and entertainment […] are concerned,” (*Belfast News-Letter*, 5 April 1879, no. 18.838, p. 5) and “our brightest and most piquant novelists.” (*Northern Whig*, 22 Dec. 1878, no. 22, 275, p. 5) Their well-constructed and amusing stories, with their smart dialogues, were often said to be suitable for the stage: the connection between coauthorship and drama resurfaces here. They were repeatedly called the Erckmann and Chatrian of English literature. After the end of the partnership, Besant and Rice were generally acknowledged as the pioneers of literary collaboration in England: “our playwrights have frequently collaborated since the birth of the English drama; but Messers. Besant and Rice may be said to have set the fashion with English novelists.” (*St. James’s Gazette*, 12 July 1887, p. 3)

Owing to the example of Besant and Rice, around the mid 1870s coauthorship was seen as an original practice that could prove useful in order to improve a work of fiction. Collaborating was still something out of the common, and the press generally recommended it as a new, brilliant device to produce better texts. Yet, collaboration was still largely associated with French authors. In 1874, the ongoing collaboration of an elderly dramatist, M. Cocasse, with a young poet, M. Poupette, attracted attention and gave the British press occasion to discuss the advantages of a peculiar kind of coauthorship: the one between old and young writers:

>b>etween them there is little in common, for M. Poupette is the bard of home joys and M. Cocasse a dramatiser of questionable episodes; but M. Cocasse has reached a time of life when ideas begin to fail him, and he is constantly on the prowl after young and raising authors with whom he may strike up a collaboration – they furnish plots and he the dramatic ordinance of the same. […] [M. Cocasse] looks like a pensioned gendarme in easy circumstances, and he rather startled rosy, yellow-haired M. Poupette when he button-holed him at the Français and proposed that they should mount a ‘machine’ together. M. Poupette had never heard any work of literature described as ‘machine,’ nor had he ever
met a man of letters so uncommonly shrewd in all the business details of authorship as M. Cocasse. […] [M. Poupette] had sense enough to suspect that he was wanting in the dramatic knack, and that he well-knew that M. Cocasse possessed this knack to the full; on the other hand, M. Cocasse, glancing at M. Poupette’s brow, […] felt that there must be a stock of ideas in this youth which would yield like a mine if worked judiciously. So the two very soon came to an arrangement in the café of the Français, drinking beer. [my emphases] (Morning Post, 15 Aug. 1874, no. 31864, p. 3)

Collaboration between old and young writers could prove a useful exchange for both parties: the former would bring experience, technical skills and diligence into the partnership, which would compensate the fresh ideas but the inclination to get distracted of the young. Cocasse is described as the cunning fox “constantly on the prowl after young and rising authors,” hunting for new ideas; he managed to “buttonhole” the young Poupette during a social occasion and proposed to him a collaboration, intended as “mounting a machine together.” Poupette possesses the “stock of ideas” typical of youth, a “mine” of creativity, which, combined with the older Cocasse’s craft – his “dramatic knack” – would result in a well-mounted text. Collaboration is thus seen not as a spontaneous creative act, but as a forced, artificial activity undertaken in order to “mount” a well-structured novel. This was not presented in a negative light: conversely, it was put forward as a model for British writers. Collaboration – whether between same-age authors or elderly and young ones – was seen as a good way to improve a text, in a two-is-better-than-one perspective. In 1878, a review in the Graphic wished that the author of the novel called John Orlebar had recurred to a collaborator:

After reading a book like this, one cannot help regretting that the art of effective literary collaboration should, as far as novels go, seem a secret only possessed by Messers. Besant and Rice. Why should not a novelist in many ways so highly gifted as the author of John Orlebar have not been able to secure the aid of a colleague with just that fair turn for construction […]? (The Graphic, 16 March 1878, no. 433, p. 7)

The reviewer states that the novel lacks action and a well-built plot: two shortcomings that a collaborator with a “turn for construction” could have easily put remedy to. Remarks of this kind were not rare in the press of the time; in fact, it was common to have reviewers wish for authors to have recurred to a helping hand. From this point of view, collaboration was represented as a practical way to make a plot more engaging, dialogues more intriguing, characters more defined.

By the 1880s, coauthorship on fiction writing had become a trend in the market of popular literature, and the press acknowledged this fact. Collaboration had established itself as a widespread practice, so much so that articles simply entitled ‘Collaboration’ are not rare to find. In 1882, the Irish Times recognized its importance and observed that “literary partnership, or collaboration […] is more in vogue than ever, and soon we may expect to find every other title-page inscribed with joint authors’
names.” (13 Oct. 1882, no. 7959, p. 5) In a letter to the editor of the St. James’s Gazette in 1886, a reader complains that “[i]n your article on Collaboration sufficient stress is not perhaps laid on the extent to which literary collaboration is carried on at present.” (7 Sept. 1886, no. 1953, p. 4) This points to the fact that readers were aware of the amount of coauthored fiction present in the market, so much so that the writer of the letter felt the urge to underline the weight of the phenomenon.

In these years there were no particular worries about the diffusion of collaboration, and its popularity was presented in positive terms. In point of fact, the general idea was that collaboration was a good recipe for success and that it instantly led to fame: “[p]eople can collaborate either for business purposes or for pleasure, and the result is notoriety, […] literary collaboration in all its branches […] has most frequently been attended with considerable success,” commented the Glasgow Evening News. (15 Feb. 1888, no. 5665, p. 6) The article further reflected that, if two authors are successful separately, “[i]n collaboration they should make success doubly sure.” (Glasgow Evening News, 15 Feb. 1888, no. 5665, p. 6) The Aberdeen Free Press declared that coauthorship had “reached a point hitherto unknown in literature, especially in this country,” (22 Aug. 1889, no. 6409, p. 4) and in 1892 the Freeman’s Journal aptly predicted that “[l]iterary collaboration is likely to become the craze of the hour.” (3 June 1892, p. 2) In the same year, Hearth and Home classified collaboration as “one of the literary features of our age,” and offered the following ironic but somewhat disquieting picture:

> at the present rate of progression there seems to be some prospects of its attaining alarming proportions in the future. The saying ‘Two heads are better than one,’ may develop eventually into ‘Four heads are better than two,’ and already there is in our midst a sort of literary centipede, each separate leg of which has been put into its place by a separate author. (Hearth and Home, 11 Feb. 1892, no. 39, p. 1)

The increasing diffusion of collaboration is here recognized, but not only: the expansion of coauthorship is also – and above all – seen as an “alarming” perspective. But what is there in coauthorship that late Victorians started to find distressing? The coauthored text is depicted as somewhat monstrous, a sort of Frankenstein’s monster made up of different pieces of diverse origins, the result being unnatural and unharmonious, if not utterly unsettling. The point of view of the press started in this period to present increasingly negative connotations. This was perhaps motivated by the fact that, in the 1890s, coauthorship had become such a trend that it was often practised out of business reasons only, thus producing texts of a much lower quality.

**Sociability, domestic bliss and marriage**

The sharing of the creative act was often associated with a harmonious comradeship between the collaborators. Even better, collaboration itself was usually based on it. Many of the early and all the
most productive collaborations were grounded on a pre-existing personal relationship between the coauthors. They were friends or relatives, and the writing relationship was more or less interwoven with the emotional one. As we have seen in detail with Besant and with Somerville, they published commentaries in which they described their collaborative years in idyllic terms, highlighting the social aspect of coauthorship. After his partner’s death, Besant reported of their collaborative period in an emotional tone, remembering how they used to spend all their days in each other’s company, not only working but also having their meals together, playing cards, and going to the theatre. Somerville repeatedly expressed her nostalgic attachment to the days spent outdoors with her cousin, riding, strolling, and talking their novels into existence. Lang and Haggard used to eat together at the Savile Club while working on The World’s Desire. (Koestenbaum 1989, 153) The convivial side of the collaboration was a prominent part of the whole experience. The image of the collaborators spending most of their time together in a pleasurable atmosphere, half working, half conversing over meals, walks, and various social activities, was one which various coauthors were keen on, and which the papers often reported. Conviviality and comradeship were two key features of collaboration. Coauthors were thus often represented as a unity, a cell, so much so that collaboration was sometimes labelled ‘literary twinship’ in the press. Significantly, the Morning Post article mentioned above about the alliance of Cocasse and Poupette was entitled “Seaside Collaboration,” and described in detail the coauthors’ residence in a resort in France. (Morning Post, 15 Aug. 1874, no. 31864, p. 3) In order to write together, the two left the chaos of the city and headed to the relaxing and secluded atmosphere of a small town at the seaside. They were reported to spend their travel talking and planning what to do once in isolation, in the sole, delightful company of each other. However, the many diversions that waited for the two famous artists soon enough distracted them: “no prince gets such a reception in a French hotel as an author of celebrity,” notes the article. In particular, the undesired attentions of two fashionable ladies took up all the time of the younger collaborator: “[i]t is to be noted that when ladies are good enough thus to lot out the hours of an artist or literary man, they leave him not five minutes for work, concluding, apparently, that he gets through his labours at night while other people sleep.” Luckily, the vigilant Cocasse was “on the look-out,” and saved his young friend, taking him back to their rooms, where they could finally talk, eat, smoke, and write together. The relationship between the collaborators is portrayed here in terms of mutual caring and support: even if their alliance is aimed at producing a text, the emotional and convivial aspects are emphasised. Erckmann and Chatrian too used to live together “when they had any literary project on

229 Besant and Rice were friends; Emily and Dorothea Gerard and Mary and Jane Findlater were sisters; Somerville and Ross were cousins; Kipling and Balestier brothers-in-law; Stevenson was Osbourne’s step-father; Agnes and Egerton Castle and C.N. and A.M. Williamson were husband and wife.
foot,” noticed the *Freeman’s Journal*. (6 September 1890, p. 5) Beaumont and Fletcher shared a house in London and are said to have been so united that they shared a bed and their clothes. (Koestenbaum 1989, and Stephen and Sidney, vol. II, p. 55)

![Figure 30 “Sir Walter Besant, James Rice,” by Archibald John Stuart Wortley, oil on canvas, 1882. National Portrait Gallery.](image)

The idea of joint authorship as consisting basically of isolation and intimacy between the collaborators had become the norm. However, the fact that it also involved entertainments of various sorts enjoyed by the coauthors between a writing session and another was also so common that in 1884 *The Graphic* denounced literary partnership in polemical terms, concluding that “[i]n all collaborations there is an inconceivable amount of cigarette-smoking, an extraordinary number of café appointments. It will be seen it is not an eminently moral institution.” (13 Sept. 1884, no. 772, p. 22) *The Graphic* gave voice to a part of the public opinion which perceived collaboration as slightly
inconvenient: the act of coauthoring a novel, laden with all the implications it was assuming, could lead to have one’s reputation harmed, or at least to be considered a not very serious person. If a writer coauthored a text with someone, it was implied that not much time would be devoted to writing: much more time would be spent in diversions and amusements between the literary friends.

Coauthorship was often represented in the press as being more an amusing social activity than a serious artistic commitment. In the short story “Collaboration” by Henry James, published in The English Illustrated Magazine in 1892, the social – and the immoral – aspects of collaboration were strongly underlined. When the protagonist, a French poet called Félix Vendemer, proposes the deal to a friend, the German Herman Heidenmauer, he says: “[w]e will dine together – he and I – at one of those characteristic places, and we will discuss […] we’ll go out and we’ll walk together. We’ll talk a great deal.” (James 1892, 918) In order to collaborate, the protagonist gives up his engagement – as his fiancée’s mother opposes to his venture – and the two of them move to Genoa, “where sunshine is cheap and tobacco bad, where they live (the two together) for five francs a day, which is all they can muster between them.” (921) Actually, it is hinted that Vendemer had to break his former engagement – and “he was really in love” (921) – in order to be able to form a new, more important one, a “sacred engagement,” as he ecstatically calls it. (918) Vendemer and Heidenmauer know that the public will think their secluded collaboration an “unnatural alliance” (921) and an “unholy union.” (921) The story ends with the pair of collaborators being “very poor” (921) but deeply engaged with their work.

In James’s story we find the idea of living together in poverty but in mutual sympathy, which was also an aspect of collaboration often highlighted by the press. In 1899, an ironic poem in Punch satirised an ad which had appeared some time before in the Daily News. The ad read: “[l]iterary collaboration or companionship. Author and Journalist, 39, would like to go shares in very cheap living with another.” The poem in Punch was entitled “Grub Street Echoes” and went like this:

I am growing sick and weary
Of the attic dull and dreary

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231 The fiancée’s mother feels offended because Vendemer’s collaborator is German, and her husband had been slain by a German soldier. Thus, by putting himself in close association with a compatriot of her husband’s murderer, the protagonist is accused of dragging the family into “abysses of shame and suffering” and charges of “monstrous perversity.” (138-139) Koestenbaum (1989, 143-44) focuses on the sexual implications of collaboration and argues that actually the mother-in-law’s charges of immorality might be due to the shadow of homosexual ties rather than to xenophobic prejudices: “[i]n James’s story, artistic and sexual motives are inseparable: the poet and composer work together to consummate a sexual union and to create a masterpiece.” (144) Koestenbaum’s insight might have a point, as Vendemer goes as far as to break his engagement in order to be free to write and live with his literary partner.
Where in solitary state I wake and sleep,
And I want some fellow-sinner
Who will share my frugal dinner,
But the living must be very, very cheap. [my emphases]

Now the kind of man I’ve painted
In my mind, is one acquainted
With the shallows when the tide of Fortune’s
neap;
Who is not above tripe suppers,
Or a patch upon his uppers,
For the living must be very, very cheap.

One who scorns the oyster season,
When he has the feast of reason
And the flow of soul, whereof he drinketh deep –
It is advantageous, very
To prefer bright soul to sherry
Or to claret, when your living must be cheap.

One who doesn’t care a button
If he has no beef nor mutton
So his Lamb be there to bid him laugh or
weep;
Doesn’t mind if egg’s denied him
If his Bacon is beside him,
Doesn’t grumble though his living’s very cheap.

Doesn’t think it really matters
Though one’s coat should be in tatters,
And one’s elbow through one’s shirt-sleeves
sometimes peep;
With a friend like this to like one
I believe ‘twould seldom strike one
That the living was so very, very cheap.\(^{232}\)

The fictional advertiser here is a hack, tired of living the life of the poor and solitary man of letters – the “attic” immediately evokes images of the solitary genius – who desires a collaborator, so that the pangs of poverty would be less biting. The writer is looking for a “fellow-sinner:” the notion of collaboration as not being “an eminently moral institution,” comes back once more. Their dinners would be “frugal,” their coats “in tatters,” they would have patches upon their sleeves, but at least they would find consolation in literature and each other’s company.

\(^{232}\) Reported in *Shepton Mallet Journal*, 17 November 1899, no. 2225, p. 3. This poem was printed in many newspapers of the period.
Ads of people looking for a collaborator such as the one lampooned in *Punch* were not uncommon in this period. On the contrary, it is quite easy to find notices of people who, allured by the popularity of the practice, ventured to advertise for someone to write with. Here are some examples taken from the “Situations Vacant and Wanted” and from the “Literary” sections of the *Daily News*:

Well-known Novelist-Dramatist requires a clever and bright Collaborator; preference given to one with private income, with spare time and fond of literary work. – Write Novelist, care of 54, New Oxford-street, W.C.” (5 May 1894, no. 21.790, p. 11)
Bright young lady, with literary experience and connection, fluent writer, knowledge shorthand, to collaborate with author or dramatist: references exchanged. (18 July 1894, no. 21.853, p. 9)

Man of Eminence (Novelist, Dramatist) standing quite alone. Wishes to meet with a bright collaborator, lady or gentleman, of independent means and literary taste; advertiser (himself of independent means), a great traveler, linguist, and accomplished musician, could arrange for board and residence if a suitable, refined home is offered. – Write Confidence, Willing’s,152, Piccadilly.” (2 May 1894, no. 21.787, p. 10)

In the last ad, the wannabe-collaborator proposes to live together with his hypothetical partner, corroborating the association between literary collaboration and domesticity

Even if sometimes characterised by poverty, the image of two coauthors living in sympathy with each other in domestic bliss was widespread. The relationship between the ideal literary partners was described as being one of deep intimacy and mutual understanding. Very often this domestic bliss was represented in terms of marriage: the relationship between the coauthors was equated to the relationship between husband and wife, with the text acting as child. Remarkably, an article which appeared in the Glasgow Evening News in 1888 was entitled “Stable Companions,” and “companionship/stable companionship” was used as a regular synonym for collaboration. (15 Feb. 1888, no. 5665, p. 6) In his essay “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration,” Brander Matthews repetitively linked collaboration to marriage, (5, 9, 23, 24, 25) and distinguished between literary monogamists and polygamists. (23) According to him, Besant and Rice and Erckmann and Chatrian had been monogamists, while other writers who had collaborated with different partners were classified as polygamists. In his influential article on collaboration in the New Review, Besant made a distinction between “brief and fleeting partnerships, like amourettes of an hour” (202) and long-lasting writing relationships, which he too compares to marriage. As discussed at length in chapter 2, Besant remarked that the recipe for a good collaboration was the same as the recipe for a good marriage.233 Like marriage, collaboration was generally perceived as the union of two minds: “[i]n marriage husband and wife are one, and that is not a happy union when either inquires as to which one it is: the unity should be so complete that the will of each is merged in that of the other. So it should be in a literary partnership.” (Matthews 1891, 24) Matthews stated also that “collaboration in literature is more complete, more intimate than it is in the other arts,” (2) and similarly Besant defined it “work which may bring mind closer to mind than in any other task.” (Lit. Col., 204) Such a serious

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233 “As in the partnership of marriage, so in that of literature, these unions are happiest and best where the two partners have many points of unlikeness as some of likeness. […] There should be of course […] equal invention, equal dramatic power, equal perception of proportion, equal artistic sense. With these there may be – and, perhaps, should be – unlikeness in pursuits, learning, experience, private life, birth, social connections, tastes, training, and temperament.” (Lit. Col., 207)
commitment was not to be taken lightly. Again, as we have seen, Besant discouraged young writers from entering into a literary partnership with someone they did not know very well. To the proposal of a writer to enter into a partnership with him, Besant commented that “one would as soon offer to marry a girl met once at an evening party – or perhaps never met at all – as to take into partnership a complete stranger.” (Lit. Col., 206) The marriage metaphor was (in)famously carried further at the end of Besant’s essay, where he advised “every young literary workman” to find a smart girl to collaborate – and flirt – with, thus deeply influencing public opinion and provoking the ironic reactions I have discussed in chapter two.

If the collaborators were the partners of a marriage, then the coauthored text was often represented as the child. Both Matthews and Besant developed this metaphor. The former declared that both partners had to equally contribute to the writing, and that at the end it should be impossible to distinguish their respective hands: “any endeavour to sift out the contribution of one collaborator from that of his fellow is futile – if the union has been a true marriage. […] Who shall declare whether the father or the mother is the real parent of a child?” (Matthews 1891, 9) Besant, on the contrary, thought that most of the writing had to be done by one of the partners, but that the phase of the creation was anyway extremely important and that it should be grounded in joint discussion; it is precisely during the moment of the discussion that the subject takes shape: “[c]onsider the work before a partnership engaged upon a novel. One of the two must contribute the leading motif of the work. Here we have the infant.” (Lit. Col., 205) He adds that “it is not possible for a child to have two mothers, but a child may be watched, trained, educated, and moulded by two women.” (Lit. Col., 205, see infra p. 73)

The idea of the collaborative text as a child existed long before Besant and Matthews and the trend of collaboration. For example, it comes out clearly from the prefaces to two collections of short stories written by six authors, published in 1865 and 1866.234 In the first preface, the book is said to be “the growth of a friendly communion, of pleasant chats of an evening, of fellowship of taste and feeling. It is a pet child – a hobby of ours in short, and a labour of love.” In the preface to the following collection, the authors “submit the result of their united labours to the public.” [my emphases] The act of writing a text as labour was definitely not a new idea, and had been circulating for a long time. Now, a coauthored text acted as a child of the literary partners.235

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235 Koestenbaum has investigated this idea (1989), even if he focuses exclusively on male couples that wrote together between 1885 and 1922. 1885 was the year in which Parliament passed the Labouchère Amendment, which made ‘gross indecency’ between men, whether private or public, a crime punishable by up to two years of prison with hard labour. Ten years later, in 1895, Oscar Wilde was punished with the maximum penalty. The Labouchère Amendment shaped
Fights, scandals and divorce

Since collaboration was associated with marriage, divorce stood lurking on the threshold: “[a]s there are households where husband and wife fight like cat and dog, and where marriage ends in divorce, so there are literary partnerships which are dissolved in acrimony and anger.” (Matthews 1891, 25)

In particular, as in the 1890s collaborating became a fashionable practice, more and more writers engaged in joint literary projects mainly looking for economic gain, but lacking the right attitude. In these cases, the text was treated as any other goods that could be sold and bought. In contrast to the idyllic image of two coauthors living miserable but cheerful existences together, the idea of collaboration as merely a business matter became progressively pervasive. *The Graphic* lamented the loss of “the old Arcadian collaboration of other days – the union of two sympathies, the marriage of two talents” to “the association of two cheque books,” and reflected that “[p]urely commercial partnerships are rapidly succeeding to the literary friendships. […] The collaborateurs of our days are nearly all men of business, and have little more than business relations one with another.” (13 Sept. 1884, no. 772, p. 22) The article called contemporary collaborators “manufacturers” ready to work with anybody capable of enhancing their reputation; such partnerships were defined “monster machines,” which “produce less glory but more hard cash.” (*The Graphic*, 13 Sept. 1884, no. 772, p. 22) The association of collaboration with manufacturing is significant, as it implies the idea that coauthorship consists basically in a combination of skills, as when assembling an industrial product. With such premises and almost no laws to regulate authorial rights, quarrels broke out on a regular basis. This was another point on which the press progressively insisted, as – as always – conflicts attracted the public’s voyeuristic curiosity. In 1886, the *Aberdeen Journal* remarked:

> In England the principles of collaboration seem, morally speaking, so little understood that the columns of the *Era* are constantly filled with boasts, counter-boasts, accusations, and recriminations exchanged between gentlemen who, after proclaiming themselves joint authors of a particular piece, have afterwards fallen out as to which of the two did the best part of the work. (*Aberdeen Journal*, 8 Sept. 1886, no. 9851, p. 2)

*The Era* – but also the *Standard* – were indeed well-known for having their pages full of controversies about authorial rights over novels, short story serials, and dramatisations of novels. In many cases, long disputes in form of letters to the editor were started. Many were also the cases of lawsuits

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male behaviour until its repeal in 1967. According to Koestenbaum, collaboration between men in that time span was a complicated and anxiously homosocial act: regardless of their sexual preference, men who collaborated engaged in a metaphorical sexual intercourse, and the text they produced was the child of their sexual union, or the body of a shared woman.
reported in their columns. An example was a long lawsuit between a Mr. Norton and a Mr. Freeland narrated in the *Era* throughout 1896. Apparently, Mr. Norton had purchased a short story from Mr. Freeland, had completed it, and then published it as a coauthored work under their two names. Some time afterwards, the ‘original’ author, Mr. Freeland, claimed total authorship over the work, disowning Mr. Norton as a collaborator. To this, Mr. Norton replied that he had regularly paid for the purchase, and could even produce a receipt, so that the propriety of the text was to be divided between the two of them. An extract from a letter by Mr. Norton to the editor of *The Era* is sufficient to show how these lawsuits drew heavily on the language of commerce:

Mr. Freeland says that I did not purchase the story from him without restrictions, but that the transaction was in the form of a loan. Well, *I have his receipt for the sum I paid* him lying before me at the present moment, and *I repeat that the purchase was absolutely without restrictions*. I know nothing of any ‘understanding’ that Mr. Freeland could at any time have the copyright back by repayment of the amount received; and even if such an idea were mooted, three years have elapsed without his ever showing the slightest anxiety to resume authorship. [my emphases] (*The Era*, 16 May 1896, no. 3008, p. 12)

Mr. Norton conceded he had not collaborated in writing the original story, but, since he had added one-fourth new matter, and pruned and altered a portion of the remainder, he felt justified in associating his name with Mr. Freeland as joint author. He added: “I have no personal motives to serve in linking my name with his, as my name is sufficiently well-known in the literary world. It was simply in fairness to Mr. Freeland that I did so.” (*The Era*, 16 May 1896, no. 3008, p. 12)

A famous – or rather infamous – lawsuit was that between Erckmann and Chatrian in the summer of 1889. The ‘divorce’ after forty years of collaboration was caused by economic misunderstanding over the dramatisation of one of their novels: each author claimed to have contributed more than the other to the writing of the novel, and therefore to be entitled to more profits when it was sold to be staged. The quarrel grew increasingly bitter (and public), and British newspapers reported the news with emotional tones. The *Aberdeen Free Press* dedicated a long article to it, commenting that “the friendship – the rarest type of friendship that exists – of forty years has been irrevocably broken, and in all probability their work is at an end […] Some misunderstanding as to the profit has arisen, and the literary friends of nearly half a century have become sworn foes.” (22 Aug. 1889, no. 6409, p. 4)

Comparing the collaborators to Siamese brothers, the article wonders whether, with the disruption of the partnership, also their respective literary careers would be at an end: “the Siamese twinship has been cut, and the question arises whether, like the physical life of the twinship, the literary life of each twin has not ceased forever. […] It is difficult to imagine that two minds so long linked together, and invariably linked together, can work apart.” (*Aberdeen Free Press*, 22 Aug. 1889, no. 6409, p. 4)
They did not, and Chatrian’s sudden death the following year put an end to the rumors of a possible reconciliation:

[The connection between Messers. Erckmann and Chatrian, whose differences have just been finally adjusted by the death of M. Chatrian, is an even more striking example of the difficulty of keeping a literary partnership intact. The two Alsatians had collaborated for forty years, when they suddenly discovered that they could not get on together. This tardy repugnance is to be seen sometimes between old married people […] In the Erckmann case one of the partners thought that he was doing all the work while the other spent most of his time sitting at the receipt of custom. So they quarreled and went their ways, and litigated. (St James’s Gazette, 4 Sept. 1890, p. 4)

The literary partners are compared here to two “old married people” who, after four decades of close intimacy, cannot stand each other’s company any longer.

Nine years later, in 1899, Erckmann’s death raised again a new wave of reflections on the harsh end of this collaboration, but this time in less sentimental and more cynical terms. The atmosphere had changed, and opinions on collaboration were increasingly negative. The St. James’s Gazette pondered:

[in place of a literary firm one and indivisible, there were revealed to the world two squabbling Alsatians. […] At least there would have been some compensation if litigation had led to any trustworthy revelation of the practice of literary collaboration and the shares of each author in the joint work. […] Attempts have not been wanting to discriminate between the shares of Erckmann and Chatrian […] [but] the litigation threw no light on the subject. Both partners did their best to justify the well-known views of Dumas and Mr. Lang, that in such cases one man does the work and the other takes half the profits; but they justified it on inconsistent ground, each claiming to be the man who did all the work. (St. James’s Gazette, 18 March 1899, no. 5828, p. 12)

The case of Erckmann and Chatrian seemed to bear witness to the opinion that had been circulating in the press for some time, that literary partnership was the “most transitory of all forms of collaboration,” and that such relationships “are bound in the long run to end in a quarrel,” as The Globe stated in 1889. (31 August 1889, no. 29409, p. 6) Noticing the unceasing interchange of literary partners that was taking place, The Globe concluded that “[i]n our own time the continual changing which goes on seems to prove that the system works unsatisfactorily.” (The Globe, 31 August 1889, no. 29409, p. 6)

Moreover, if The Globe is quite negative on the possibility for two men to carry on a writing partnership, it is even more so in the case of women, as “it is hopeless for any two women to attempt it.” (The Globe, 31 August 1889, no. 29409, p. 6) As a matter of fact, we have already seen in the initial survey (infra chapter one) that women collaborated much less than men. This is surely not due to some intrinsic narcissistic issue with women: we have seen that practical problems made
collaboration difficult for women. Also, men collaborators usually aspired to individual recognition, while women did not seem to need it so much: if, as Walter Besant suggested, male collaborators inevitably falter because of the artist’s desire to “enjoy the reputation of his own good work” (Autobiography, 188), women collaborators would seem to betray no such self-interest, no such need to be recognised individually. Women seem to have experienced literary partnership less competitively, and in more fluid and equalitarian terms, as we will see in the next chapter.

That dual authorship generally not only ended in a quarrel, but in a very bitter one, was an opinion supported by many instances. The news of the break-up between Gilbert and Sullivan in 1890 after twenty years of joint successes seemed further proof that “[l]iterary collaboration is an ill-fated thing.” (St James’s Gazette, 4 Sept. 1890, no. 3195, p. 4) The lawsuit that followed led the two former partners to become enemies, and the press to write that

> [t]he partners, after getting on amicably for a number of years, and helping each other to make a great deal of money, almost invariably fall out at last. And when the quarrel comes it is commonly exceedingly bitter. Mr. Gilbert, having discovered heavy griefs against Mr. O’yly Carte as to the profits

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236 Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) and William S. Gilbert (1836-1911) collaborated from the 1870s to the 1890s. Sullivan had become famous at only 20 when still a student at Leipzig, when his Opus I, a group of twelve pieces of incidental music for The Tempest, was performed in London in 1862 (in the course of his career, he would write other pieces for other Shakespeare’s plays). Gilbert, on the contrary, began his career as a barrister, but without interest nor success; then he started to contribute regular columns of comic verse, producing the Bab Ballads (first collected under this title in 1869), where he turned the odd into the ordinary in what he called the ‘Topsy-Turveydom.’ He turned his verbal dexterity to drama, beginning with the burlesque Dulcamara (1866) and proceeding to writing successful, light, parodic stage works. His comedies were satiric burlesque in blank verse “in which Gilbert made audiences laugh at their own hypocrisy by transplanting them to fairyland.” (Trussler 1994, 256) In 1869 he first met Sullivan, “whose talent for musical parody and pleasing melody was perfectly suited to Gilbert’s verse.” (Birch 2009, 416) Their first collaboration was Thespis (1871). In 1874 Gilbert met the impresario D’Oyly Carte, for whom he and Sullivan wrote a long series of comic operas, with librettos by Gilbert and music by Sullivan, starting with Trial by Jury (1875). In 1881 Carte built the Savoy Theatre especially for the D’Oyly Carte Company. The prolific (and profitable) partnership lasted for twenty years, and some of their most celebrated operas include: The Sorcerer (1877), HMS Pinafore (1878), Princess Ida (1884, a satire on female education suggested by Tennyson’s The Princess), The Mikado (1885), Ruddigore (1887), The Yeomen of the Guard (1888), and The Gondoliers (1889). The plots generally draw on stock romance incidents and cheerfully lampoon the social establishment. In 1890 there was a rift resulting from a business transaction: Carte charged the cost for a new carpet for the Savoy theatre lobby to the partners; Gilbert objected, as he believed that this was a maintenance expense that Carte alone should pay: besides, Gilbert was convinced that Carte had been for some time swindling them. On the contrary, Sullivan supported Carte, as he probably needed to stay in his good graces: Carte was building The Royal English Opera House to produce Sullivan’s one attempt at serious opera, Ivanhoe (1891). (Birch 2009, 964) Gilbert brought suit (which he eventually won), and the two former collaborators resentfully stayed apart for some years. However, after the failure of The Royal English Opera House, Carte tried to reunite them, and after many attempts and the mediation of Tom Chappell, the collaborators’ music publisher, he succeeded. Gilbert and Sullivan composed two other pieces together, Utopia, Limited (1893) and the last one, The Grand Duke (1896). Gilbert and Sullivan had also independent careers: Gilbert wrote a few plays without Sullivan and used the profits to build the Garrick Theatre; Sullivan composed incidental music, songs and ballads for the Victorian drawing room, hymn tunes, and large-scale coral works on sacred subjects; he also collaborated with Tennyson on a song cycle, The Window, or The Songs of the Wrens, in 1871. (Birch 2009, 936) Sullivan was knighted in 1883, Gilbert in 1907. For a complete discussion of Gilbert and Sullivan, see: Jacobs 1984, Stedman 1996, Trussler 1994.
of the works with which he and Sir Arthur Sullivan have adorned the stage, is satisfied with nothing less than law, blood being now difficult to have. (St James’s Gazette, 4 Sept. 1890, no. 3195, p. 4)

Matthews’s 1890 essay claimed that “[t]he quarrels of collaborators […] are the height of folly. The world looks on at the fight, and listens while the two former friends call each other hard names; and more often than not it believes what each says of the other, and not what he says of himself.” (Matthews 1891, 26) He remarked that “in general it is when the work fails that the collaborators fall out,” (25) and similarly Besant warned: “[t]he admission into partnership is a thing which might lead to great abuses and preposterous pretensions;” (Lit. Col., 206)

[to take a man into partnership even for a short story or a short play is a step attended with great risks: it may lead to certain failure, with certain quarrels, recriminations, and pretensions. Why did the novel fail? Because of the other man. Or, if it was not a failure, why did the thing succeed? In spite of the other man. (Lit. Col., 208)

Besant discouraged writers from entering into a partnership, at least with another man: the only kind of literary partnership recommended by him is the one already mentioned with a girl-assistant, as “in everyday life, so in imaginative work, woman should be man’s best partner – the most generous – the least exacting – the most certain never to quarrel over her share of the work.” (Lit. Col., 209)

Interestingly enough, although both Matthews and Besant put forward such bitter views, they also declared that, as for themselves, they had never had a harsh word with their own collaborators. They appeared (too?) anxious to let the public know that their collaborative relationships had been characterised by harmony and companionship. At the end of his essay, Matthews inserts his own collaborations in the realm of harmonious friendships:

I can declare unhesitatingly that I have never had a hard word with a collaborator while our work was in hand and never a bitter word with him afterwards. My collaborators have always been my friends before and they have always remained my friends after. Sometimes our literary partnership was the unpremeditated outcome of a friendly chat, in the course of which we chanced upon a subject, and in sport developed it until unexpectedly it seemed promising enough to be worthy of artistic consideration. […] There was no dispute as to our respective shares in the result of our joint labors, because we could not ourselves even guess what each had done when both had been at work together. (Matthews 1891, 26-27)

In the preface to the 1887 re-edition of Ready-Money Mortiboy, Besant commemorates his collaborative decade in unrealistically idyllic terms, saying it had been “undisturbed by the least jar of disagreement.” (RMM 1887, v)

The fact that these popular coauthors decisively discussed collaboration as a practice involving “great risks,” “great abuses, “preposterous pretensions,” and “recriminations,” while on the contrary boldly
declaring in exaggerated tones that they had only had wonderful experiences, seems unconvincing.

Were they trying to distance themselves from the widespread negative opinion about the outcome of literary partnership? Were they worried that, had they confessed the existence of strifes during the composition of a work, the sales would have suffered, as people might think that the quality of the product could have been affected by the quarrels?

Anyway, in the 1890s the tendency for articles on collaboration was to discuss the inevitability of quarrels. Now, the domestic bliss was seen as simply preceding the unavoidable break-up, as the few following passages will suffice to show:

Not infrequently collaboration leads to recrimination, and brotherly love is shown the door by egoistic spleen. (*Hearth and Home*, 11 Feb. 1892, no. 39, p. 1.)

Collaboration […] is only successful when it is not collaboration. […] Two friends live together and pass their evenings, side by side, in front of a common hearth, a cup of coffee beside them, a cigar between their teeth. […] One composes and writes, the other commends or blames, corrects, gives ideas, throws new light on the subject. That is the ideal collaboration. […] The only drawback to it is that the two friends usually quarrel about paternal rights. (*The Globe*, 4 May 1894, no. 30861, p. 1)

Literary partnerships, however successful, are not wont to be permanent. Even the famous Erckmann-Chatrian collaboration was dissolved. Had Mr. James Rice lived it is probable that the alliance of Besant and Rice would have ended in separate authorship. (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 16 Aug. 1894, no. 12.338, p. 5)

In the light of what we have seen so far, there seemed to be no half measures when it came to literary collaboration: it was represented as leading either to bloodshed, or to total and idealised comradeship.

Literary collaboration was such a fashion in the 1890s that sometimes it was professed even when it was not true.237 Cases of false collaborations and forgery crowded the pages of newspapers. A famous episode was that of a short novel, *The Lost Diamonds*, which appeared in December 1891 and was published under the joint names of Charles Ogilvie and Florence Marryat. The latter wrote an outraged letter to the *Athenaeum* to expose the forgery, claiming that her name had been used without her consent. She maintained that she had only written “a scene in the story at Ogilvie’s request, which he had expanded to make four chapters”. (Reported in the *Dundee Advertiser*, 11 January 1892, no. 9611, p. 8) Marryat complained that the publication of her name in connection with that novel had also caused her problems with some of her publishing contracts both in the United States and in England. However, the *Dundee Advertiser* suspected that “it seems hardly credible that Florence

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237 Ashton (2003, 5) reports of a certain Albert Terhune who, in the late 1890s, regularly made money by individually writing fake collaborative serial novels, signed “By The Beautiful Shopgirls,” or “By The Beautiful Actresses.”
Marryat would write anything of the kind merely as an amusement for herself, and without knowing it would be utilised. [...] Her letter, in this gossiping age, will serve to increase the demand for *Lost Diamonds.*” (Dundee Advertiser, 11 January 1892, no. 9611, p. 8) Could the forgery have been made up, and the scandal be part of a marketing plan? The Dundee Advertiser seemed to consider it an option, which does not appear totally without grounds.

As the 1890s went on, the overall view of the press on collaboration became more and more negative, and increasingly connected with deception of various kinds. An example was an article that appeared in 1898 in the *Blackburn Standard* (24 Dec. 1898, no. 3279, p. 6) where a writer, a certain Archibald Anstruther, reported in the first person of a strange case of ‘collaboration’ that had happened to him. He narrates how, shortly after he had published a novel, he received a letter from one Paul Desart, proposing to turn the novel into a play together. “In a weak moment I consented,” is the foreboding comment of the protagonist. Since Desart did not live in the same town as Anstruther, the collaboration was carried out by letter. However, the mysterious coauthor gradually took over the whole thing: “[o]nce having commenced, my collaborator calmly assumed the position of a dictator. I was to do this and do that, so ran his peremptory commands.” [my emphases] For some time Anstruther put up with the whims of his literary ‘ally,’ until a final disagreement over whether the hero of the story was to get married made him lose his patience. He sent a telegram to Desart containing an ultimatum: “[y]ou must abide by my decision. Otherwise collaboration must cease. Decision irrevocable.” Receiving no answer, he thought the matter was over, only to discover some time later that his collaborator had organised the staging of the play on his own. To the news that the work was to be staged the following night in Birmingham, Anstruther wondered: “[w]hat should I do? Get an injunction to stop the play, or tamely allow it to go on, and tacitly admit that I was defeated?” He decided to go and see the play, and finally confront Desart. Once he arrived at the theatre, the poster presented his collaborator’s name first, and in capital letters too, while his own was printed in small letters. After seeing the play, Anstruther went looking for his deceitful collaborator, but could not find him anywhere; instead, the main actress, Isabel Lennox, told him that Paul Desart was pleased to see him the next day in his apartments. At the end a surprise awaits the reader, as Anstruther found out that his collaborator was actually Miss Lennox, who candidly confessed: “I am your collaborator. [...] Forgive me. I know the prejudice you men have towards women’s work, and so I adopted this little innocent deception [...] When do you commence legal proceedings against me?” However, the legal proceedings Anstruther started are not those expected by Miss Lennox: he proposed to her, and the story has a happy ending, once again linking literary collaboration with romance and marriage. Moreover, the story is told employing the lexicon of war (dictator, commands,
ultimatum, defeated): by inserting collaboration in the semantic field of war, the author once again connects it with the general idea that fighting is inescapable.

Cases of unauthorised adaptations of novels for the stage were innumerable. Authors had no power to prevent dramatisations of their work, and had no exclusive rights on dramatisation: any novel could be dramatised by any author. This spurred many reflections on the thorny issue of copyright. The Era would repetitively plead for a bill that would better regulate authors’ rights, as the following extract testifies:

[w]e cannot find any good reason why literary and artistic copyright should not be as eternal as any other sort of property. If there is anything that may be said to ‘belong’ to a man and to be bequeathable to his heirs and descendants for ever and ever, it is the product of his brains. The reason why property in land is permanent and that in plays and novels limited in duration is that the laws in times past have been made by landowners and not by authors and dramatists. (The Era, 25 April 1896, p. 15)

Many were also the petitions for reforms concerning a clear definition of authorship, and, consequently, of coauthorship. In an article that appeared in The Era in September 1896 a barrister advanced his definition of the cases of legitimate joint copyright:

[i]f two persons undertake jointly to write […] agreeing in the general outline and design, and sharing the labour of working it out, each would be contributing to the whole production, and they might be said to be joint authors of it. But to constitute joint authorship there must be a joint common design. Mere alterations, additions, or improvements by another person, whether with or without the sanction of the author, will not entitle him to be called joint author. (The Era, 26 Sept. 1896, no. 3027, p. 14)

Here the barrister puts “a joint common design” as the necessary condition for a work to be considered collaborative. According to him, each writer should contribute “to the whole production” and share the labour from beginning to end in order to be called a coauthor. However, things were not that simple. Definitions of “joint common design” and of the “sharing the labour of working it [the text] out” were slippery. Where did the “joint common design” begin? It could initially be the idea of only one and then the other would help from a certain point onwards – and in that case had he not the right to be called a collaborator? The idea, the starting point had necessarily to be by one only. Also – as it was the general opinion of the press, as we should see later in this chapter – not in all collaborations both authors contributed in the same way and measure. How was one to calculate if both shares had been equal? And if they were not, was the one who supposedly contributed less not to have the right to sign his name on the title page? Maybe it could be specified that he was a ‘partial’ author. As a matter of fact, fights frequently burst out between coauthors accusing each other of not having contributed enough. Should a judge be called? But how was he to reconstruct the whole creative process? It was a sticky situation. For this reason, the barrister who wrote the article in The Era
proposed that, at the end of the collaboration, the coauthors should sign a contract in which they declared their shares, and agreed on the existence of a collaboration: “when two or more authors have collaborated, the written consent of all must be obtained, as one of them cannot bind the other or others.” (The Era, 26 Sept. 1896, no. 3027, p. 14) Coauthorship was thus defined as a matter of contract, as a business transaction like any other. However, this suggestion was not always followed, and quarrels continued to break out.

The great popularity of coauthorship during the last decades of the nineteenth century gave origins to curious cases of gossip and scandal. In the wake of the expansion of collaboration, amateurs and people with literary ambitions from various backgrounds experimented with it. Collaboration entered the public imagination. Since to collaborate on a novel implied spending much time in close contact, infinite ambiguous situations developed. A couple of examples are worth mentioning. In 1886 the Sheffield Independent (20 Nov. 1886, no. 10.051, p. 2) reported an infamous lawsuit known as the ‘Adams v. Coleridge,’ where a father sued a young man accused of having “ruined his daughter,” Miss Coleridge, with which he was officially “engaged in literary work.” However, the father suspected that something more happened during their long writing sessions. The two young people claimed that “the only relations between [them] were those of literary collaboration” but the controversy was long and bitter. Collaboration was also exploited as a suitable and apparently innocent excuse for meeting people, or simply for staying away from home, as in the case of one ‘Erskine Suit,’ in which a husband wanted divorce from his wife because of her alleged adultery: apparently, the woman “absented herself from home, representing she was assisting a Miss Smith to write novels,” when actually “she occupied apartments where she was visited by the co-respondent [the lover] from whom the damages were now claimed.” (Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail, 29 Feb. 1892, no. 4285, p. 3)

These and many other scandals reported in the columns of newspapers contributed to further demean the way in which literary collaboration was perceived. Surely, Besant’s linking of collaboration with flirting and romance had not helped. Real-life cases did the rest. The result was, a connotation of impropriety was attached to coauthorship. It became a suspect practice, something used to cover ulterior motives. However, these episodes connected with literary collaboration corroborate the fact that coauthorship had truly penetrated late Victorian society.
How is it done? The paradox of collaboration

Leaving aside the ‘social’ aspects of writing in double harness, the process of collaborating itself attracted a lot of attention. How could two or more people actually create a work of fiction together? How did coauthorship work? As we have seen, to coauthor a text challenged established norms of composition based on the Romantic model of the solitary artist. In front of a coauthored text, people felt puzzled. An impressive number of articles in the late 1880s was thus devoted to the big question of ‘how it is done:’

If there is any form of authorship which still puzzles the few persons who have written neither books nor plays, it is probably that joint form which goes by the name of collaboration. (Aberdeen Journal, 8 Sept. 1886, no. 9851, p. 2)

What the public is most curious to know about collaboration is, ‘how it is done.’ (St. James’s Gazette 7 Sept. 1886, no. 1953, p. 4)

Literary collaboration is […] one of the things that no fellow can understand. (East Aberdeenshire Observer, 21 June 1889, p. 1)

No more curious problem has ever presented itself to the literary student than that of collaboration. Various theories have been put forward in regard to it: many and strange explanations of it have been given. But, in spite of all this, the ‘art’ has remained a ‘mystery.’ (Pall Mall Gazette, 19 Oct. 1891, no. 8293, p. 3)

An idea of mystery concerning the art of literary collaboration keeps surfacing in the press, as if a sort of secret – known only to the people involved – was hidden behind a collaborative work. Commenting the partnership of Erckmann and Chatrian, the Aberdeen Free Press observed that “[t]he mysteries of collaboration have always been of intense interest, but in this case, as in most others, the secret has been jealously guarded by the authors.” (Aberdeen Free Press, 22 August 1889, no. 6409, p. 4) The press constantly endeavoured to unravel the mystery and shed light on how literary collaboration worked. On this point, the debate was heated and the points of view various and sometimes contrasting. The periodicals of the time present a richness of theories on the methods of collaboration, since, as The Graphic put it, “the systems differ as much as the fancies.” (13 Sept. 1884, no. 772, p. 22)

The most credited opinion was that it rested on a division of work – most of the time an unequal division: one partner doing most of the work with the other basically assisting, supplying ideas and comments. Besant and Rice’s partnership, which remained the most popular case of collaboration, often presented as a model, seems to have had a heavy influence on public opinion. Beside setting the example, Besant also theorised his and Rice’s working method. As I have discussed in detail
chapter 2, Besant dismissed the idea that each author should contribute in an equal way to the writing; on the contrary, two authors taking turns in writing are “grotesque,” “ineffective,” and “a horrid nightmare,” since every character would talk “with two voices and two brains” and have “two faces.” (Lit. Col., 205) According to Besant, “[t]he presentment of the story must seem to be by one man. No one would listen to two men telling it together. We must hear – or think we hear – one voice.” (Lit. Col., 205) The consequence of this method was that, for the sake of the unity of the text, even if both partners may be called authors “one of the two must be in authority, one of the two must have the final word.” (Lit. Col., 205)

In the same year as Besant’s “On Literary Collaboration,” the London Daily News supported this point of view and tried to dispel the aura of mystery that seemed to surround the practice of collaboration:

[t]he subject is always interesting to the innumerable people who want to be authors. They think that there is some mystery in the matter, and that, had they the ‘Open Sesame,’ they could enter the cavern of treasure. There is really no mystery. If one dull man cannot write a successful book, it would be mysterious, indeed, if two dull men could do so. They cannot, there are no such happy results from the combination of two stupidities. But a dull man and a clever man may write a successful book – because the clever man writes it. (London Daily News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 14319, p. 4)

The article contradicted Matthews’s essay, which promoted a model of coauthorship based on the equality of the partners, claiming: “[w]e venture so far to differ from Mr. Matthews as to say that the work is always done by one man. […] Now we have a theory that ‘doing the actual writing’ is doing the work,” and so he who does the writing is the real – and only – author; the partner who does not write “is but the man who cuts the marble blocks out of the quarry,” while the author is the sculptor who shapes the rock into a work of art. The sculptor can do without the assistant, but the assistant cannot do without the sculptor: “[t]he partner saves the great man some labour, which, if he chose, he could do better for himself.” The work of the assistant may be useful, “but it leaves the one man dominant and indispensable.” The London Daily News concluded that “[a] good-natured genius sometimes calls a man his ‘collaborator,’ when he is really only his companion.” (London Daily News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 14319, p. 4)

Thus, the debate over who actually held the pen in a collaboration triggered wider reflections on the question of authorship: what did it mean to be an author? What did it take to be defined an author? Could only those who actually put pen to paper be defined so? According to Besant, the partner who did not write was to be considered an author just like the other one. The creative phase, when the collaborators discuss, was of paramount importance. After that, one of the two did the writing because “literary style is another thing. It is individual. One of the two must impress his own individuality
upon the work.” (Lit. Col., 205) Besant repetitively insisted that Rice’s signature had the right to appear beside his own on the covers of their novels: “[c]an, then, the other man who has contributed only rough drafts here and there, or even perhaps nothing at all in writing, be called a collaborator? Most certainly he can. And in the recognition – for the first time – of this fact lies, I think, the chief value of the essay before us.” (Lit. Col., 205) But what did the periodical press think about it?

On this point, the press generally took its distance from Besant’s position, and put great emphasis on the connection between being an author and the act of writing, so much so that to write was equated to being an author. An author was someone who wrote a text, and no one else. At best, there could be a hierarchy of authors, as in a theorisation proposed by the article of the London Daily News: a ‘chief’ author and then one or more ‘assistants’. “Whether partnership really helps the master spirit much is a question which only himself can answer. In Mr. Matthews’s tales, it may be said that they probably would not be worse if he had written them alone.” (London Daily News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 14319, p. 4) If both partners write, “the partnership is likely to be a failure”:

> the result might be diverting to the curious, but could scarcely be of much consistent value as a work of art. [...] We might welcome cases of Miss Rhoda Broughton in the middle of the author of John Inglesant’s disquisitions, but verily we should prefer Miss Broughton neat. All liquids will not blend, nor is currant jelly good with roast beef. Writers with marked styles and notions of their own had better not work together. The combination of two very distinct popularities may make one failure. (London Daily News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 14319, p. 4)

The culinary metaphor here expresses the awkwardness of two strong personalities juxtaposing their styles. This view contrasts with the positive opinion suggested only two years earlier by the Kerry Evening Post on the occasion of Lang and Haggard’s collaboration, which had enthusiastically stated that the mixing of two apparently incompatible ingredients could prove successful, and had often given origin to gourmet dishes.239 The article in the London Daily News ends with the following, utterly negative, conclusion:

> the moral of the whole discussion seems to be that no two geniuses of a high order can work together: for this reason Mr. Matthews Arnold would never believe that Homer had partners. Therefore it is good for the second-rate literary player to get a partner of genius, but is it good for the partner, for the man who does the ‘mere writing’? Except in plays, where co-operation is often necessary, [...] and in translation, where two eyes are better than one, ‘collaboration’ seems a mere gift to the sleeping partner. (London Daily News, 13 Feb. 1892, no. 14319, p. 4)

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239 “The gourmet who appreciates roast venison and cureant jelly, the boumeler goose and apple sauce, or lamb and fragrant mint may perchance wonder what daring wight was first inspired to couple such apparently incongruous elements. Yet, once allied, there is no denying their quality. Quite as startling a literary juxtaposition is that of Mr. Rider Haggard and that of […] Mr. Andrew Lang.” (Kerry Evening Post, 4 June 1890, vol. cxvi, p.3)
The metaphor of the sleeping partner had actually been circulating for quite some time: “Probably all collaborators have their own way: and perhaps there is frequently a sleeping partner,” the *St. James’s Gazette* had pointed out in 1886. (7 September. 1886, no. 1953, p. 4) And again the *St. James’s Gazette*, a few days after the article in the *London Daily News* in February 1892 came out, reached the same conclusion:

[t]here is no mystery whatever about the art of collaboration, for the simple but sufficient reason that there is, in fact, no such thing as literary collaboration. Books may appear under the names of two authors, but it is invariably one of the two authors who does all the work. The other may make suggestions, talk things over, and so forth. […] The real business in writing a book is the writing; that is always the work of one of the partners only. (*St. James’s Gazette*, 20 February 1892, no. 3648, p. 12)

This view was shared by a great number of periodicals, and in 1892 the discourse around collaboration basically revolved around this ‘paradox of collaboration:’ there was really no collaboration behind a collaborative text. In 1894 *The Globe* exaggerated this opinion and ironically commented that, when two writers decide to co-author a book, “one writes it while the other takes a trip to the African desert, returning just in time to draw half the profits.” (*The Globe*, 4 May 1894, no. 30861, p. 1) The article then gave some advice to aspiring coauthors: “the intending collaborator had better look out for a partner who is fond of work; it is always easier to do the critical part of the job, and the cutting.” (*The Globe*, 4 May 1894, no. 30861, p. 1) Also, most journals seemed to agree that, if a writer had talent, he had better not to collaborate:

Mr. Besant, writing alone, has produced better novels than the two wrote between them. This, *of course*, supports your theory that if a man has the divine afflatus, or even a touch of it, he does best by himself. (*St. James’s Gazette*, 7 Sept. 1886, no. 1953, p. 4) [my emphasis]

A writer of high ability, or even of distinctive character, should avoid collaboration unless he is aiming, above all, at commercial success […]. Who can fancy a writer of delicate taste, and accustomed to say things in his own way, taking a collaborator? […] What collaborator would have dared to suggest to Victor Hugo that his interminable monologue on the portraits in Hernoni was a little long? What collaborator, again, could have touched the dialogue of ‘The School for Scandal’ without really injuring it? *Collaboration is for authors of the second rank and under.* (*Aberdeen Journal*, 8 Sept. 1886, no. 9851, p. 2) [my emphasis]

It is not necessary here to make any estimate of the gain or loss incidental to collaboration. Of course it all depends on the collaborators, and even when these are of the best it is doubtful if the work will have the finest quality of genius. One cannot think of the ‘Divina Commedia,’ or ‘Paradise Lost’ as being the outcome of any joint effort, and though the case of Beaumont and Fletcher is a remarkable exception, it must, we think, remain an exception. (*Freeman’s Journal*, 3 June 1892, vol. cxxvi, p. 2)
So, from an efficient tool to improve a work of art, collaboration came to be perceived as useful only for “authors of the second rank and under,” the ones with little or no talent. If one had talent enough, collaboration was not only useless: it was harmful. The fact that most periodicals mentioned the great classics of literature, saying that they could have never been “the outcome of any joint effort,” but that on the contrary the intervention of a collaborator would have ruined them, speaks volumes. Dante, Milton, or Hugo would have been restrained and hindered by the presence of a collaborator. The press supported Matthews’s opinion that “[n]o great poem has ever been written by two men together, nor any really great novel.” (Matthews 1891, 11) According to him and to most late Victorian papers literary collaboration “with its talking over, its searching discussion” (13) inevitably leads to “an over-sharpness of outline, a deprivation of that vagueness of contour not seldom strangely fascinating.” (14) Joint authorship was perceived to deprive the creative process of individuality, of spontaneity and of excess, all ingredients considered fundamental to make a masterpiece. It was also believed that “there is less chance of unforeseen developments suggesting themselves as the pen speeds on its way across the paper.” (Matthews 1891, 14) Besant corroborated this point of view and insisted on the “danger that there may be too much distinctness – a loss of atmosphere – not enough left to the imagination;” (Lit. Col., 208) he concluded that “[t]o touch the deeper things one must be alone.” (203)

On the contrary, probably influenced by Besant’s opinion, collaboration was believed to be very useful “when satire, fun, humour and pathos are concerned.” (Lit. Col., 203) Authors who wrote together were represented – and also generally represented themselves – as “first and foremost […] storytellers.” (Lit. Col., 203) Collaboration was considered as having “served the cause of periodical literature.” (Matthews 1891, 11) Indeed, in novels to be published in weekly or monthly parts, a requirement of paramount importance was a well-planned plot, capable of keeping the suspense up. In this, coauthorship was renowned for its successes. In a coauthored work of fiction “we are likely to find polish, finish, and perfection of mechanism,” (Matthews 1891, 11) almost as if it were a scientific construction, due to the constant mutual criticism of the authors. Matthews was drastic in this respect: “to call the result of collaboration often over-labored, or to condemn it as cut and dried, would be to express with unduly brutal frankness the criticism it is best merely to suggest.” (13) And yet, his position is ambiguous, as it continually wavers between heavy criticism and renegotiation:

[i]t has been objected that in books prepared in partnership even the writing is hard and arid, as though each writer were working on a foreign suggestion and lacking the freedom with which a man may treat his own invention. If a writer feels thus, the partnership is unprofitable and unnatural, and he had best get a divorce as soon as may be. (Matthews 1891, 14-15)
The belief that collaboration could have claims to high literary value remained stable with the passing of the years. By the early 1920s, when coauthored novels were isolated cases and were mainly the final output of few long-lasting collaborative relationships which had begun at the turn of the century, this notion was more widespread than ever. In 1922, The Yorkshire Post observed that “[n]owadays literary collaboration of the first order seems to be out of fashion in England,” (20 May 1922, no. 23.366, p. 10) and expressed a very negative view of the practice in general:

[n]or, without pretending to exhaustive research in the matter would joint authorship seem to have been popular amongst the literary great of the nineteenth century. The Beloved Vagabond and his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, made somewhat desultory joint effort in the direction of South Sea Island yarns. A more enduring success – as readers of Ready-Money Mortiboy will attest – fell to the united pens of Besant and Rice. (The Yorkshire Post, 20 May 1922, no. 23.366, p. 10)

Then the article sets out listing a series of literary partnerships from the Elizabethan drama to the present time, only to reach the following conclusion:

[o]ne thing alone stands clear. That the greatest literary art has always been a product of the individual. […] The ultimate expression of the great artist’s soul demands solitary workmanship. No other hand than Shakespeare’s could have finished Desdemona or Cordelia; no other touch than Hardy’s could have moulded Tess. (The Yorkshire Post, 20 May 1922, no. 23.366, p. 10)

If collaboration between two writers was subject to heavy criticism, multiple collaboration was universally scorned:

[l]iterary collaboration at the best of times is risky work, and not infrequently is unsuccessful. At the same time, it must be admitted that some of the finest books that have been published have been the united production of two great writers. As a rule, however, works of this character are confined to couples. (Debon and Exeter Daily Gazette, 23 April 1891, p. 7)

As we have seen, Matthews considered the association of more than two writers for a single story “a woeful waste of effort” (Matthews 1891, 4) and “mere curiosities of literature.” (5) When late Victorians seriously discussed collaboration, they usually did so for collaborations of two, because, as Matthews put it, double writing was “the only collaboration worthy of serious criticism.” (5)

**Which is which? Disentangling the hands**

It may be said that curiosity is the only useful vice, since without it there would be neither discovery nor invention; and curiosity it is which lends interest to many a book written in collaboration, the reader being less concerned about the merits of the work than he is with guessing at the respective shares of the associated authors. To many of us a novel by two writers is merely a puzzle, and we seek
to solve the enigma of its double authorship, accepting it as a nut to crack even when the kernel is little likely to be more digestible than the shell. (Matthews 1891, 1)

So began Brander Matthews’s 1890 essay. He noticed that, before a coauthored text, readers inevitably find themselves wondering “what was the part of each partner in the writing of the book?” (1) His observation could not have been more appropriate. As a matter of fact, a big concern of the late Victorian press was the urge to tell the different coauthors’ contributions apart. This, however, somewhat clashed with the widespread idea that usually it was only one of the two who did most of the work. Apparently, then, people were not really convinced. The need to tell the different hands apart was also rooted in the post-Romantic conception of ‘one author for one text;’ if a text belonged to two authors, people sought to at least divide the text into parts clearly ascribable to each writer.

Going through articles on collaboration and reviews of coauthored novels, it appears that the public was quite obsessed with trying to guess at the respective hands, so much so that, in 1894, the Globe ironically suggested a way to have one’s share safely proclaimed, thus “insuring a fair share of praise:”

[t]here is, indeed, one safe way out of the wood, which, if literary rumor be accurate, has been taken by the authors of an impending novel. These two intend, it is said, to have the book printed in two different kinds of type, so that the reader shall know, however dull his literary palate, whether he is indulging in the sparkling Burgundy of Brown or the plain Swipes of Smith. (The Globe, 4 May 1894, no. 30861, p. 1)

Although such an extreme method was never adopted, many coauthored novels of the 1890s and 1900s presented various ways to distinguish the different, individual authorships. Many novels had prefaces with explicit declarations of the parts assigned; this was naturally easier for works made up of fictitious exchanges of letters, like the epistolary novel A Fellowe and His Wife by Blanche W. Howard and William Sharp (Osgood & McIlvaine, 1892), whose preface stated that the letters written by the female protagonist had been Sharp’s part, while the ones by the male protagonist had been written by Blanche Howard. The epistolary novel was usually classified by the press as “the most convenient mode for the purposes of collaboration.” (Glasgow Evening Post, 22 March 1892, p. 8)

Another novel of this kind, The Etchingham Letters by Ella Fuller Maitland and Sir Frederick Pollock (Smith, Elder & Co., 1899), was positively reviewed by The Standard: “[it] is an experiment in collaboration in what seems to be its most natural form – a novel in letters written by two persons of opposite sexes.” (31 May 1899, no. 23.377, p. 4)

Also novels made up of extracts from diaries of different persons were thought well suited to the collaborative mode. The Affair at the Inn (1904), jointly written by Mary and Jane Findlater, K.D.
Wiggins and Allan MacAulay, is related through diary passages by the four main characters, for each of which a novelist was in charge. The division of tasks is declared at the beginning. An extreme case of division of authorship was *The Green Bay-Tree* by W.H. Wilkins and Herbert Vivian (Hutchinson & Co., 1894) which had a “Prefatory Note” at the beginning of each of the three volumes which announced in detail the authorship for each chapter and even paragraph. (figure 32)

![Image of Prefatory Note to *The Green Bay-Tree* by W.H. Wilkins and Herbert Vivian (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1894).](image)

In *The Green Bay-Tree* the respective shares are more or less equally divided (Wilkins wrote 21 chapters, Vivian 17, and three chapters were written by both together). A blurb in *The Standard* announcing the forthcoming publication of the novel recited, as if to reassure the readers: “[a]lthough written in collaboration, the authorship of each chapter is indicated.” (8 May 1894, p. 9) This seems to suggest a sort of disturbance lingering in people’s consciousness about not knowing who wrote what. The press appreciated the solution adopted by these coauthors, and a review in *The Athenaeum* read:

> [t]his is an unusually successful case of collaboration, for, though the authors are at pains to indicate the chapters and paragraphs for which they are respectively responsible, the different parts are admirably welded together, so that it is difficult even with this knowledge to detect any differences of workmanship or division of interest. (*The Athenaeum*, 9 June 1894, no. 3476, p. 737)
*The Athenaeum* took for granted the urge to disentangle the two hands. Later on that same year, the third collaborative novel by R.L. Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide* (Heinemann, 1894), appeared in print, and the press immediately set out to separate the two hands, although the two authors had given no hint whatsoever about their compositional method:

> [t]his is, we understand, the last time that Mr. Stevenson and his stepson, Mr. Lloyd Osbourne, intend to write a story together, and though it is impossible to regret the resolution – for English readers, at any rate, have never taken kindly to literary partnerships of this sort – it attaches a special interest to ‘The Ebb-Tide.’ We have tried to parcel out their respective contributions to the present volume, and come to the conclusion that the earlier portion belongs chiefly to Mr. Lloyd Osbourne, and the second part wholly, or almost wholly, to Mr. Stevenson. (*The Standard*, 15 Sept. 1894, no. 21.904, p. 2)

The review considered the second part of the novel the point where “the strength and genius of Mr. Stevenson are crowded,” and talked about the book as mainly Stevenson’s output. The idea of genius is present throughout the review, which basically focused on the famous man of letters only, completely neglecting the contribution – nay, even the existence – of young Osbourne:

> [t]he book is very short, one volume and large print, but Mr. Stevenson gives such vitality to his characters, and so clear an outlook upon the strange quarter of the world to which he takes us, that when we reach the end of the story, we come back to civilization with a start of surprise […] His method is as artistic and his style as masterly as ever. (*The Standard*, 15 Sept. 1894, no. 21.904, p. 2)

As the time went on, and the vogue for collaboration declined, the disentangling of the hands of coauthors remained an ever-present feature of reviews and articles on coauthorship. As late as 1919, a letter to the *Aberdeen Daily Journal* thanked the editor for an article recently published about collaboration and for the “deft treatment of that interesting theme: “[t]he subject has for long had an attraction for me, chiefly because of the nice problem of disentangling the various ‘hands’ involved. […] There is an unfailing fascination […] in unraveling the detail of such ‘syndicate writings.’” (2 Sept. 1919, no. 20.178, p. 3) The need to know ‘which is which’ could be felt very sharply, and the following article in *The Academy* of 1909 expresses all the frustration a reader could experience: “[t]o the critic or the student of literature such partnership is like enough to afford more irritation than pleasure. He feels compelled to disentangle the respective contributions of the pair, and can never be sure that he has made a just and accurate division.” (9 Oct. 1909, no. 1953, pp. 605-606)

Despite the public’s preoccupation with the attribution of authorship, many coauthors strove to go against it and insistently professed that it was impossible to detect which is which. In the early 1880, when the ‘literary twins’ Erckmann and Chatrian were still working together, *The Era* reported:
[b]etween these two writers, in their work, there is always perfect unity, and it is an absolute truth that none of their productions can be said to belong more to one than the other. Similar sentiments, and the same work during fifteen years, combined with a love of the same country, Alsace, have established between these two men a style of thought positively similar. Sometimes it is one who writes most, and the other who directs the work by furnishing the ideas, or plot. Often the roles change, but the result is continually the same. (The Era, 1 Apr. 1882, no. 2271, p. 7)

Rosa Campbell Praed and Justin McCarthy, who entertained a collaborative relationship from 1886 to 1890, declared since the preface of their first novel (The Right Honourable, Chatto and Windus, 1886) that “[e]very character, incident, scene, and page is joint work, and was thought out and written out in combination.” Neither of them ever withdrew these words, and in interviews throughout the years they stuck to their initial view of collaboration:

Mrs. Campbell Praed herself cannot tell her own share in the novels which she has written along with Mr. Justin McCarthy. ‘I write the bones of the chapters I think I can do most easily […] and Mr. McCarthy does the same. Every sentence is joint work. I really don’t know which is which, and now I wouldn’t work in any other way. (The Globe, 4 May 1894, no. 30861, pp. 1-2)

George R. Sims had written short stories, novels and plays in collaboration, and explained in an interview in 1892:

[i]n the case of myself and my collaborators we literally live together till the play has been evolved, in which we have so intermingled that it would, and should, be difficult for one or other to point to his work. Two men come together bubbling over with ideas, and throw a plot together, as a sculptor takes a piece of clay. Then we reject and reject until we have paired it into a symmetrical shape, and then we set to work on the dialogue. Perhaps one man will write a whole scene. He will submit it to the other, who will ruthlessly revise it – and so we go on.” (The Era, 27 Aug. 1892, no. 2814, p. 9)

Brander Matthews himself replied to the question he had asked at the beginning of his essay declaring the hopelessness of distinguishing the coauthors’ hands. He writes that the answer can hardly ever be given; even the collaborators themselves are at a loss to specify their own contributions. When two men have worked together honestly and heartedly in the inventing, the developing, the constructing, the writing, and the revising of a book […] it is often impossible for either partner to pick out his own share. (Matthews 1891, 2)

Matthews maintained that what really matters in a collaboration was the creative phase, in which the coauthors discuss and develop the story together; the putting down on paper was “but the clothing of a babe already alive and kicking.” (7) However, this side of the coin was marginal and it never succeeded in taking over public opinion.
In 1919, the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* dedicated a very long article to literary collaboration, spanning from Michael Field to various French collaborateurs to Mrs. Campbell Praed and Justin McCarthy, to the ever-present Besant and Rice. After considering various kinds of coauthorship, it unceremoniously dismissed the practice, proclaiming that “[t]he Anglo-Saxon temperament, on the whole, is too shy and reticent to unbosom itself to a confidant with the unreserve for which collaboration calls.” (12 Sept. 1919, no. 8957, p. 2) Coauthorship was declared unfit for and even incompatible with the British national character. The press agreed upon its failure, and defined it a transitory literary fashion that had served the cause of periodical literature (as predicted by Matthews). Even without such negative leave from the press, coauthored novels had already started to drift towards the margins of the literary market. In the 1920s, of all the production of the preceding fifty years only some works by Besant and Rice and Somerville and Ross still circulated. Soon enough they would sink into oblivion too, and almost nothing would remain in the collective memory.

All in all, in the representations by the press, the literary page could either become the site of fruitful exchange between the collaborators or the field of bitter warfare. As we have seen, both sides of the coin coexisted in the Victorian imagination. As the trend for coauthorship rapidly turned into an inclination for literary manufactures, thus sacrificing the artistic quality of the product, the response of the reading public grew more critical and heavily negative. The debate I have tried to illustrate seems to point to a problematic understanding of authorship in the late Victorian imagination: on the one hand, the idyllic representations of collaborators working together for years in an atmosphere of productive sympathy effectively challenged the paradigm of the solitary author; on the other hand, the inevitable tensions implied in any collaborative relationship and the limits this practice presented seemed to confirm the urgency for solitude in order to create literature, thus reassessing and enhancing the Romantic genius. The coexistence for a certain period of these oxymoronic positions exposes an ambiguity in the construction of the author. Yet, ultimately Romantic notions of the solitary man of letters were so deep-seated in the collective consciousness that the trend for coauthorship did not manage to uproot them; on the contrary, it seems to have strengthened them, as if corroborating the necessity for the creative act to be carried out in solitude.

Moreover, even if the authors of a text were two, the ‘real’ author was believed to remain one, whom the reader had the challenging duty to detect. As we have seen, some collaborators went to great lengths to explain that all their production was joint work; they endeavoured to convince the public that to try and dissect the different contributions was impossible, and – most importantly – pointless. However, their voices did not penetrate the Victorian imagination, which kept figuring a coauthored work as not really so, in what I have called the paradox of collaboration. This negative view was embodied by some coauthors themselves – and very influential ones, like Walter Besant and Andrew
Lang. Some coauthors also paradoxically talked about their collaborative products as mere entertainment and lacking serious artistic value, since “the deeper things” belonged to the man alone in his room. The established idea of the creative single artist as opposed to the supposedly mechanic and/or playful collaborative practice was so pervasive that not only was it fixed within the public’s consciousness, but it also constantly lurked in coauthors’ perception of themselves and their works. Indeed, the fact that popular writers who had experienced collaboration maintained these opinions is significant, and their declarations had a huge impact on Victorian representations of coauthorship. Ironically enough, then, coauthors contributed to their own exile. Fiction resulting from joint writing was not taken seriously, and although very popular and sometimes scoring perfectly respectable reviews, it did not stick in libraries and bookstores. The Victorian imagination simply consumed and forgot it. Also, the negative halo that surrounded commercial partnerships swallowed up the cases of valuable texts written collaboratively.

This chapter has tried to map the discourse in the British press around literary collaboration on fiction during the decades when it was at its peak, with some incursions in the immediately preceding and succeeding years in order to get a more complete perspective. The main interest of this chapter lay in how the coeval reading public reacted to, perceived and represented the act of coauthoring a work of fiction. It has been sought to identify some trends in the discourse in order to understand which were the aspects of collaboration that struck the late Victorian imagination the most. Also, it has been underlined that the debate on coauthorship spurred further discussions on wider issues connected with authorship, a topic of paramount importance in the Victorian age, which will be examined in the following chapter.
Chapter Six: Literary Collaboration and the Figure of the Author

The way Victorians saw the practice of literary collaboration has been the focus of the previous chapter. The discussion aroused in the periodical press, when talking about coauthorship, proved capable of generating a discourse around some central questions: which author had the initial inspiration? Whose hand held the pen? Who was the more talented author? That is, who was the real artist behind the collaborative process? These and other questions led to a heated and controversial debate. Collaborative texts were felt to be problematic, to “afford more irritation than pleasure” since the reader “feels impelled to disentangle the respective contributions of the pair, and can never be sure that he has made a just and accurate division,” as the Academy (9 Oct. 1909, no. 1953, pp. 605-606) wrote when the practice was in its twilight.

The problem with the reading of collaborative texts was precisely that they were approached and evaluated according to the same paradigms employed for single-authored texts. A collaborative work, instead, had implications for the author-figure other than those implied in a single-authored work: within collaborative writing, the author turned into something very different from what the Victorians were accustomed to imagining.

This chapter considers the theoretical effects of late Victorian collaborative writing on the figure of the author. The ways in which the author emerging from the collaborative process defied hegemonic conceptions of author-ity will be at the core of the analysis. In order to support and illustrate its argument, this chapter will rely mainly on the experiences of some collaborators discussed in the previous chapters, in particular Edith Somerville, Walter Besant and James Brander Matthews. At the end of the chapter, metadiscoursive comments by some other coauthors, like Michael Field, will be taken into account as well. Although coming from different backgrounds and performing under diverse conditions, these authors all described their experiences in surprisingly similar terms. They all employed a rhetoric meant to highlight the unity of the coauthored work and the shifted position of the author with respect to the text. Reading their metadiscourses, a shared idea of authorship gradually takes shape: that of a diluted, hybrid, elusive subject that rejects the predominant role accorded to him/her by the Romantic tradition and proclaims the desire – nay, the necessity – of remaining concealed behind the text.

The discourses unfolding in the late nineteenth century press disclose a dominant understanding of authorship, which identifies the author with an inspired creative agent who produces works of art in isolation, a ‘solitary genius,’ to borrow the terminology employed by Stillinger (1991). Such model, considered by the Victorians to be the only possible condition for the writing of texts with some literary value, was actually a pattern modelled in the course the eighteenth century, which found its
consecration in the Romantic period. The author is a historically and culturally determined construction. What was felt by the Victorian public to be the ‘traditional’ author figure was in fact the invention of the previous century, as many twentieth-century critics – including the acclaimed Barthes and Foucault – have repeatedly pointed out. The dawning of the idea of the author as a solitary genius and its increasingly central function during the eighteenth century were mirrored in the lexicon, with the appearance of a whole set of new words all entering the English language in this period, as reported in the OED: ‘authorial’ (1757, “of, belonging to, or characteristic of an author”), ‘authorical’ (1731, same meaning of ‘authorial’), ‘authoring’ (1742, “the activity or occupation of an author”), ‘authorism’ (1702, “the career or occupation of an author”), ‘authorling’ (1752, “an inferior or minor author, an insignificant writer”), ‘authorly’ (1784, “of, befitting, or characteristic of an author”), and ‘authorship’ (1. “the career or occupation of an author,” 1710; 2. “the fact of being the author of a piece of writing; the fact of being written by a particular person, literary origin,” 1748; 3. (obsolete) “a with possessive adjective: a person considered in regard to his or her occupation as an author,” 1782). If the language is the mirror of the society in which it is generated, the appearance of these words is symptomatic of an emerging kingdom of the author. Once the reign of the solitary author had begun, we find also the first occurrence of the word ‘collaborator’ as connected with literature. Significantly, ‘collaborator’ in this sense was first used in 1802. This means that collaboration becomes significant, comes to signify, within an ideology of authorship as singular, individual, unique […]. The idea of literary collaboration, in other words, seems only to have become a matter of consideration, seems only to need its own word, once the Romantic conception of authorship […] emerges as the dominant ‘ideology’ of composition.” (Bennet 2005, 94)

Towards the birth of the author

As highlighted by Masten in his powerful study of Renaissance drama, “collaboration was a prevalent mode of textual production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” a practice later displaced by “post-Enlightenment paradigms of individuality, authorship, and textual property.” (1997, 4) Even though the focus here is a discussion of collaboration in the field of novels, sixteenth- and seventeenth- century drama cannot be totally ignored. As it has been increasingly recognised, much early modern playwriting was collaborative in nature. (Masten 1997, Vickers 2002, Knapp 2005, Stern 2009, Clare 2012) Dramatic texts were not normally printed, and even when they were, they often came out without ascription of authorship; they were “pre-anonymous,” to use Masten’s terminology, (1997, 13) in the sense that they appeared at a time when attribution of texts to authors was not so important. In point of fact, ‘anonymous’ acquired its modern sense of “bearing no author’s
name; of unknown or unavowed authorship,”) only in the late seventeenth century (1676), as the OED attests. Earlier, it simply meant “nameless, having no name” or “of unknown name.”

The emergence of the author in the eighteenth century is therefore “marked by the notice of its absence.” (Masten 1997, 12) Also, the modern use of ‘anonymous’ emerges with the author as a singular entity; on the contrary, the authorlessness of Renaissance texts was often plural and collaborative. Thus, dramatic texts from this period literally demolish the author-text continuum that later methodologies have taken for granted. As Masten’s striking analysis has demonstrated, “collaborative play-texts disperse the authorial voice (or rather, our historical subsequent notion of the authorial voice.)” (1997, 13)

Indeed, at that historical moment the relationship author-text seems to have been rather loose and blurred. In the absence of copyright laws, early modern playwrights had no claim or proprietary interest in their plays. Once they handed over their plays to a theatre company, they gave up ownership. Dramatists had no further moral claim or financial investment in their work. Even if Clare (2012, 142) argues that “long before copyright laws authors did have a notion of their proprietary and moral rights and were sensitive to plagiarism,” their understanding of ‘plagiarism’ and ‘author’s rights’ was very different from later ones. Lowenstein (2002b) presents a study of early modern playwrights, first of all Ben Jonson, in their struggle to control the presentation of their work, but, as he notes, boundaries between imitation and plagiarism were ambiguous and shifting. Playwrights borrowed and imitated with little regard for possession of material. Jonson, as it is commonly

\[240\] Also in medieval times, as it is widely recognised, anonymity was the norm: manuscript culture was largely anonymous. (Burrow 1982, 40-6) The writer was seen simply as one who transmits a story: the readership was not interested in the writer, who remained unknown and had little more significance to the reader than a scribe. With its multiple copying by successive scribes, manuscript transmission was far from the author’s control; copying texts was part of an ongoing social discourse, and “in this environment texts were inherently malleable, escaping authorial control to enter a social world in which recipients both consciously and unconsciously altered what they received.” (Marotti 1995, 135) In point of fact, in manuscript culture, the scribe’s name was likely to appear on a text as that of the author, who was often “lost in anonymity.” (Saunders 1964, 18) Such a system was therefore far less author centred than print culture was. Tracing the development of the author into the late fourteenth century, Minnis (1988) argues that in that period the medieval notion of the auctor began to develop into an individual whose personal qualities began more clearly to be emphasised. Chaucer was, according to Minnis, one of the first writers “with names and identities who speak in distinctive voices.” (1988, 40) Indeed, despite his knowingly modest description of his role towards the end of Prologue to The Canterbury Tales as one who has simply compiled the text, he expresses an emergent authorial self. Chaucer’s adoption of the role of the compiler is actually a disguise for his own presence as a self-conscious author. Triggs (2002) maintains that Chaucer stands at the beginning of the development of a new conception of authorship: he is “an exemplary embodiment of the transitions and contradictions involved in late medieval understanding of authorship,” (54-55) and he anticipates “an emerging, modern understanding of the professional author setting the terms for his own posterity.” (50) For a discussion of authorship in the Middle Ages, see, among others, Bennet (2005, 38-43), Triggs (2002), Minnis (1988), and Burrow (1982).

\[241\] See Clare (2012) for a discussion of Shakespeare borrowing directly from coeval plays for his The Taming of the Shrew, King John, and King Lear.
acknowledged, was one of the few to have an active role in the publishing of his plays. He oversaw the publication of his Works in 1616 and also the earlier publication of his quarto texts. As Clare points out, Jonson was not the first to publish an edition of his plays: in 1601 Simon Waterstone had published The Works of Samuel Daniel. Jonson however “was the first to use the term ‘works’ in relation to the author and so asserting authorial possession.” (2012, 144) Unlike Jonson, most dramatic authors of the time did not care to identify with or lay claim to their work. As for Shakespeare, there is little evidence of his view on authorship. He died in 1616, the same year of Jonson’s Works, with only a few plays performed by the King’s Men in print (without his control).

Some plays, like Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet, were published anonymously; some others, like Henry IV, Richard II and Richard III, went into multiple editions under his name, while others such as Twelfth Night, The Taming of the Shrew, Measure for Measure, and Macbeth were not published at all in his lifetime. (Clare 2012, 145) As Clare aptly underlines, despite the recent growth of interest in Shakespeare’s collaborators, most of the uncertain plays continue to be marketed under his name. The reason might probably be the vested interests in the attribution of Shakespearean authorship: an edition or a performance of a play of uncertain authorship like Edward III is surely more commercially viable if a case of attribution can be made for Shakespeare. In point of fact, over time the name of Shakespeare “has reached a position of such pre-eminence […] that his unique status as an author seems impregnable.” (Clare 2012, 150) This marketing of Shakespeare as an island “is a historical accretion at variance with the conditions prevailing in the theatre in his day, where a writer with the ‘bibliographical ego’ of Jonson was at pains to assert ownership over his writings.” (Clare 2012, 150) Especially since the eighteenth century, Shakespeare started to be regarded as the embodiment of the individual Author – “the very anti-type of collaboration.” (Masten 1997, 10)

Although the collaborative nature of early modern plays has been widely recognised in recent debates about authorship, for a long time the main concern of critics who dealt with dramatic texts of this period has been to establish who wrote what – much like the Victorians. They have worked “to construct an authorial univocality,” (Masten 1997, 15) even if such a thing does not exist, or at least is not applicable to dramatic texts of this period. Problems of attribution have held the attention of literary critics, and “attempts to divine the singular author of each scene, phrase, and word” (Masten 1997, 7) has long predominated. As Love (2002, 4) puts it, “the subject of attribution studies is the uniqueness of each human being and how this is enacted in writing.” Bennet (2005, 98) comments that “the work of attributionists is based on a fundamental concern for the integrity of the individual

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242 It is true, however, that Shakespeare took care to see to the publication of some of his poetic efforts. (see Clare 2012, 145)
signature, for indelible signs or traces of authorial identities that, they believe, remain in the work.” The attribution by use of versification and idiom tests was pioneered by F.G. Fleay in *On Metrical Tests as Applied to Dramatic Poetry* (1874). His successors in the field include E.H.C. Oliphant (especially *The Plays of Beaumont and Fletcher*, 1927), C. Hoy (“The Shares of Fletcher and His Collaborators in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon,” in *Studies in Bibliography*, 1956-57, 1958-62), and B. Hensman (*The Shares of Fletcher, Field, and Massinger in Twelve Plays of the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, 1974). Oliphant (1911, 1927) investigated extensively the problems connected with the absence of a certain, single author. He presents long lists of issues when facing a Renaissance play: “unclaimed plays; […] plays unclaimed but having possibilities of specific authorship; […] plays claimed on altogether inadequate grounds; […] plays of diverse claims, lacking certainty; […] plays of joint attribution, partly probable and partly of very little value; […]” All these problems existed because Oliphant, like his successors, insisted in approaching such texts with the idea of the solitary author in mind. That a play was the output of a generally collaborative atmosphere in which individual contributions went lost was unacceptable. Oliphant did not conceive the absence of the author and the presence of more corporate forms of textual production. After Oliphant’s, Cyrus Hoy’s are probably the most influential of these studies. He attempted to sort out the collaborators on the grounds of linguistic criteria, by examining the traces of individuality and personality such as handwriting, spelling, word-choice, imagery, and syntactic formations left in the coauthored text. He wished “[t]o distinguish any given dramatist’s share in a play of dual or doubtful authorship” by applying “a body of criteria which, derived from the unaided plays of the dramatist in question, will serve to identify his work in whatever context it may appear.” (1956, part I, 130) Hoy’s analyses thus began with the presumption of singular authorship. Yet, as Masten (1994, 367) points out, Hoy assumed that “a writer’s use of ye for you and of contractions like ‘em for them is both individually distinct and remarkably constant in ‘whatever context.’” Hoy’s assumptions were challenged by evidence he himself noticed: firstly, there is no play that can with any certainty be regarded as the unaided work of only Beaumont or Fletcher; secondly, their linguistic practices “are themselves so widely divergent as to make it all but impossible to predict what they will be from one play to another;” (Hoy 1958, part III, 86); Hoy’s results were, moreover, further rendered problematic by the frequency of revision and the mediation of many other figures such as copyists, actors, compositors. He himself recognised the mutual contagion of style as the result of close association. Oliphant’s, Hoy’s and other studies of this kind relied on the assumption that a singular authorial voice, if not identifiable, at least existed behind these texts. They have read collaborative early modern authorship as a *multiple* version of authorship, as the summing up of different authors, as a confirmation of the individuality and autonomy of the author, rather than as a fluid, dispersed, fused type of authorship.
To complete this concise discussion of (co)authorship in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it is essential to stress that playwriting was only one of the collaborative discursive sites and genres in a period in which textual propriety was typically not assigned to authors either by law or custom. The studies of Saunders (1965), Marotti (1990; 1995), Wall (1993), Thomas (1994) and others have demonstrated the collaborative construction of meaning in Renaissance poetic manuscripts. The late sixteenth century, and later the early and mid seventeenth century, was a moment of transition and uncertainty, of in-between notions of collaborative fluidity and the emergence of presiding authorial figures. “The author’s emergence was a slow and fluctuating process,” writes Clare. (2012, 137) Masten (1997, 113-155) notices that the increasing frequency of publications of play-texts in folio format organised around authorial figures corresponds to developments in the understanding of the author figure. He discusses the emergence of concerns about singular authorship in this period, taking as an example the first Beaumont and Fletcher folio of 1647. According to his analysis, title-pages attributions of authorship towards mid seventeenth century are related to the emergence of discourses of authority. Before the first collection of Beaumont and Fletcher’s plays in the 1647 folio, forty-six editions of plays associated with the names Beaumont and Fletcher had appeared in quarto. Significantly, of these forty-six, all the editions that were published without attribution of authorship (eight in total) appeared before 1623, the date of the first Shakespeare folio; after that date, no edition of a play eventually included in the Beaumont and Fletcher canon was printed without ascribing authorship, whether to Fletcher or to Beaumont alone. Moreover, where earlier quartos had simply preceded playwrights’ names with ‘by,’ ‘written by,’ or ‘made by,’ later quartos started to employ the word ‘Author.’ Thus, it seems that the 1616 Jonson folio and the 1623 Shakespeare folio set the model for organising plays around a central authorial figure. Masten argues that “the more frequent appearance of playwrights’ names on quarto title pages and the publication of dramatic folios organized around author-figures signals in some sense ‘the birth of the author.’” (1997, 119) However, the emergence of concerns regarding authorship was not without its problems and contradictions. The 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio read in its title-page Comedies and Tragedies Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, Gentlemen (their names are bracketed together, thus stressing the plurality of attribution), but the frontispiece presented a portrait of Fletcher alone. In the picture, Fletcher is depicted as a classically sculpted bust out of a natural scene; he wears a toga and a crown of laurels, and over and under him there are Latin inscriptions denoting his position as a poet.

243 Studies by Stallybrass and White (1986), Loewenstein (1985), and Murray (1987) on the Jonson folio, and studies by Blayney (1991), de Grazia (1991), and Marcus (1988) on Shakespeare have highlighted the great amount of cultural work involved in converting texts written for the stage, in which the author was decentered, into volumes that organise texts under a single patronymic.
This frontispiece fits in the conventions of authorship in the recognizably classical mode used by Jonson. The authorship is declared to be plural in the title page, but the frontispiece “visualizes its attribution as a singular author in a classical garb.” (Masten 1997, 123) Moreover, the folio’s swinging between collaboration and singular authorship is made even worse by the extensive preliminary material that lies between the title page and the plays: there are thirty-seven commendatory poems, of which only seven are addressed to Beaumont and Fletcher together; twenty-three are addressed to Fletcher alone, while only three to Beaumont; the other poems are addressed to one man but speak at length of the authors’ collaboration. Humphrey Moseley, one of the folio’s two publishers, wrote in the preface that he initially had the intention to print only Fletcher’s work, but that “since never parted while they lived, I conceived it not equitable to separate their ashes.” (qtd. in Masten 1997, 123) This might explain the presence of only one portrait, and of the majority of the poems addressed to Fletcher; however, it seems improbable that Humphrey Moseley did not notice the apparent contradiction between the collaborative collection and its paratextual apparatus.

Another aspect challenging modern ideas of authorship is the fact that Moseley declared in the preface that he received his copy for the texts from the acting company, which routinely altered the texts and circulated copies that bore these alterations – as it was the established theatrical practice. (see Bentley 1986) He also adds that some parts (mostly prologues and epilogues) were not written by Beaumont and Fletcher, but made by others in the various revivals of the plays. From these statements it is clear that the idea of ‘Author’ does not correspond to later standards: “the term ‘Author’ is working not in the sense of those who have written (and taken credit for) every word in the volume, but rather those who authorize it with their prominent names, those who give it its primary author/ity; they are ‘the Authors of this Volume,’ but not entirely its writers.” (Masten 1997, 126) Here ‘authorship,’ it might be added, does not necessarily exclude the notion of collaboration in its wider sense. Authorship and coauthorship are thus both present in the presentation of the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio. The plays printed there were written collaboratively by two men, and the title page explicitly shows that; also, the texts were altered, cut, or expanded by subsequent figures who worked with them. These plays were truly collaborative. At the same time, although the folio is presented as a collection of collaboratively written plays, it nevertheless privileges one author (Fletcher) through the presence of the engraving and of the proportion of the commendatory poems. Fletcher is presented as the fathering singular author. All these appear to us conflicting positions, but they bear witness to a liminal moment in the history of the construction of authorship. The Beaumont and Fletcher folio was one of the attempts “to negotiate two modes of textual production:” (Masten 1997, 138) the collaborative and the emerging individual one.
One last remark concerning the development of the notion of author in the Renaissance. Eisenstein (1979, vol.1, 121-124) interestingly links the emerging emphasis on the individual and on originality during the Renaissance to print culture. Indeed, from its introduction print publication was connected to new conceptions of authorship. Firstly, the difference between having – and seeing – one’s work and one’s name in a fixed, permanent form, instead of writing something that most probably would be lost, or altered by copyists, or carried on and ultimately assigned to ‘anon’, was striking. Secondly, Eisenstein underlines, originality – the determining element in modern conceptions of authorship – had a totally different status before print was invented: without relatively accessible, relatively speedy multiple copies (which print affords), no one could be sure that a new discovery was in fact new. Burrow (1982, 126) distinguishes between the ‘intermittent’ culture of the manuscript age and the ‘continuous, incremental’ culture of the age of print. Eisenstein suggests that before print culture, writing was thought of in terms of the representation of what is already known. In Bennet’s words, (2005, 45) “in such a culture [the pre-print culture] invention is what, in a different context, Jacques Derrida calls ‘revelatory invention, the discovering and unveiling of what already is’ as opposed to the production of something new, what he calls ‘creative invention, the production of what is not.’” (Derrida 2002, 168) [my emphases] Also, by stabilising the text and making it more controllable by the author, printing led to the need for new kinds of property rights – copyright – and such rights ultimately led to an increase in prestige for authors. The introduction of printing spurred originality and individuality also as a reaction against its uniformalising impulse: the uniformity of the printed book triggered “a desire to express one’s personality, one’s self, to represent oneself as a unique individual.” (Bennett 2005, 45) But not only: according to some historians, while oral and manuscript culture implies intertextuality, with one text building on another (manuscripts rarely contained only one text), the printed book gives the illusion of being separate from other texts, producing a strong effect of closure, thus stressing the individuality and separateness of the author. (Ong 1982, 133-34)

The author speaking in his own person

Literary historians tend to agree that the key social, legal, economic, philosophical and aesthetic changes that brought about the development of the ‘modern’ sense of authorship took place during the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth centuries.244 Print technology had become fully

244 Foucault’s acclaimed essay “What is an Author?” puts emphasis on this issue, stressing that what he calls the ‘author-function’ “does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization.” (Foucault 1979, 153) Foucault underlines the radical difference between the ‘modern’ sense of the author and the medieval or pre-modern one. After the seventeenth century, Foucault argues, anonymity in the case of literary texts has become intolerable and
embedded within the culture of Western Europe. It was starting to become virtually possible – even if the cases were still rare – to be able to make a living by writing. Authors were gradually emancipating from patrons: the selling of their works could provide their living. The Civil War stimulated demand for printed material, and literacy rates rose steadily in the decades after the Restoration. The role of books changed. Hammond (1997) reflects that

[i]n a society becoming capable of delivering a standard of living considerably above that of mere subsistence to an increasing number of its members, books were amongst the possessions that these improving citizens wanted to consume. Indeed, they were high on the list of such consumables, because, as people grew richer, they required the trappings of what David Hume would call ‘refinement’ to distance themselves from those who could not afford to acquire it and to narrow the gap between themselves and those who had possessed such refinement effortlessly for several generations. (32)

By the 1690s, newspapers and periodicals had become a permanent part of the public and social scene. The era of the mass market for literature – although at its very beginnings – had started. The invention of authorship cannot be separated from the commodification of literature, and, according to Rose (1993), the distinguishing characteristic of the modern author is proprietorship. What is generally considered the first real copyright law, the Statute of Anne (1709), affirms the new understanding of the author as not only the originator but also the rightful owner “of a special kind of commodity:” the literary text. (Rose 1993, 1-2) Significantly, the first law on copyright was made to protect printers, not authors. In 1556, the Charter of the Stationers’ Company was granted, stating that no person in England should practise the art of printing unless he belonged to this corporation. The next important event in the evolution of literary property was the Licensing Act of Charles II, in 1662, but still no reference to authors was made. In 1709 finally the Statute of Anne was issued, the first law that took authors into consideration. Its full title recites “An Act for the encouragement of Learning by vesting the copies of printed books in the authors or purchasers of such copies during the times therein mentioned.” The driving force behind the Act was economic: copyright was first and foremost a device developed to protect the investments of those involved in printing and publishing. As underlined by Feather, (1994, 4-5) in the Statute of Anne authors, publishers and booksellers were all put on the same level: the copyright of a text could belong indistinctly to the author or to those who bought his copy. And yet, notes Rose, (1993, 49) an unintended consequence of the need to protect publishers’ and booksellers’ financial interests was the institutionalisation of the author as legal entity: for the first time, authors were legally recognised as possible owners of the

acceptable only as “a riddle to be solved.” (Foucault 1979, 150) As we have seen, the same happened with coauthorship, which was often seen by the Victorian public as a puzzle, a mystery to be solved by playing at guessing who did what.
text; before that, only members of the Guild of Printers and Booksellers of London could claim rights on a text. The Statute of Anne and its successive modifications led firstly to the legal appearance of the author, and secondly to his gradual strengthening. Rose points out that there was a transformation in the conception of authorship from an emphasis on what the author does towards a sense of the author as owning a certain property – the intellectual property.

Copyright laws constituted the legal ground for the Romantic understanding of the author as originator and owner inseparable from his text. And it was at this point that what Bennett calls ‘the commercial paradox’ of Romantic authorship began:

[j]ust at the time that authorship becomes financially and legally viable, an ‘aesthetic ideology’ of the transcendent and autonomous artistic work and of the author as guarantor of the originality and autonomy of that work comes into play. [...] To put it briefly, if a book has commercial value it is seen to lack aesthetic value. (Bennet 2005, 52)

This antithesis, this irreconcilability of the artistic and the commercial value of a literary text remained a central issue well into the following centuries. Alexander Pope perfectly embodies the contradiction: he was a consummate professional writer, but his poems attacked professional and commercial writing: “I writ because it amused me […] I corrected because it was as pleasant to me to correct as to write; and I publish’d because I was told I might please such as it was a credit to please.” (qtd. in Hammond 1997, 292-94). The writer was no longer controlled by the patron, but he was, if he wanted to make a living out of his pen, or at least to have his texts published, controlled by the reading public. The patronage system had mostly disappeared, only to be replaced by the commercial system of publication. Now the author was subject to the laws of the market, which contrasted with the notion of the creative and disinterested genius. The author should be uninterested in worldly matters – let alone money. This doctrine – produced “just when the artist is becoming debased to a petty commodity producer” – might be a sort of “spiritual compensation” for the humiliation that such an individual might feel at the prospect of writing for money. (Eagleton 1990, 53)

In point of fact, inspiration was considered to be the spur for the author to write, not the possibility to profit from one’s writing. The author is so because he is taken by a mysterious, divine-like inspiration. This belief was not a new one: it was derived from ancient Greek tradition. In Plato’s Ion (c. 390 BC) – a dialogue between Socrates and the Homeric rhapsode Ion – the discussion revolves around the nature of poetry and poetic inspiration, and Socrates argues that the true poet works through inspiration,
For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. (Plato 2001, 41)

Socrates goes on explaining that poets themselves are “not the ones who speak those verses,” but “god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us.” (Plato 2001, 42) This description was later to be resumed by most Romantic poets, who celebrated themselves as “standing apart from other men, as in touch with higher, non-human wisdom, as divinely mad and as outside society but therefore better able to judge it.” (Bennet 2005, 37-8) Thus, the poet has the moral responsibility to reveal the truth to the public.

The idea that the author is both himself and at the same time beyond himself when writing is a commonplace in Romantic poetics. For instance, Blake intriguingly declared to have written Milton (1803-8)

from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time, without Premeditation, and even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus render’d Non-Existent, and an immense Poems Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life, all produc’d without Labour or Study. (Letter to Thomas Butts, 25 April 1803, Letters, 1956, qtd. in Saunders 1964, 166)

Romantic poets insisted on the immediacy and spontaneity of poetic creation, on the work of art as being the direct expression of the author’s (divine) inspiration. In the much-celebrated passage from the 1800 Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth declares that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 2006b, 265). However, the declaration is rendered problematic some pages later:

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before that subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on. (Wordsworth 2006b, 273)

So, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” is not spontaneous after all. The emotion is “recollected” and “contemplated” rather than immediately acted upon or written about on the spot. Still, this emotion is both “kindred” to the original, spontaneous one and “actually exist[s]in the mind.” The emotion thus produced is, in other words, both a copy and itself original. Coleridge claims that “genius involves unconscious activity.” (Coleridge 1987, vol. 2, p. 222) In A Defence of Poetry, written in 1821, P.B. Shelley emphasises that poetry “acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness,” (Shelley 1986, 15), that it is “not subject to the control of the
active powers of the mind” and that “its birth and recurrence has no necessary connection with consciousness or will.” (Shelley 1986, 42) Indeed, in one of the most memorable passages of the essay, Shelley explains that

the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. [...] when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline. (Shelley 1986, 38)

In his conclusion, Shelley argues that poets are themselves “perhaps the most sincerely astonished” at their work, “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration,” “the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present,” their words expressing “what they understand not.” (Shelley 1986, 44) Similarly, Hazlitt’s essay “Whether Genius is Conscious of Its Powers?” (1823) explains that “what we have been able to perform is rather matter of wonder than of self-congratulations to us.” (Hazlitt 1889, 119) Hazlitt defines genius as something that “acts unconsciously” and states that “those who have produced immortal works, have done so without knowing how or why,” working under an “involuntary, silent impulse,” (110, 111) “the inspiration of the demon,” (119) as taken by a “rapture.” (111) Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Cervantes “did what they did without premeditation or effort,” “because they could not help it.” (110) Shakespeare “owed almost everything to chance, scarce anything to industry or design.” (110) Correggio “knew not what he did [...] Ah! Gracious God! not he alone; how many more in all time have looked at their works with the same feelings, not knowing but they too may have done something divine, immortal, and finding in that sole doubt ample amends for pining solitude, for want, neglect, and an untimely fate.” (111)

The image of the author that emerges from such declarations is that of a prophet, a seer, a sacred individual. The fact that it is the Roman vatic tradition to which Sir Philip Sidney alludes in his An Apology for Poetry (1595) and that Shelley recalls in A Defence of Poetry is “a mark of just how deeply the prophetic dimension is embedded in cultural representations of the poet.” (Bennett 2005, 36) Shelley wrote that a poet “not only beholds intensely the present as it is, [...] but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. [...] A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one.” (Shelley 1986, 11) Thomas Gray’s image of the poet in “The Bard” (1757) had recalled an ancient tradition of poetic narration, which takes us back to a tradition of oral epic narrative when the epic singer was seen as a seer:

Rob'd in the sable garb of woe,
With haggard eyes the poet stood;
(Loose his beard, and hoary hair
Stream'd, like a meteor, to the troubled air
And with a master's hand, and prophet's fire,
Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre;
(Gray, “The Bard,” I, 2, lines 17-22)

Gray’s ode alludes to the tradition according to which Edward I ordered all Bards who fell into his hands to be put to death; the poem suggests that the bard is also, because of his visionary powers, an outsider. This idea of the poet-prophet as fundamentally apart and isolated from society, central to the Romantic understanding of the author, also had its roots in ancient Greek culture, in which there was a tradition of mismatch between creative individuals – ahead of their times, alienated and marginalised – and society – vulgar and conservative. The idea that some great price had to be paid for one’s genius was already present, as Taplin (2000) reminds us: “[f]rom early days the poet was often seen as a lonely genius driven by creativity despite an unappreciative public: Euripides, and even the blind itinerant Homer, are archetypal examples.” (xvii) The figure of the author as separate from society recurs in virtually all Romantic poets’ constructions of themselves. Indeed, the Romantic author sees himself as ultimately different from humanity itself: “he is seen as both an exemplary human and somehow above or beyond the human, as literally and figuratively outstanding. […] The idea of the Romantic author is opposed to the idea […] of the scribbler, the journalist or literary drudge and is conceived as a subject inspired by forces outside himself.” (Bennet 2005, 60) The author’s loneliness was epitomized, among others, by Shelley, when he identifies “the Poet” with “a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds” (Shelley 1986, 15). Wordsworth’s Prelude (1850) codifies the authorial process as an ultimately solitary one, incompatible with a collaborative “Helper” or second hand:

Here must thou be, O Man!
Power to thyself; no Helper hast thou here;
Here keepest thou in singleness thy state:
No other can divide with thee this work
No secondary hand can intervene
To Fashion this ability, ’tis thine,
The prime and vital principle is thine
In the recesses of thy nature, far
From any reach of outward fellowship
Else is not thine at all. (Wordsworth 1959, Book 14, lines 209-218, p.493) [my emphases]

In this passage, Wordsworth explicitly links the idea of being an author with the idea of isolation: the author is and must be alone in the creative act, otherwise the creation “is not [his] at all.” The inspiration, the “prime and vital principle,” is to be found in one’s deepest self – and Besant’s
statement that “to touch the deeper things one must be alone” clearly echoes this passage (“Lit. Col.” 203) Wordsworth’s insistent rhetoric of possession – five occurrences of ‘thy’ or ‘thine’ within ten lines – stresses the importance of authorial ownership over the text. The impossibility of having a coauthor is remarked by the repetition of “no” plus a term referring to someone else: “no Helper,” “no other,” “no secondary hand.” Alone at the centre of his creation, the Romantic author “straddles the boundaries between man and God” (Ehnenn 2008, 28).

The link between being an author and creation was emphasised during the Romantic period. In the eighteenth century, Abrams argues in his classic study of the theory of Romantic poetics (1953), the hegemonic model of literary creation passed from being that of a mirror held up to nature to one in which the author is like a lamp, emitting light. The work of literature ceased to be regarded primarily as a reflection of nature; instead, “the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself.” (Abrams 1953, 21-23) This is voiced in a passage of Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey (1798):

Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
*Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,*
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. (Wordsworth 2006a, 260, lines 102-111) [my emphasis]

Wordsworth’s refigures eye and ear as themselves creative – half-perceiving and half-creating the world around them. Therefore, the author is no more a mirror of nature, but an active part in the creation of it. Shelley quotes Tasso, “*Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta.*” (Shelley 1986, 40-41)

Another fundamental feature of the Romantic perception of the author was originality. The stress on individuality, uniqueness and novelty central to this conception of authorship was also part of a more general development of the idea of the self. Already in the early modern period a new individualistic order based on a particular prominence of the individual’s personal experience had started to emerge. This new emphasis was related to Protestantism’s stressing of the priority of the subject’s direct and personal relationship with God; the individual was also the starting point for eighteenth-century

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245 On the influence of German philosophy on early Romantic notions of authorship, originality and creation, see for instance Bowie 2003, and Lavik 2014.
liberalism; the conception that real knowledge should be based on one’s personal experience started to spread as well – the often-cited Essay Concerning Human Understanding by John Locke (1690) marked a major shift in this respect. All these new discourses’ privileging of the individual allowed for a new growth of the author as autonomous and individualistic. The idea of originality underwent a transformation in value. From the classical idea of writing as mimetic, as basically involving the reproduction of stylistic and formal tradition, the focus shifted towards artistic originality and therefore ‘genius.’ This idea is extensively articulated since Edward Young’s Conjectures on Original Composition (1759), in which he classifies authors according to two categories: ‘imitators’ and ‘originals.’ The former, he argues, “only give us a sort of duplicates of what we had, possibly much better, before;” they serve to increase “the mere drug of books” by “build[ing] on one another’s foundation” and their debts are “equal to [their] glory.” (Young 1918, 7) Imitators are like monkeys, “masters of mimicry.” (Young 1918, 20) Originals, on the contrary, are “great benefactors,” as they “extend the republic of letters and add a new province to its dominion.” (Young 1918, 6-7) If imitators have to share their crown “with the chosen object of [their] imitation,” “an Original enjoys an undivided applause.” Young makes a series of comparisons to explain his view of originals and imitators; firstly, he compares originals to plants and imitators to industrial products: “[a]n Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made;” conversely, imitators are “a sort of manufacture wrought up by those mechanics, art, and labour, out of pre-existent materials, not their own.” (Young 1918, 7) A few pages later, he compares genius to virtue, and learning to riches: “[a]s riches are most wanted where there is least virtue; so learning where there is least genius.” (Young 1918, 14) Genius and learning, he argues, are very different things:

[1]earning we thank, genius we revere; That gives us pleasure, This gives us rapture; That informs, This inspires; and is itself inspired; for genius is from heaven, learning from man: This sets us above the low, and illiterate; That, above the learned, and polite. Learning is borrowed knowledge; genius is knowledge innate, and quite our own. (17)

The pen of an original writer, “like Armida’s wand, out of a barren waste calls a blooming spring.” (Young 1918, 7) According to Young, authorship in the highest sense should be therefore intended as ‘genius.’ The best forms of poetry “emanate singularly from the mind or soul of the author-genius.” (Lavik 2014, 46) Young “insists on the true author as radically independent, autonomous, and self-creating.” (Bennet 2005, 59) This notion of originality developed into the mantra of the poet as being ahead of his time, a genius so original that only few of his contemporaries can understand him, and bound to be neglected during his own time and fully appreciated in the future. The importance of
uniqueness and imagination was further stressed by Coleridge, who in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) makes a distinction between fancy, primary imagination and secondary imagination. Fancy is “a Mode of memory” that “must receive all its Materials ready made from the law of association;” (Coleridge 1834, 173) it is mere mechanic and associative power, and is controlled by one’s will. On the contrary, primary imagination is “the living Power and Prime Agent of all human Perception,” (Coleridge 1834, 172) it’s the vital faculty that *creates*, and which explicitly imitates God in creation: it is “[a] repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” (172) Secondary imagination is a kind of in-between: it “co-exist[s] with the conscious will” and deals with objects “fixed and dead,” and yet it is vital like the primary imagination, to which it is “identical […] in the kind of its agency;” indeed, it is “an echo of the former,” “differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.” (172) Coleridge’s classification draws directly on the theorisation made by Schelling on *Fantasie* and *Einbildungskraft*, itself inspired by a similar distinction by August Wilhelm Schlegel. The German philosopher considers the *Einbildungskraft* as a form of memory, while the *Fantasie* is the highest faculty, the most similar to divine creation: “[m]an muss nur wissen, dass die Fantasie, wodurch uns erst Welt entsteht, und die wodurch Kunswerke gebildet werden, dieselbe Kraft ist, nur in verschieden Wirkungsarten.” (Schlegel 1884, vol. 2, 84) [it is necessary to know that the *Fantasie* thanks to which the Earth was first created, and the *Fantasie* thanks to which works of art are created, are the same faculty, only expressed in different forms,’ my translation]. Following the German Romantics, Coleridge links imagination (the creative faculty) to the notion of poetic genius – of which it is “the soul” (180) – as contrasting with fancy (the mechanic faculty), which is only genius’s “drapery.” (180) Thanks to imagination, Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry*, the poet “participates in the eternal, the infinite, the one.” (Shelley 1986, 11)

Such theorising of the myth of the author-God as a solitary genius led, especially as the nineteenth century advanced, to an underrating of the many collaborative relationships that connected Romantic writers. The discrepancy between idealisation and actual practice is evident. Collaboration was “an indisputable fact of the Romantic period, traceable through authors’ published accounts of the genesis of their texts; through personal journals, epistolary exchanges, publication history, and the testimony of contemporaries” (Hickey 1996: 735). Studies such as Stillinger’s (1991) give ample evidence of major Romantic writers’ solid involvement in each other’s literary production. The Romantic era is indeed full of collaborative projects: one year before Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, a

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246 It is well-known that Coleridge was deeply influenced by Kant, Schelling and A.W. Schlegel. In his *Biographia Literaria* he acknowledges his debt, in particular towards Schelling: “[t]o me it will be happiness and honour enough, should I succeed in rendering the system itself intelligible to my countrymen.” (Coleridge 1834, 94)
poetic volume by Coleridge appeared in print with the addition of some sonnets by Charles Lamb and by Charles Lloyd; in 1794 *The Fall of Robespierre* was published, a play to which Coleridge contributed the first act and Robert Southey the second and the third; Coleridge and Southey collaborated on the satirical ballad “The Devil’s Thoughts,” published in the *Morning Post* in 1799.\(^{247}\)

Recent studies have brought to light the crucial roles of Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb in their brothers’ literary production. The collaboration between Mary and Charles Lamb results particularly intriguing due to their co-dependent, almost symbiotic, relationship.\(^{248}\) These two siblings’ mutual influence was embedded in a life-long domestic and authorial partnership (the ‘double-singleness’ described by Charles in “Mackery End”) and they actually set out to collaborate on three works for children, most notably *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), with Charles in charge of adapting the tragedies and Mary the comedies.\(^{249}\) The self-proclaimed nightingale Percy Bysshe Shelley was himself part of a net of literary comradeship, and also shared an intense relationship of literary exchange with his wife Mary – his ‘editing’ of *Frankenstein* and his contributing the 1818 Preface to the novel must be accounted for, along with his contribution to Mary’s mythological dramas *Proserpine* and *Midas*.\(^{250}\)

This view of the author has important consequences for the relationship author-text. Firstly, since the text is perceived as the direct reflection of its author’s hypertrophic self, how could a single text possibly “manifest the essential being of more than one person”? (Ede and Lunsford 1990: 85) The author is always a singular individual.

Secondly, it is hard to separate the author from the text: the authorial self is extremely present and alive inside the literary work, so much so that Coleridge equates the two: he cannot “describe the legitimacy of the poem without referring it to ‘the poetic genius himself’ as embodied in ‘the poet.’” (Hickey 1998, 306)

What is poetry? Is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself,
which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet’s own mind.
(Coleridge 1834, 179)

Thirdly, when it comes to reading a text, the reader will look for the author in it. The temptation to find the author in the text is almost inevitable: the Romantic text, due to its very nature, calls the reader to search for its writer. A striking case is that of Byron, whose contemporaries insisted on identifying with his literary characters, starting from *Childe Harold*. In the preface to the first two cantos (1812), Byron insisted that the hero was a fictitious character, “the child of imagination.” (Byron 2006, 617) However, in the manuscript version, Byron had called his protagonist ‘Childe Burun,’ the early form of his family name. After the insistences of the public on seeing Byron’s own travels in those of his fictional hero, in the fourth and last canto (1818) we find a first-person narrating voice; in the preface, he writes that in that canto there will be “less of the pilgrim,” and “that little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person. The fact is, that I had become weary of drawing a line which everyone seemed determined not to perceive.” (Byron 2006, 617) The work of art becomes explicitly autobiographic: the author as a biographical person is in the text; his personality, his inclinations and his experiences are all poured into it; the result is, the author is extremely visible inside his work.

A widespread practice that contributed to strengthen the relationship author-text was that of public readings of one’s works, whether in front of wide audiences or in small private circles. Coleridge’s readings became a cult in his age: his rooms at Highgate were a centre of constant entertainment for his friends, for the London intellectuals, and “for a steady stream of pilgrims from England and America. They came to hear one of the wonders of the age, the Sage of Highgate.” (Stillinger and Lynch 2006, 425) Coleridge’s talk had an almost hypnotic power, which Hazlitt remembers in “My First Acquaintance with Poets,” and which deeply impressed, among others, a young Mary Godwin (the future Mary Shelley), who apparently was haunted by the memory of an evening when, “a small child, she hid behind a sofa to listen to Coleridge, one of her father’s visitors, recite *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. (Stillinger and Lynch 2006, 425) Through the act of reading aloud one’s text in front of a public, lending one’s voice and one’s body to the characters the author himself has generated, the presence of the author-creator is made concrete, alive. The literary creation is taken to a further level: thanks to the use of his voice, the expressions of his face, the movements of his body, the author literally gives life to his characters. From an abstract, invisible creator – a quiet voice

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251 Hence the attacks of the formalist school against what it saw as the tendency of critics to gossip about the biography of the author instead of making a serious discussion of the literary text. Paul de Man significantly wrote: “whenever one is supposed to speak of literature, one speaks of anything under the sun […] except literature.” (1986, 29)
behind the written words – the author turns into a more complete creator, visible, audible, touchable. Also, the experience of seeing the author reading his text generates in the public a sense of overlapping between reality and fiction: the author’s public reading turns something that before belonged to the world of the imagination – heard and seen only in one’s mind – into something that was part of reality, much more than it would have been if it had been someone else to read.

“Nothing so precious and so wonderful in the market as the face of Charles Dickens”

With the expansion of the literary marketplace in the course of the Victorian age, the cult of the author inaugurated by the Romantics intensified due to a combination of factors. During the Victorian period, “two markets conflated to produce a new merchandising strategy:” (Curtis 1995, 213) publishing and the fine arts. This new alliance had a strong impact on the figure of the author, and heavily influenced the production and the consumption of literature. Intrinsic to this fusion of markets were some cultural trends on which editors and publishers (and authors) heavily capitalised: the Victorian emphasis on the ‘art of seeing,’ and the increasing importance of portraiture. The phrase ‘the art of seeing’ refers to the Victorian passion for observation and for refining the skills of looking and seeing. John Ruskin wrote that “the greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something […] To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one.” (qtd. in Hewison 1976, 7) A book entitled The Education of the Eye, with Reference to Painting, by John Burnet (1837), claimed that eye training and drawing should be two basic aspects of children education, and that drawing should accompany reading and writing. Ads for instruments useful for observation, from optical glasses to cameras, telescopes, projection devices, binoculars, optical instruments, and microscopes, were present in magazines of various sorts. By the 1860s microscopes had become a minor craze. Observation became commodified by these products. (Curtis 1995, 217)

Such cultivation of the art of seeing triggered a change in the practices of visual communication. One consequence was a growing request for visual elements in the publishing industry, which powered popular enthusiasm for portraiture – first engraved portraits, later photographs. Curtis (1995, 214) ascribes this portrait mania to the Victorian obsession for classifying all things, including the human face. The aspiration to read one’s character by scientifically observing the conformation of one’s
physical traits resulted in the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology. By mid-century, due to new, cheaper reproduction techniques, the market for fine art engravings had shifted from an upper-class domain to the middle and lower classes. From its iconic position as a luxury item of wealth and power, the portrait came to have the status of promoted commodity in the mass market economy. A number of series and volumes appeared in print attempting to catalogue the famous people of the past and of the present through portrait biography. Penny magazines on their part offered rougher but more accessible prints; The Penny Magazine, for instance, regularly presented engraved portrait series to its readers. The portrait had become an essential advertising tool. As Curtis argues, the face was democratized and commodified: “[a]nyone’s face could now be mass-engraved or reproduced at little cost, and in various media, even, [...] down to portraits being reproduced in pats of butter.” (1995, 232) Portrait imagery was a necessary promotional mechanism both for products and for figures in the public eye. Advertising “was ubiquitous in the Victorian period, on buildings, omnibuses, cabs, and carts.” (Waller 2008, 332)

Just to make an example, portraits of eminent doctors started to be used as stamps of authenticity and worth on medicines. Authors clearly took part in this mania. Portraits of characters from popular novels were sold in series: textual portraits thus “work[ed] their way out of the novel, into the market for ‘real’ portraits.” (Curtis 1995, 232) Booksellers displayed popular writers’ pictures in their shop windows: the placement in the window spoke volumes of the author’s popular ranking; the removal of the photograph meant that it did not attract readers’ attention any more. The best-known papers to reproduce portraits were the sixpenny weeklies, like the Illustrated London News (established in 1842) and The Graphic (1869), which used woodcut drawings to provide their readers with pictorial presentations of writers and generally of people in the news.

A key figure in the portrait mania was Charles Dickens. He was able to exploit it for his own benefit – in particular the photograph. Already in October 1837, the Quarterly Review remarked that poster portraits were used in omnibuses to promote authors, and that Dickens’s face was rapidly replacing all the other ones. (Curtis 1995, 236) During his life, he posed for over eighty photographs. Pirated and counterfeit images of Dickens circulated widely. Considering that photography was invented in the 1820s, and that it became more accessible towards mid-century, Dickens’s can be counted among

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252 On the popularity of physiognomy in the Victorian age, see Pearl 2010.
254 For example, a magazine called Photographic Portraits of Men of Eminence offered a monthly carte-de-visite and biographical essay. Dickens’s image was its January 1866 one.
255 Waller points out that in the United States the phenomenon had proceeded at a much faster pace.
the first most photographed faces, and, as Curtis defines it, “the first heavily promoted face of literature.” (242) His face was a cultural icon, and his portraits (in particular the one by Maclise) became the model for representing the popular writer. The ‘real-life’ face and the signature of the author (accompanied by the ‘Faithfully Yours’) became both the seal of authenticity a literary text needed and a trademark feature. In 1867, at the highest of his fame, Dickens’s face (photographed in an exclusive sitting by Jeremiah Gurney in New York) was employed to promote his reading tour in the United States. The iconographic and commercial value of his face was aptly commented in the New York Herald:

[s]ince the dust of the Pharaohs was sold as a nostrum and mummy became merchandise there has been nothing so precious and so wonderful in the market as the face of Charles Dickens. Hence it is natural there should be danger from counterfeit, and that the happy merchant who possesses a monopoly of the real article should take all pains to prevent deceptions. […] Surely, Mr. Dickens’s face is his own, and he has as good a right to make a cent a piece on his pictures. (qtd. in Kappel 1978, 170)

From this passage it is patent how the concept of authorial identity had complicated: to know the author we must see him. Such interest might be ascribed to the aspiration that by observing the traits and the expression of the author’s face, one could gain some insights into his fictional world – an idea not at all new, but taken to new levels in this period.256 The public wanted to see a representation of the ultimate subject in the novel: the author himself. Moreover, Victorian readers were not too inclined to accept an invented world of fiction without the reassuring image of the real, nonfictional person responsible for its creation. The image, the visual, concrete and recognizable ‘face of the author’ thus became the indispensable chaperon of abstract names and words. It was the necessary accessory to complete the reading of a book. Detaching the biographical person from the text was inconceivable: the literary text was associated with its flesh-and-blood author, whom the public wanted to see. The bond of the author with the text thus came to be even closer. The text intrinsically belonged to its author, so much so that it physically bears his face and signature. The Romantic tendency to look for the writer in the text was therefore sharpened by the market-driven conflation of text and image, the portrait mania and the aggressive merchandising of the Victorian era.

256 The Victorian public actually exaggerated a deep-rooted tradition. For instance, in the first folio publication of Shakespeare’s plays there is a portrait of the Bard by Martin Droeshout; the page before the portrait presents a warning by Ben Jonson, “To the Reader,” in which the poet tries to persuade the reader not to look at Shakespeare’s face for explanations for his texts: “[…] Reader, look / Not on his Picture, but his Book.” In the first number of the Spectator (1711), Addison reflects: “I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure ‘till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or a fair Man of a mild or choleric Disposition, Married or a Bachelor, with other particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right Understanding of an Author.” (The Spectator, I, I, I)
Even the most reluctant writers now had to pose for photographs: “I do not like photographs, and dislike my own worse than all others,” declared Anthony Trollope. And yet he too realised that he needed a stock of them to send out to admirers: “[t]he one he chose in the 1870s, a mere inch square, had him look disapproving and ‘very much like a conspirator.’” (Waller 2008, 355). Also Henry James and Joseph Conrad, who despised the commercialisation of their profession, had to resign themselves to canvas and cameras. They were both photographed by Coburn, who photographed virtually every celebrated British author, from Barrie to Yeats to Shaw and Zangwill. This was not only the age of authors’ faces, but also of authors’ names – as I have already mentioned in the discussion of the fashionable collaborations between popular authors. Once established, the name of a writer was sufficient to guarantee a certain standard or a certain genre, and to make a book a bestseller. Authors’ names were emphasised through various means – from the use of colours, or capital letters, of repetition – in ads, blurbs, and in the paratexts of the books themselves. In 1876, the Boston publishers Roberts Brothers reacted against (or indeed exploited?) the “trade in reputations” by publishing a series known as ‘The No Name Series:’ each book of the series was written by a famous novelist, whose name was not revealed. The erasure of the name of the writer would force readers to rely less on reputations, trusting only their own judgement. However, the absence of authorial names served to pique the curiosity of the public, thus proving a useful marketing device. The Roberts Brothers were right: curious readers flooded bookstores, and the series lasted successfully until 1887. (Ashton 2003, 170-171)

Authors’ names sold not only books, but various commodities as well. Many popular writers found “nothing degrading about singing the praises of a commodity or company if a fee was attached.” (Waller 2008, 333) The value of Dickens’s name as a promotional device was realised by one of his former teachers, who obtained permission to use his name as an endorsement on adverts for a new school. (Collins 1963, 11). Especially from the second half of the nineteenth century, the author as celebrity reached its highest point ever.257 It was in that period that the term ‘celebrity’ became widespread in the press. (Easely 2011, 137) Popular authors’ faces were easily recognizable; they posed for and lent their signature to ads of the most varied goods, from cigarettes to the first industrial toothpastes; they were called to speak their mind about the hot topics of the moment; they became spokespersons for causes, from women’s rights to social, political and religious issues. Walter Besant was recruited from the grave as a whisky salesman: an ad appeared in 1906 in the gossip magazine M.A.P., reading “Walter Besant drew for us the character of a man who regretted that he couldn’t sleep off hunger. He was an example of those who seek results by wrong means. If you want benefit

257 Later on, literature lost its pride of place in the popular imagination due to the advent of cinema.
from a stimulant, select the right thing. It is the whisky known as Dewar’s.” (M.A.P., 31 March 1906) Besant’s name and that of the whisky were printed in bold letters, so that the association could be made at first sight.258 Hall Caine was such a notorious publicity seeker that Punch called him “an advertisement agent.” (reported in Waller 2008, 335) Women authors were enrolled for advertisements for tonics and medicines for the nerves.

The era of literary tourism was inaugurated. It had actually existed long before the late century, but it was then that it developed into a “vital national culture.” (Waller 2008, 369) Most railway companies advertised day trips to places of literary interest along their lines. Former houses of famous authors were converted into museums. For instance, in 1895 Carlyle’s Chelsea home was open to the public, and the first museum dedicated to the Brontë sisters was inaugurated.259 Shakespeare’s wife’s cottage at Stratford was discovered to have remained quite unrestored and still inhabited by a descendant of the Hathaways, and became a primary destination for literary tourists, second to which came the Lake District. Tennyson’s residence on the Isle of Wight was besieged by hordes of curious pilgrims as a consequence of virtual literary tourism – that is, the habit of the periodical press to publish reports of people’s visits to illustrious places. (Boyce 2013, 18-19) “It’s horrible the way they stare […] And their impudence is beyond words,” miserably exclaimed Tennyson in 1884. (Waller 2008, 376) In 1902 Kipling moved to the seclusion of Bateman’s, a manor house in Sussex, partly because day trippers were pressing their faces at the windows of his previous house, The Elms. But not all popular writers despised being at the centre of attentions: Hall Caine was an outstanding promoter of literary tourism, settling on the Isle of Man and associating his name with the place. In 1895 he took up his residence in Greeba Castle, which became for the next thirty years a magnet to draw tourists to the Isle of Man. Caine also wrote a guide book to the place, and marketed the resort with cleverness: a consortium of bankers, land speculators, and amusement caterers was organized, and his brother was placed in charge of their London office. (Waller 2008, 375) On the occasion of Tennyson’s burial, in 1892, ten thousand people were refused admittance to Westminster Abbey.260 The Times called it “a piece of English history.” (13 Oct. 1892, p. 4) Edmund Gosse, in an account of the event for the New Review, expressed all his “depressed and terrified” reaction to the sight of the vast crowd:

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258 Leslie Stephen underwent the same sort as Besant. For a discussion of advertisements and authors, see Waller 2008, 329-363.

259 The Brontë Society managed to acquire the parsonage in which the family had lived only in 1928.

260 The mass participation to Tennyson’s funeral contrasted with Wordsworth’s unreported, simple funeral at Grasmere in 1850. In forty years, a mass culture had arisen. (McDonald 1997, 6-8)
[i]nside, the grey and vitreous atmosphere, the reverberations of music moaning somewhere out of sight, the bones and monuments of the noble dead, reverence, antiquity, beauty, rest. Outside, in the raw air, a tribe of hawkers urging upon the edges of a dense and inquisitive crowd a large sheet of pictures of the pursuit of a flea by a ‘lady,’ and more insidious salesmen doing a brisk trade in what they falsely pretended to be ‘Tennyson’s last poem.’ (November 1892, p. 513, reported in McDonald 1997, 2)

Magazines specialised in celebrity culture made their appearance; papers devoted to gossip about popular authors (such as Our Celebrities) and to the latest fashionable publications (such as Bookman) embody the predecessors of nowadays tabloids. (Easley 2011, 138) In May 1890, the Review of Reviews significantly remarked that “authors are more read about than read.” (reported in Waller 2008, 350) Literary gossip was an expanding branch of journalism, pioneered from the 1870s by Edmund Yates. He imported the style of the ‘personal interview’ from America, and in 1874 he founded the sixpenny weekly The World, whose success largely rested on its personality focus with successful features such as its ‘Celebrities at Home’ series. (McDonald 1997, 8) By 1884, nearly 400 ‘celebrities’ had opened their houses’ door to the magazine.261 In the 1890s, the most famous exponent of the brazenly intrusive ‘personal interview’ genre was Raymond Blathwayt, whose celebrity interviews appeared in new popular papers like Great Thoughts, the Review of Reviews, Black and White, Bookman, and the Idler. (McDonald 1997, 8–9) In 1890 Punch ironically demanded a Society for the Protection of ‘Celebrities’ and blamed The World for having started this trend. The late nineteenth century witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of biographical material about authors. The 1897 edition of Who’s Who in literature contained some 6000 biographies; the 1898 added another 1000, and the 1899 another 1500. (Waller 2008 422) It was a roaring success. Interviews and (usually posthumous) publication of authors’ correspondence were also endemic. Finding that no method would prevent heirs from publishing one’s letters, in 1890 Punch advised authors that “perhaps the best plan will be, not to write [letters] at all.” Better use the telegraph, or the telephone. (Punch, 11 December 1890, 282)

Forerunners of paparazzi were already massing, and authors were no longer safe. Autograph-hunting was becoming a fashion. Naming a child after a favourite fictional character or an author was a fashion existing since the eighteenth century (when the Pamelas and Clarissas reached epidemic proportions), but again, in the Victorian age this was taken to new levels. Nicol (from Scott), Christabel (Coleridge), Shirley (Charlotte Brontë), Maud and Vivien (Tennyson) – just to mention a few – were common names. In the great age of letter-writing, an author’s postbag was another index of fame: confidences from readers with problems similar to those of the characters in the novels they

261 For more information about Yates and the interview format, see Weiner 1985, 259–74.
read, asking for sympathy and advice, flooded writers’ mailboxes. Amid the countless letters Conan Doyle received, many were addressed to Sherlock Holmes, some even including money to solve distressing cases. Although he declared to be bothered by these cases, he sometimes answered letters as Holmes or Watson. (Waller 2008, 388) Aspiring authors wrote infinite letters to their most admired writers pleading for endorsement. Being the Poet Laureate, Tennyson was probably one of the most haunted ones; certainly, he was the loudest to complain. Waller reports that Tennyson’s publisher Macmillan had to intervene several times, placing a letter in the press such as the following: “[w]e are requested by Lord Tennyson to inform his correspondents through The Times, that he is wholly unable to answer the innumerable letters which he daily receives, nor can he undertake to return or criticise the manuscripts sent to him.” (2008, 392)

In June 1892, novelist Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée) published an article in the North American Review entitled “The Penalties of a Well-Known Name,” in which she pronounced maledictions against the intrusions of fans and reporters: “[w]hoever may deem that the phonograph, the telephone, and the photographic apparatus are beneficial to the world, every man and woman who has a name of celebrity […] must curse them with the deadliest hatred.” According to her, celebrity culture encouraged the public to take more interest in authors’ personal life and habits than in their work, “to know what any famous person eats, drinks, and wears, in what way he sins and in what manner he sorrows, than it does to rightly measure and value […] his romance, his poem.” Ouida goes on: “[j]ournalistic inquisitiveness has begotten an unwholesome appetite, an impudent curiosity in the world which leaves those conspicuous in it neither peace nor privacy.”

The new periodical press, with its instinct for “mere commercial success,” emphasised the personal at the expense of the literary aspects of authorship, thus ending up making “the artist more interesting than his art.” (McDonald 1997, 8) Henry James defined his time as “this age of advertisement and newspaperism, this age of interviewing.” (James 1947, 180)

Towards the turn of the century, but especially as the 1900s went on, a new kind of ‘persecutor’ entered the scene: the academic, who contributed to further increase the status of authors. While some writers were bored by such visits, some others, whether from vanity or presumption that scholarly interest was different from other kinds of intrusion, welcomed such attention.

Lecture tours, both in Britain and in North America, became an almost necessary task. American tours in particular promised money and renown. “Sooner or later,” wrote Jerome K. Jerome, “it occurs to the English literary man that there is money to be made out of lecturing in America.” On his last American tour in 1867-68, Dickens apparently made £19.000/20.000. (Waller 2008, 576) After that, almost all popular authors went to American tours (even if for women writers it was relatively less frequent). When in 1879 Tennyson expressed his doubts about such a tour, the American publisher
James T. Fields replied that by simply “standing in a room and shaking hands with 20,000 people” he could make £20,000. (Waller 2008, 576) Edith Somerville made a lecture tour in 1929, at seventy-one (fourteen years after Martin Ross’s death), spurred by the debt-ridden condition of her Irish estate. Only few resisted touring, like for instance Andrew Lang and Thomas Hardy, despite several invitations.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, the figure of the author was more visible, more hypertrophic, more inseparable from the text than ever before. The late Victorian author called for attention perhaps more than his text:

[...]

In these noisy days of literary newspapers and literary interviewers, publishers’ puffing catalogues, illustrated with portraits, and communicated paragraphs, it is difficult to avoid knowing perhaps too much about authors. (Augustine Birrell, reviewing the first supplemental volumes of the Dictionary of National Biography, 1901, qtd. in Waller 2008, 328)

 Literary collaboration emerged and flourished in this atmosphere. Yet, as the next section will try to show, it led to unforeseen ways of imagining the figure of the author, debunking the idea of the solitary genius so dear to the Victorians.

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262 In the early 1870s, Tennyson had accepted an annual fee of £500 from James T. Fields for advance copies of his poems prior to their publication in Britain. This was a way Tennyson adopted to circumventing American piracy, even if the sum was considerably less than his British fees, and such agreements did not guarantee protection. (Waller 2008, 619)

263 The obsession with Dickens’s famously unfinished last novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, may be read as yet another symptom of the Victorian craze for authors’ biographies. When Dickens died, of the projected twelve instalments only the first three had been published (three others were published shortly after his death). Both the reading public and literary critics felt restless about the fragment, unable to let it be as it was. From that moment onwards, Edwin Drood’s fate has triggered endless speculations about the ending of the novel. Drawing on Dickens’s working notes and the vignettes on the cover of the monthly instalments, attempts to solve the mystery have run wild ever since, with the result, as Frenk (2011, 138) notes, of “adding to the mystery instead of solving it.” Discussion went on long after the years immediately following Dickens’s death. In 1914, the London branch of the Dickens Fellowship even organised a show trial, with George Bernard Shaw acting as the foreman of the jury (which at the end declared John Jasper guilty). Speculations are still alive nowadays. Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini’s The D. Case: Or the Truth About the Mystery of Edwin Drood (1989) is a notable example of a text playing with the missing ending of Dickens’s last work in postmodern fashion. Two engaging examples of neo-Victorian Dickens spin-offs are Dan Simmons’s Drood and Matthew Pearl’s The Last Dickens, both published in 2009. The former re-imagines Dickens’s last years, enraging on his circumstances after separating from his wife and his complex relationship with his friend/rival novelist Wilkie Collins. (for a discussion of Simmons’s novel, see Costantini 2015b and Costantini 2015c) Pearl’s book is set immediately after the novelist’s death, and sets up an intricate game to find the mysterious missing manuscript pages of the novel. The fascination with Dickens’s last fragment may be ascribed, among other reasons, to the popular desire to find Dickens himself within his text. Crucially, both Edwin Drood and the author himself are absent from Edwin Drood. “What is at stake,” reflects Frenk (2011, 139), “is the life and death of two figures which have by now both become fictional. The discussion about the ending of Dickens’s last novel has not been content with focusing on the text and the death or survival of the main character; it has also reached out to the existence, or the haunting authorial spectre, of Dickens himself.” The absent author is sought in his (half absent too) text. Thus, “[e]nding The Mystery of Edwin Drood has more often than not also meant unending Dickens. […] The popular cultural desire to speak with the dead, with the dead Dickens, has never ceased.” (Frenk 2011, 140)
A ghost behind the text: the dissolution of the author in literary collaboration

As discussed in chapter five, the periodical press often associated literary collaboration with a clear-cut, mechanical, almost industrial division of tasks, in which each author took care of his own part and then put it together with the other shares of his collaborator(s), thus giving origin to (monstrous) literary centipedes. In this light, coauthorship embodied the extremisation of mass-produced literature. However, this understanding does not fit with the kind of collaboration described by Somerville and Ross, by (partly) Besant and Rice, by James Brander Matthews, and by many others. In point of fact, some late Victorian collaborative relationships challenged the most pervasive and long-accepted notions of what an author was and should be. The truly collaborative author is very different from both the literary craftsman and the Romantic hypertrophic and autonomous individual. The truly collaborative author – that is, the figure that emerges from the collaboration on a text of two or more persons – almost does not exist: it fades away into a diluted, deliberately weakened, hybrid and elusive figure, a ghost that, according to coauthors themselves, remains concealed behind the text. In this section, the collaborative trend of the late Victorian period will be suggested as producing an embryonic dismantling of the author – though not systematically theorised and today largely unknown of. This process will be the object of this section.264

Dispersing author/ity

Let us start from the very word ‘collaboration.’ The collaborative writer, being someone who by definition ‘works with’ (lat. *cum/laborare > collaborat*) someone else, destabilizes the first notion of post-Romantic authorship: solitude. Collaboration implies being in close contact with someone else. The collaborative author is not an individual isolated from society, living apart from humanity – at least not as completely as the Romantic one. He has significant relationships with other members of the society, his solitude is shared: he is no longer a nightingale ‘who sings to cheer its own solitude,’ he is a co-labourer.

Secondly, the privileged relationship author-text, the codified model of the literary text as the expression of an author’s self, is undermined. The collaborator *shares* the creative moment with someone, so that the possessive ‘his’ or ‘her’ and the Author-God identity cannot apply. In the act of coauthorship, the direct cause-and-effect scenario staging ‘individual author + inspiration = original literary masterpiece’ becomes somewhat less clear, as Karell (2008, xxi) has pointed out. Collaboration ‘calls attention to a possible weak link in this ‘genial’ conception of authorship per se:

264 Part of this chapter was published in *Altre Modernità*, no. 19 (May 2018): 12-26.
an illegitimacy in the relation between genius and its products:” it emphasises “the tenuousness of the idea of a legitimate relation between unitary author and unitary text” (Hickey 1998, 306-307). The association ‘one author for one text’ is no longer valid and the Romantic monotheist system of the author as the one God at the centre of his creation collapses. At best, we could have a polytheist system, with different gods for one creation.

As a matter of fact, when a reader takes up a book written in collaboration and looks at its cover, he will find two names in the place reserved for the name of the author. The authorial role is not in the hands of a single person, but is shared. Consequently, control over the textual spaces and narrative responsibility have to be distributed between the collaborators. Masten (1997, 19) points out that collaboration is “a dispersal of author/ity, rather than a mere doubling of it.” Masten’s intuition, though just touched upon and referred to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama, proves to be absolutely valid for nineteenth-century collaborative fiction as well. True coauthorship does not consist in the juxtaposition of individually created lots, hence in the ‘doubling’ of the author. Quite the contrary, the sharing of textual spaces implied in collaboration gives origin to a double dispersion.

Firstly, a dispersal of authority, as authorial power, ownership and control over the text have to be divided. Interestingly, Hickey (1998, 306) argues that “the general anxiety about collaboration arises from the equivocal relation of collaboration to authority.” Collaborators, she explains, “in addition to jointly producing texts, jointly produce authority. But whose authority? Each his own? Each the other’s? Both together a collective authority? Collaboration leads to ambiguous relations of mutual construction and deconstruction of authority.” (308). In this light, coauthorship acts as “a reminder that authority is not organic and inalienable,” but “it is constructed with reference to other people and forces, it is always partial, it is never fully controllable by any one party, and it is vulnerable to deconstruction” (307). Similarly, Karell (2008, 31) maintains that collaboration is “an unmanageable dispersal of authorial control.”

The second kind of dispersal implied in collaboration – and a consequence of the first – is a dispersal of the author-figure itself. In the collaborative process, a ‘dilution’ of the author, rather than a strengthening, takes place. Such dilution was generally perceived as unmanageable by a large portion of the reading public, and by many co-writers themselves. “A collaborative relationship that consciously disperses power and authority,” notes Karell (2008, 36), “appears not only unusual but psychologically unnatural,” as if the coauthors were “breaking the laws of authorship.” However, as

265 Drawing a parallel between coauthorship and political upheavals (specifically the French Revolution), Hickey notes that as “in the political realm, the revolutionary refiguring of the patriarchal familial paradigm as a fraternity threatens the singular nature of political authority, so refiguring authorial paternity as fraternity jeopardizes the singular nature of writerly authority” (306).
composition theorist Anne Gere remarks, in writing couples/groups “trust and a sense of empowerment result from the giving and receiving of authority.” (1978, 110) This is exactly what happened to many late Victorian coauthors. In particular, recent studies on collaborations between women (London 1999, Laird 2000, Ehnenn 2008, Jamison 2016), demonstrate that the writing relationship was very frequently accompanied by a strong personal bond that provided validation, intellectual stimulation and emotional support. This positive reciprocal exchange of authority is illustrated by Somerville in her autobiographical writings examined in chapter three. For instance,

[s]ometimes the compelling creative urge will come on both, and we would try to reconcile the two impulses, searching for a form into which best to cast them – one releasing it, perhaps as a cloudy suggestion, to be caught up by the other, and given form and colour, then to float away in a flash of certainty, a completed sentence – as two dancers will yield to the same impulse, given by the same strain of music, and know the joy of shared success. (“Two of a Trade,” 186)

The author of a collaborative text is split into as many parts as the individuals who partook in its creation. The author is not embodied in an individual, but gets dispersed. The singular monolithic author does not exist anymore: he is shattered, crushed, scattered around. As Koestenbaum observes, “double writing serves as a symptom to the monolithic author’s decline.” (1989, 8)

**Negotiating differences**

No more closed up in himself/herself, the collaborative author needs to deal with someone else’s self. Indeed, within the collaborative dynamics the writer “inevitably encounters a relational difficulty: acknowledging the other,” as Karell (2008, 25) points out. The coauthored text may be imagined as a space where authors must negotiate their differences.266

Meeting the other always implies arguments. Indeed, in the Victorian imagination literary collaboration was often associated with fights, so much so that, from a certain point onwards, as discussed in chapter five, the press focused almost exclusively on the warfare between the collaborators. In the 1896 short story “The Collaborators” by Hichens (a coauthor himself), two poor but ambitious friends decide to coauthor a novel, but one initially backs out because he is afraid they would “quarrel inevitably and doggedly” and “tear one another into pieces” (Hichens 1896, 139) – which they duly end up doing. Walter Besant influentially stated that every writing team must inevitably end after some time, because of the very nature of the artistic temperament:

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266 Stone and Thompson (2006, 24) maintain that collaboration partakes of the same complex strategies of “negotiation, mediation, compromise, competition, retaliation, coordination, and obligation that operate in larger institutional structures and economies.”
[t]here will come a time when both men fret under the condition; when each desires, but is not able, to enjoy the reputation of his own good work; and feels, with the jealousy natural to an artist, irritated by the loss of half of himself and ready to accept the responsibility of failure in order to make sure of the need of success. (Besant, Autobiography, 188)

Also the collaborators who had productive and happy collaborative experiences, like Matthews and Somerville, did not try to tone down the practical difficulties of writing with their respective partners. They both treated ironically “the question as how two people can write together, without battle, murder, and sudden death ensuing immediately” (Somerville, “Two of a Trade,” 180). The American coauthor declared that “[i]t is a fact that the ‘artistic temperament’ is jealous and touchy […] It may be that I am lacking in the ‘artistic temperament,’ since my varied associations only cemented the friendships which preceded them.” (Matthews 1917, 252)

Matthews and Somerville ascribed the good results of their partnerships to the “harmonious equality” (Matthews 1891, 24) that both partners enjoyed within the creative process. Such equality was necessarily the product of a certain degree of suppressed egos. Indeed, in order to write with another, the hypertrophic self of the writer (the ‘artistic temperament’) must undergo a weakening. The collaborative author needs to take a distance from himself and to open up to the other: “[e]ach must be ready to yield a point when need be. In all associations there must be concessions from one to the other” and “an ability to take as well as to give.” (Matthews 1891, 5, 23). In the partnerships of Somerville’s and Matthews’s we are in the presence of two consciousnesses that deliberately decided not to try to impose themselves on each other, but to blend harmoniously:

“Sometimes I may have thought that I did more than my share, sometimes I knew that I did less than I should, but always there was harmony, and never did either of us seek to assert a mastery.” (Matthews 1891, 27). This “possibility of transforming difference into a positive force, which can occur during the recognition and negotiation of difference” (Karell 2008, 25) is one of the most significant and compelling aspects of such collaborations.

The deliberate suppression of one’s ego was not experienced by Somerville and Matthews as a loss (as “the loss of half of himself” lamented by Besant). Rather, they both saw the shared creative act as an added pleasure: “writing together is [...] one of the greatest pleasures I have. To write with you doubles the triumph and the enjoyment, having first halved the trouble and anxiety;” (Somerville, IM, 134) “[i]f I may be allowed to offer myself as a witness, I shall testify to the advantage of a literary partnership, which halves the labor of the task and doubles the pleasure” (Matthews 1891, 26).

267 In this respect, the present reading differs from Koestenbaum’s (1989), which argues that in every writing couple each partner tries to dominate over the other, thus suggesting a model of coauthorship as divided and engaged in a constant struggle for authorial control. Koestenbaum’s reading does not include the wealth of different attitudes and practices that characterised collaboration.
The merging process

Under these favourable conditions, the two distinct authorial consciousnesses meet, and, in the course of the collaborative process, mix up, intertwine, and become more and more blended into each other. Gradually, a ‘merging’ of the two authors takes place, so that at the end of the process it is not possible to determine who is responsible for what – not even for the coauthors themselves:

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\text{[e]ven the collaborators themselves are at a loss to specify their own contributions. When two men have worked together honestly and heartily in the inventing, the developing, the constructing, the writing and the revising of a book [...] it is often impossible for either partner to pick out his own share; certain things he may recognize as his own, and certain other things he may credit frankly to his ally; but the rest was the result of the collaboration itself, contributed by both parties together and not by either separately. (Matthews 1891, 1-2)}
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Thus, while retaining their bodily borders, the coauthors metaphorically merge, giving origin to a new author figure. Borrowing Glissant’s (1995) concept of cultural creolization, Medaglia (2014, 94) theorises that “la scrittura a quattro mani creolizza l’autore.” Her analysis proposes a formula to represent the creolization of the author: given a co-author X\textsubscript{1} and a co-author X\textsubscript{2}, the result of the collaborative writing process shall not be X\textsubscript{1-2} – a superficial juxtaposition of authorial individualities – but rather X\textsubscript{3}, something new and independent from both X\textsubscript{1} and X\textsubscript{2} (Medaglia 2014, 100-101). X\textsubscript{3} is the result of the merging of the coauthors, of their consciousnesses, their social and cultural backgrounds, their styles, etc. and therefore is a hybrid entity. The writers who create a collaborative text, suggests Medaglia (2014, 96), “non sono delimitabili, né inseribili in categorie rigide: la loro caratteristica pricipe è proprio quella di ‘fluttuare’ nel testo, di non avere confini fissi e pre-determinabili.” The author-figure resulting from the collaborative project is no biographical person: it is neither of the coauthors. One could say that this author-figure is depersonalised, because it does not correspond to an individual, a subjectivity, a self. Even though it has distinct tracts, it remains abstract. Behind a coauthored text, then, there is no defined authorial self, but a creolized multiplicity of consciousnesses, which defies any untangling of the original contributors. In the collaborative practice, the hybrid triumphs.

It is useful here to recover the metaphor employed by Somerville in order to clarify what their contemporaries considered the mystery of her and Ross’s joint writing. She explained that their styles were as different as blue and yellow, but that the final product was neither blue nor yellow, but green (see infra, ch. three, p. 169). This new ‘author,’ the green, appearing from the merging of Somerville and Ross has its own recognizable characteristics (an ironic style and a preference for Irish country life became the ‘Somerville & Ross’ trademark); what is not recognisable are the individualities
behind, the two hands involved. Likewise, in his essay Brander Matthews wrote that, if the collaboration had been “a true marriage,” any endeavour “to sift out the contribution of one collaborator from that of his fellow” would be as futile as trying to decide “whether the father or the mother is the real parent of a child” (Matthews 1891, 9). As a baby bears the genes of both parents, but constitutes an independent being with his own features, so does the collaborative X

At this point, a question springs naturally to mind: how, in actual terms, is this merging possible? How does it take place? Matthews and Somerville offer the same answer. They both explained that they relied on a conversational method:

the subject was always thoroughly discussed between us; it was turned over and over and upside down and inside out; it was considered from all possible points of view and in every stage of development. (Matthews 1891, 27)

To those who may be interested in an unimportant detail, I may say that our work was done conversationally. One or the other – not infrequently both, simultaneously – would state a proposition. This would be argued, combated perhaps, approved, or modified; it would then be written down by the (wholly fortuitous) holder of the pen, would be scratched out, scribbled in again; before it found itself finally transferred into decorous MS. would probably have suffered many things, but it would, at all events, have had the advantage of having been well aired. (Somerville, IM, 133)

Both coauthors claimed that their collaborations drew heavily on conversation and accorded special significance to the act of talking, saying that the writing came secondary and was not as important as the discussion that preceded it: “[w]hen a final choice was made of what seemed to us best, the mere putting on paper was wholly secondary” (Matthews 1891, 27).

Discussion with one’s partner was deemed fundamental also by Besant – so much so that he insisted in recognising Rice as a full author even if he did not take part in the writing. However, in Besant and Rice’s case no merging ever takes place; if discussion is present, there is no blending: at the end of the day, it is up to one partner only to have “the final word.” (Lit. Col., 204) Besant’s self prevailed. The text is moulded on one author’s taste and style and, even if it contains some traces of someone else’s mind, it is basically the expression of an individual. That is why in the case of Besant and Rice we cannot really talk of any particularly subversive, innovative author figure – at least not as much as in the cases of Somerville and Ross and Brander Matthews with his partners.

A consequence of the conversational method is the loss of the ‘divine rapture’ so insisted upon by the Romantic mythology of authorship. If the Romantic author declares to write under ecstatic inspiration, collaboration defies this belief as obviously there may be no rapture, no sudden spontaneity, no immediacy when two individuals need to take their thoughts out of their mind, talk
about them, discuss, negotiate, and finally agree on something. Every aspect of the text needs to be negotiated. The collaborative process takes longer than solitary composition. Shelley’s declaration that the mind in creation is a fading coal, and that “when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline” (Shelley 1986, 38) is further complicated by the process of collaboration; inspiration is already declining when one starts to write in solitude, let alone in collaboration, when one needs to talk and explain one’s thoughts to someone else. If one was to follow his line, collaborators could produce nothing.

“IT’S THE BOOKS THAT MATTER, NOT WHO HELD THE WRETCHED PEN”

Thanks to the conversational method, then, the authors become ‘one’ and it becomes impossible to discern the hands of the individuals behind the collaboration. Furthermore – and crucially – both Matthews and Somerville insisted that there is no point in trying to do so. To the coeval public’s curiosity about who wrote what, the coauthors replied: what does it matter? These late Victorian collaborators considered the public’s “supreme, almost invariable question, as to which of us held the pen – the inspired pen!” (Somerville, “Two of a Trade,” 181) totally worthless— if not utterly irritating. Matthews spent much of his essay insisting that

[i]n a genuine collaboration, when the joint work is a true chemical union and not a mere mechanical mixture, it matters little who holds the pen. […] When a situation has been talked over thoroughly and traced out to its logical conclusion, and when a character has been considered from every angle and developed to its inevitable end, nine-tenths of the task is accomplished. The putting down on paper of the situation and the character is but the clothing of a babe already alive and kicking. (Matthews 1891, 7)

Somerville commented that “[t]he question as to which of us held the pen […] was a point that never entered our minds to consider,” (Somerville, “Two of a Trade,” 133). Pestered by the media’s unrelenting questions about the mechanics of her and Ross’ collaboration, she expressed all her exasperation in a letter to her brother: “[i]t’s the books that matter, not who held the wretched pen!” (qts. in Jamison 2016, 46).

Somerville’s and Matthew’s final point seems to be one: the focus of the public’s attention should be the text in its unity, not what is behind it, that is, not the authors. The writers of a collaborative work, being neither discernible nor perceptible, remain concealed behind the text. They remain invisible – an idea totally at loss with the common conception of the author in the Victorian age. In a cultural atmosphere that paid increasing attention to authors (authors’ names, authors’ biographies, authors’ faces, authors’ opinions, even authors’ houses), the insistence of these collaborators on their own insignificance and invisibility is striking. They discouraged their readers to look for them into their
texts, because they were not in the text. Only the product in its final unity, coherence and independence, the colour green, the baby alive and kicking, X₃, should be visible. Only to it the reader should devote his attention, without trying to look for the authors in its pages.

Therefore, the author-figure promoted by Matthews and Somerville in their commentaries on collaboration is reduced to a scattered, blurred and hybrid entity that simply ‘does not matter.’ The collaborative author fades away into an elusive presence that remains hidden behind the text: he (or should we say ‘it’?) becomes a ghost, which cannot – and should not, the coauthors exhorted – be seen nor even looked for.

And yet, as it normally happens with ghosts, Victorian readers have been constantly haunted by this puzzling presence. The ghost of the collaborative author haunted the Victorian reading public, and keeps haunting readers of today.

Summing up, the late Victorian collaborative relationships examined so far undermined basic tenets of the Romantic tradition. Direct consequences of the fact that the text is the product of more than one person are that the author is no more the God of creation, and the close relationship author-text is broken. Solitude is no more the hallmark the authorship. The Romantic hypertrophy of the author fails, because the authorial role and its power – the author/ity – has to be shared between at least two people: a dilution takes place. In order to successfully meet with the other, the privileged authorial self has to be tamed; the coauthors need to take a distance from themselves and blend with each other.

Thus, a merging of the biographical authors happens, giving origin to a new, depersonalised and hybrid author-figure. Through this merging, it is impossible to recognise the original contributions, the biographical authors that took part in the collaboration. Moreover, it is meaningless: the text only should be the focus of the reader, not the author, who remains hidden behind the text, an invisible and unimportant presence. So, contrarily to Ashton’s conclusion that “[i]f we listen to collaborative texts […] we hear individual voices,” (2003,12) I argue that, if we listen to collaborative texts, we hear no distinctive voice, but rather a creole, fluid one.

It is now necessary to note that the experiences of Edith Somerville and Brander Matthews with their respective collaborators are by no means the only cases in which the dissolution of the Romantic author takes place. Similar assertions of merging and fluidity of the authorial identity are present in other collaborators’ metadiscourses. Another late Victorian literary couple expressed similar views: the controversial aunt-niece duo/lovers, Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who published poetry, plays and various fiction under the pseudonym Michael Field. Bradley took care of her niece from infancy, and later attended university with her; they shared a house that
hosted gatherings of intellectuals (including Meredith, Wilde, Tennyson and the Brownings) and homosexual couples. They are largely associated with turn-of-the-century aesthetes, and the poetry they wrote together was widely regarded as ‘Sapphic’ poetry: their texts are characterised by references to pagan celebrations, nature, and same-sex love. (Ehnenn 2008, 19) Like Violet Martin, Bradley and Cooper adopted men names for both their public and private identities, affectionately referring to themselves as ‘Michael’ and ‘Field,’ or sometimes ‘Michael’ and ‘Henry.’ The journal they kept together, *Works and Days*, describes a relationship that tends towards total fusion, of their minds and bodies alike. Comparing their domestic partnership to that of the Brownings, Bradley wrote that “these two poets, man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another with their work; we are closer married.” (Field 1933, 16) They described their joint works as a “perfect mosaic,” (qtd. in Sturgeon 1922, 47) and, echoing Somerville’s image of the partnered dancing, Bradley declared that, during the creative moment, she and Cooper “cross[ed] and interlace[d] like a company of dancing summer flies. If one begins a character, his companion seizes and possesses it; if one conceives a scene or a situation, the other corrects, completes, and murderously cuts away.” A passage from the poem “A Girl,” from the collection *Underneath the Bough* (1893), describes the experience of their joint writing process:

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[...] our souls so knit
I leave a page half-writ –
The work begun
Will to heaven’s conception done
If she come to it. (Field 1893, lines 10-14)
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As Ehnenn notes, “instead of divided writers battling over the ‘last word,’” the poem documents “its own instance of creation as a seamless, almost effortless writing process.” (2008, 31) Like Somerville and Ross, Bradley and Cooper did not try to conceal conflict within the collaboration, but treated it openly and lightheartedly. Also, they expressed the intertwining and the seamlessness of their joint texts, and warned their readers, eager to uncover traces of the respective contributions, in religious terms: “as to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined.” (qtd. in Ehnenn 2008, 31) Mary Sturgeon, the first biographer of Michael Field, points out: “it is not possible, in the plays on which the two worked, to point to this line or that speech, and say ‘It is the work of Michael’ or ‘It is the work of Henry.’ You cannot do it, because the poets themselves could not have done it.” (Sturgeon 1922, 62-63) She adds that “one may search diligently, and search in vain, for any sign in the work both wrought that this is the creation of two minds and not of one,” (Sturgeon 1922, 62-63) and “the diverse elements of these two minds were fused in a union so complete that the reader cannot credit a dual authorship.” (80-81, my emphasis) In a letter to Vernon Lee, date January 1890, Michael
Field wrote: “It cannot be too frequently repeated that belief in the unity of M.F. is absolutely necessary. […] He is in literature one.” (qtd. in Ehnenn 2008, 33)

Another late Victorian partnership, that of Vernon Lee with Clementina ‘Kit’ Anstruther-Thomson recurred to metaphors of merging and boundlessness. Vernon Lee was the pseudonym of Violet Page (1856-1935), a widely respected and prolific art critic, aestheticist, and essayist, who gained fame with Studies in the Eighteenth Century in Italy (1880). She shared a love and creative relationship with Kit Anstruther-Thomson (1857-1921) from 1887 to the latter’s death. Their association resulted in many works on psychological aesthetics. Of their partnership, Lee wrote:

[w]here do you end and I begin? Who can answer? We are not definite, distinct existences […] we are forever meeting, crossing, encroaching […] part of ourselves left behind in others, part of them becomes ourselves: a flux of thought, feeling, experience, aspiration complex, interchanging life which is the life eternal, not of the individual, but of the race. (qtd. in Ehnenn 2008, 172)

Images of unity and fluidity are also employed by a less celebrated but equally interesting pair of turn-of-the-century collaborators, the Scottish sisters Mary and Jane Findlater, introduced in chapter one. Mackenzie (1964, 133) points out that, concerning the Findlater sisters’ collaborative texts, “[i]t was in effect the writing of one person.” They too promoted a dialogic and intersubjective model of authorship.

The twentieth-century Australian collaborators Marjorie Barnard (1897-1987) and Flora Eldershaw (1897-1956), who coauthored a number of novels and other literary texts during the 1930s and the 1940s, also fit into this discourse. Barnard and Eldershaw met during their first year at the University of Sidney and became life-long friends. Their first novel, A House is Built, was published in 1928 under the collective pseudonym M. Barnard Eldershaw. Altogether, they wrote five novels, three historical studies, and a volume of literary criticism. Their last collaborative novel, Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, is regarded as one of Australia’s major early science fiction novels. However, it was censored for political reasons at the time and was not published in its entirety until Virago Press reissued it in 1983. Barnard and Eldershaw are ranked among the leading Australian writers of the interwar period. At their time, however, they found a market for their works mostly in England, “where Australian literature, like Australia itself, was considered a curiosity.” (London 1999, 120) Barnard and Eldershaw left few manuscripts and no journals; no detailed account of their partnership by them both exists. The only account we have is Barnard’s single-handed, late-life essay “The Gentle Art of Collaboration” (1977), where she chronicles the collaboration and briefly

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268 The major works of M. Barnard Eldershaw are: A House is Built (1929), Green Memory (1931), The Glasshouse (1936), Plaque With Laurel (1937), Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow (1947), Phillip of Australia (1938), The Life and Times of Captain John Piper (1939), My Australia (1939), and Essays in Australian Fiction (1938).
discusses their writing method. Here, she stressed the role of conversation, claiming that collaboration had “already taken place in the discussion period.” (Barnard 1977, 126) She wrote that they “discussed every aspect until we came to agreement,” and that they “talked about it to one another, discussed it at length, story, characters, background, treatment, in that order, getting the feel of it, coming to know it in depth, all this without putting pen to paper.” (Barnard 1977, 126, my emphasis) During the discussion, their individualities poetically merged: “[w]e worked it up together and our thoughts and ideas became inextricably blended into a whole. There was no mine and thine but ours. This not only excluded proprietary rights on either side but gave the book its unity” (Barnard 1977, 126). Dever calls this process “unselfing” (70), which closely resembles the process of giving up one’s self in collaboration in order to successfully merge with the other. After examining the manuscripts of M. Barnard Eldershaw’s first two novels, Dever (1995) comments:

[t]he handwriting in both manuscripts alternates, and the balance between the two hands is fairly even. […] There are instances where the handwriting changes in mid-sentence and where a different hand supplies either the opening or closing sentence of a given paragraph. No distinct pattern of division between the two hands emerges, and it appears that the division of labor was neither rigid nor mechanical. […] The collaborative enterprise emerges, then, as an open-ended performance, the manuscript forming a ludic discourse. Here there is no revelation scene. (Dever 1995, 67)

Moreover, each manuscript presents a note written by Barnard (probably attached when they were donated to the public), where she warns the reader that the alternation of their handwritings is not at all a solution to the mystery of who wrote what: “if anyone thought that this was a key to the collaboration they would be vastly mistaken.” (qtd. in Dever 1995, 68) Dever observes that Barnard’s use of metaphors of fluidity “conveys a sense of the inseparable or indivisible, a sense of something that dilutes or mixes to such a degree that the distinction between the one and the other becomes blurred: the mixed voices overflow the individual subject.” (69) Also, “the two traverse the boundaries of discrete subjectivity to found a nonindividuated collective subject.” (70)

Like Somerville and Ross and Michael Field, neither Barnard nor Eldershaw ever married. Their life-long, exclusive friendship constituted an alternative to marriage and children – viewed as incompatible with their professional and writing careers. Even if they never lived together (Barnard living at home with her parents, Eldershaw being a live-in teacher at a boarding school), they maintained a flat in Sydney where they hosted literary meetings and worked together. Also in their case, the emotional bond constituted the basis for their literary efforts: “[t]heir relationship was clearly one in which they located the consent and encouragement fundamental to them as literary producers,” aptly comments Dever (1995, 72) in a sentence that could equally be referred to Somerville and Ross. Unlike their Victorian predecessors, however, Barnard and Eldershaw did not
rely primarily on their writing to provide their income: the former was a librarian, the latter a schoolmistress. Only Barnard eventually gave up her job to become a full-time author. On this occasion, a crisis of the partnership could have arisen, as reported by Barnard herself:

[y]ou can imagine how easily she [Eldershaw] might envy me my greater leisure to wrestle with [The Glasshouse] or be jealous of the time spent alone with our common property. But she isn’t. The atmosphere between us is so clear that any speck would show up monstrously. I think collaboration (in creative work) is impossible, but now and then it happens. And an entirely satisfactory friendship that neither trails off at the edges into boredom nor gets clogged with emotion is another good thing in this rather dark world. (qtd. in Dever 1995, 70)

On another occasion, Barnard compared their collaboration to “a bedroom secret,” (qtd. in Dever 1995, 68) that is, “a privacy that cannot be violated.” (London 1999, 67) Such extraordinarily intense, “entirely satisfactory” friendship gave origins – as usual in the case of women collaborators – to persistent rumors about their alleged lesbianism. 269 Moreover, by declaring that “collaboration (in creative work) is impossible, but now and then it happens,” Barnard contributes in enveloping her and Eldershaw’s collaboration into a veil of mystery.

The recurrence of discourses of ecstatic fluidity in women’s collaborations may point to a gender peculiarity, an aspect advanced first by London (1999), then by Ehnenn (2008). Considering a wide range of women collaborators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, London concludes that “for women writing together […] combining ‘as one’ would seem to be the trope they most insistently appeal to in describing their joint creations.” (69) Such assertions of ‘oneness’ “threaten the idea of individual authorship.” (69-70, n. 12) London argues that male collaborations inevitably falter because of the author’s desire “to enjoy the reputation of his own good work” – to use Besant’s words (Autobiography, 188) – while “women collaborators would seem to betray no such self-interest, no such need to be recognized individually.” (London 1999, 70) Conversational composition, seamless production, and harmonious union are the characteristics of women’s collaborative writing, according to London. “Women collaborative writing […] would seem to produce […] a text so seamless as to defy the reader’s most diligent efforts at discrimination.” (London 1999, 71) 270

Specifically focusing on the collaborative relationships of Somerville and Ross, Michael Field, Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson, and Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell (excluding Barnard and Eldershaw), Ehnenn (2008) observes that, while men’s collaborations are generally

269 “Women’s collaborations cannot apparently be talked about without invoking lesbianism.” (London 1999, 64)
270 In her assertion of collaboration as a feminist practice, London goes further and claims that collaborative writing by these women could be seen as the precursor of the feminist critical practice which developed in the academy in the 1970s. (London 1999, 76) London then proceeds to discuss Gilbert and Gubar’s collaboration, who, apparently, regard their texts as fully collaborative (76-82).
characterised by competition and hierarchy, women, perhaps because already excluded from the
category of ‘solitary genius’ because of their gender, tend to shape collaborative relationships on the
basis of equality, mutual caring and extreme closeness. Such assumptions might be indeed true.
However, as discussed above, Brander Matthews’s approach to collaboration seems to partially refute
this binary opposition.

So, the dismantling of the author within the collaborative practice is not limited to the cases of
Somerville and Matthews, but is a larger and fascinating phenomenon, though understudied and not
sufficiently theorised. Without trying to go too far, this chapter suggests that the late nineteenth-
century collaborative trend might point to an early overcoming of the Romantic concept of
authorship, strikingly akin to and slightly anticipating those twentieth-century literary and critical
movements bent to systematically dismiss the importance of the author.

Towards the death of the author

In the light of what has been said so far, one may wonder whether the late Victorian collaborative
practice had somewhat anticipated a certain independence of the text from the author. Contrary to the
coeval, mainstream version of authorship, collaboration of that time aimed at an understanding of the
author as invisible to the eyes of the reader, and at an idea of the text as a cohesive, autonomous unity,
independent from the singular biographical personalities of the coauthors. Such notions present some
common points with the Modernist attitude as to the relationship between the text and the author.
Immediately, Stephen Dedalus’s well-known declaration in the fifth chapter of A Portrait of the Artist
As a Young Man (1916) springs to mind: “[t]he personality of the artist finally refines itself out of
existence, impersonalises itself […] [the artist] like the God of creation, remains within or behind or
beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, pairing his
fingernails.” (Joyce 2000, 180-81). In the Portrait, the author is said to have the duty to disappear
behind his work like a deus absconditus. (Iser 1976, 298) A similar perspective was expressed by
T.S. Eliot in Tradition and Individual Talent (1919), in which he attacks Romantic theories of
authorship and illustrates his “Impersonal theory of poetry” about “the relation of the poem to his
author.” “Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation,” he argues, “is directed not upon the poet but
upon the poetry.” Eliot insists on the “depersonalization” and the “surrender” of the artist, maintaining
that his progress “is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” (Eliot 1975, 40)
He makes an analogy with a chemical reaction:

[w]hen the two gasses [oxygen and sulphur dioxide] are mixed in the presence of a filament of
platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present;
nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; [...] The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man itself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates. (Eliot 1975, 40)

Eliot’s theory could be applied to Victorian coauthorship: the work of art bears no sign of the personalities of the individual coauthors (the platinum); rather, it stands as an independent, impersonal unit (sulphurous acid). Poetry “is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” (Eliot 1975, 40)

The idea of the fragmentation, the depersonalisation and the invisibility of the author-monolith in late Victorian collaborations appears all the more outstanding considering the historical and cultural context in which it developed. Modernism arose into a totally different, rapidly changing atmosphere. In 1900 Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams appeared, marking the shifting of the human mind from a positivistic unity into a shattered multiplicity; in the same year Nietzsche, who had declared God’s death, died in an asylum; Einstein’s theory of relativity and the models of the atom’s structure by Rutherford and Bohr led to revise centuries-long ideas and to embrace an understanding of knowledge as limited and partial. Trust in the human being, with his internal coherence, unity and reliability was challenged. “In or around 1910 human nature changed,” famously wrote Virginia Woolf. (Woolf 1966, 320) It seems natural that the arts re-imagined human identity. Beside literature, artistic movements such as Expressionism and Cubism broke with tradition: one may think of “Les demoiselles d’Avignon” by Picasso (1907) or the Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910 by Roger Fry at the Grafton Galleries in London, which introduced the English public to the works of Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne, causing uproar and indignation. In this light, Modernism’s position about the author is not surprising. Moreover, in considering the similarities between the Modernist and the late Victorian conceptions of authorship one has to take into account the different kinds of public their production was aimed at: Modernism was targeted at an intellectual elite, while the late nineteenth-century collaborations perfectly fit into the market of popular literature, offered much more accessible texts, and were aimed at the large middle-class reading public. We could therefore imagine late Victorian literary collaboration as a sort of intermediate step between the hypertrophy of the Romantic author and the cancellation of the authorial voice by Modernism.

A well-known text of New Criticism, “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) by W.K. Wimsatt e Monroe C. Beardsley, argues that the biographical background and the intention of the author are not only hard to reconstruct, but, were they traceable, they are irrelevant to understand the meaning of the text, which has to speak for itself: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable.” (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, 468) As it is well-known, according to Wimsatt and Beardsley, when
reading a literary text one must not fall into the ‘intentional fallacy,’ that is, pay too much attention to the author’s biographical and psychological information. In front of a text, only two alternatives are possible: the first is that the author has failed in realising his intentions, and so the meaning of the work does not coincide with them; consequently, knowing his intentions will say nothing useful about the text; the second alternative is that the author has succeeded in realising his intentions, and so the meaning of the text coincides with them; but if the text expresses what the author wanted to make it say, then the author’s words will add nothing to what is already expressed by the text. Wimsatt and Beardsley’s conclusion is that the text alone is sufficient: task of the critic (and of the reader in general) is to stick to the text. The exhortation not to look behind the text, not to try to dig up the author sounds familiar: the resemblances with the metadiscourses of late Victorian coauthors are striking. From both points of view, it is pointless to look for the author(s) in the text: information about the author’s life and character will not lead to a fruitful reading of the text. In the case of a collaborative text, the very starting point is missing: the author himself — to be intended as the biographical person, with a subjectivity, a character, a background. As we have seen the author resulting from collaboration is a slippery and elusive hybrid, being the product of the fusion of two different subjectivities, mixed up and intertwined in unpredictable and inexplicable ways. The pointlessness of finding the ultimate explanation of the text in the author has been taken to its extreme consequences by Roland Barthes’s ultra-famous announcement of the ‘death of the author.’ In a key passage of his polemical essay, Barthes exposes the Romantic ‘tyrannical’ author:

> [t]he Author […] is always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line, divided into a before and an after. The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. (Barthes 1977, 145)

Barthes replaces the author in the traditional sense of the term with what he calls “the writer” or “scriptor,” a subject in the grammatical sense, not a person in his biographical existence: “the modern writer is born simultaneously with his text; he is in no way supplied with a being which precedes or transcends his writing, he is in no way the subject of which his book is the predicate; there is no other time than that of the utterance, and every text is eternally written here and now.” This interpretation may easily refer to the author figure emerging from the collaborative process: it is born in the moment when the co-authors start to interact, and takes shape simultaneously with the advancing of the text;

\[^{271}\text{Somerville’s statement that hers and Ross’ collaboration was “what can never be explained” (“Two of a Trade,” 186) is significant. Also, to the question “how is it possible for two men to be concerned in the making of one work?” Matthews comments that the answer “can hardly ever be given.” (Matthews 1891, 1)}\]
when the collaboration comes to an end, and the text is finished, this author-figure ceases to exist, because it does not exist outside the text. It exists in the here and now of the creation of the text. It is therefore futile to look for an explanation of the text in the co-authors: they do not have it, because they are not ‘the author’ of text.

The depersonalisation of the collaborative author presents some similarities with Barthes’s theory when he writes that “it is language which speaks, not the author: to write is to reach, through a preexisting impersonality – never to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realistic novelist – that point where language alone acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘oneself.’” Significantly, and similarly to the collaborative ethos, the performance has to be by the text, not by the authorial self.

When the collaborative process begins, the coauthors enter their own death.

Another pivotal text for twentieth-century theoretical thinking about the author, Foucault’s “What is an Author?”, argues that writing creates “a space into which the writing subject endlessly disappears.” (Foucault 1979, 142) As if he were talking about collaboration, Foucault is concerned above all with the idea of the “effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics.” (Foucault 1979, 142) He aims at analysing literary texts by going beyond the conception of writing as the expression of a certain subjectivity, the expression of an individual who is outside of or who precedes the texts (a conception historically and culturally specific, as he proceeds to illustrate). Foucault’s final, blunt declaration, “[w]hat does it matter who is speaking?” seems to echo Somerville’s “[i]t’s the books that matter, not who held the wretched pen,” and her various impatient dismissals of the questions about the authorship of hers and Ross’s books. Both Somerville and Foucault seem to yearn for a future in which our only response to the question ‘who is speaking?’ would be a shrug, a “stirring of an indifference.” (Foucault 1979, 160)

To conclude, this chapter proposes that “the tendency towards impersonality established throughout the twentieth century from modernist poetics to post-structuralism” (Soccio 2012) might find, under some aspects, an embryonic anticipation in the collaborative practice of the second half of the nineteenth century. Obviously, the present work is far from trying to imply that Modernist authors, or Wimsatt and Beardsley, Barthes, and Foucault had the declarations of Victorian collaborators in mind – I believe they were not even aware of their existence. Medaglia’s (2014) hypothesis that Barthes somewhat took inspiration from collaborative practice is more than improbable: there is no pretext to sustain even a slightest link between collaboration and the death of the author.272 The aim

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272 As, instead, partly claims Medaglia (2014, 21): “Non credo che Barthes collegasse razionalmente il concetto della morte dell’autore alla scrittura a quattro mani, ma che dovendo trattare, e in questo caso sostenere, l’avvenuta morte dell’autore sia dovuto, e sottolineo dovuto, per forza “inciampare” almeno nell’idea, per quanto sotterranea questa appaia,
of this chapter has only been to point out the features of late nineteenth-century collaborative writing and their implications for the figure of the author, which has led me to notice its (unexpected) similarities first with some Modernist positions and then with those mid-twentieth century critical movements that dismissed the post-Romantic understanding of the author. These similarities result all the more astonishing if one thinks of the totally different backgrounds in which they originated. Differently from Modernism, New Criticism and Post-Structuralism, late Victorian collaborators never actually formulated a systematic theorising of their positions, and hardly saw themselves as radically transforming the nature of authorship. We only have desultory reflections – scattered among articles, essays, prefaces, autobiographies, chapters of books – which make up our only source of knowledge of this fascinating practice and of how coauthors conceived it. Such documents have never been collected and developed into a thorough, comprehensive aesthetics, neither by their contemporaries nor later on, when the practice sank into oblivion. The present work has attempted to fill this gap, but there would be still much to be done. So far we can only affirm that ideas such as the depersonalisation, the dissolution, the irrelevance and the invisibility of the author can be already glimpsed in the late nineteenth-century collaborative processes, but that collaborators never developed and systematised their ideas. They only share some starting points with those successive radical theorisations of the death of the author, and who knows if late Victorian collaborators would support them.

della scrittura a più mani.” Medaglia’s suggestion is fascinating, but it remains an unjustified speculation and this work does not agree with it.
Conclusions

This work has been an attempt to provide a comprehensive study of literary collaboration on novel writing in the United Kingdom from 1870 to 1900. However, as my research proceeded, I realised it was by no means exhaustive. So much more could have been said, so much more could have been dug up. Of course, for practical reasons, a selection had to be made. I have tried to present some case studies that in my opinion best represent the very diverse patterns of collaboration at the end of the nineteenth century.

The present study has shown that collaboration on novel writing went through different stages. In the eighteenth and in the first half of the nineteenth centuries, there were few, however notable, isolated cases. Then, it slowly began to develop as an experimental, daring literary practice shared by friends or relatives, who were not really confident about how the reading public could react, and who therefore devised self-protective strategies such as the use of anonymity (like Walter Besant and James Rice’s first novels), pseudonymity (like Somerville and Ross, or E.D. Gerard) and other defensive strategies, and often hid behind (most likely exaggerated) pretenses of amateurism. Later on, thanks to the appeal of the practice, more and more already established authors started to experiment with coauthorship. Intricated nets of collaborators developed; once it became a trend, coauthorship was confidently asserted and deployed as a marketing strategy thanks to its extraordinary capacity to spur curiosity. Not-really-collaborative works were declared so, like all Somerville’s post-1915 production, or other scandalous cases we have seen in chapter five.

The chief merit of collaborative fiction was at first believed to be its novelty; then, the Victorian imagination started to link it with different, often contrasting, views. Coauthorship was generally perceived either as something temporary and amateurish, a sort of training before being good enough to write on one’s own, or as an original, lucrative experience to try once in a while in the course of one’s independent career. To deliberately choose to write with a partner all the time, thus renouncing the prestige and the power of solitary authorship, does not seem to have been an option, apart from Somerville and Ross’s case, whose intimate almost life-long collaboration attracted so much attention also for this reason. The aesthetic value of coauthorship was also debated. Sometimes its merits were sung, but with the passing of the years it was repetitively posited as an inferior, aberrant method of textual production, based on either a mechanical division of labour (useful in the hectic literary business to cut production times) or the dominance of one of the partners, and – above all – as opposed to artistic vocation. No coauthored novel was taken seriously in the long run— even if reviews highly praised it. The fact was, this aesthetic hierarchy aligned joint authorship with craftsmanship, rather than with inspiration. The ‘deeper things’ were to be touched in solitude. Talking spoilt insight. To
write in double harness could be good for clear-cut, well-constructed plots, and humorous pieces, but it was believed to limit the artist.

“Collaboration sometimes poses almost hopeless tasks to the literary detective,” comments Dever (1995, 66) This was exactly the feeling most late Victorian readers had when facing a coauthored text. Coeval readers and critics approached coauthored novels with what was felt as the instinctive, natural curiosity to find out individual contributions. The important thing was to ascribe authorial responsibility, thus re-establishing the cherished idea of the literary genius. Instead, as this work has tried to illustrate, truly coauthored texts defied such notion, and suggested a model of authorship based on the merging and the invisibility of the authors and on the importance of the text on its own.

At this point, it seems quite clear why late Victorian collaborators never made it into the canon. The first reason surely is, as most studies on coauthorship (rightly) lament, the disinterest of scholars who have generally tended to focus on individual authors and have ignored or dismissed collaborative products. But collaborative efforts were more or less despised also in their own time, and not only due to the public’s pre-conceived ideas of the Romantic artist. A habit of some coauthors to self-deprecation has been identified. The established idea of the creative single writer as opposed to the mechanic collaborative practice was so pervasive that, apparently, not only was it deep-seated within the public’s consciousness, but it also constantly lurked in coauthors’ perception of themselves and their works. Despite their market success and their often positive reviews, coauthored works have become literally invisible within the prevailing ideological discourse of solitary authorship, a destiny favoured by the meta-discourses offered by some collaborators themselves. In point of fact, in their commentaries and autobiographies some coauthors debased their own collaborative work as lacking high artistic merit, as games made with some friend of theirs, as a pleasurable activity, or as a means to make money. Some were even ashamed of their collaborative projects and avoided speaking about them – Besant, the master of the art of collaboration and of verbose essays, when writing his long autobiography basically ignored his ten-year collaboration with Rice. Some others aimed at artistic recognition, but ended up for a number of reasons to adjust to the market’s demands and expectations, like Somerville and Ross. Despite their significant novels, they became famous for their humorous stories. In this way, they confirmed that collaboration was good for funny pieces, and that was it. The popular market had its requests, and, if one wanted to survive, one had to comply – unless, like the poet Michael Field, one had private means and did not care to earn a living by their writing. But the fashionable trend of coauthored novels belonged to the popular literary market. Paradoxically, then, in one way or another, coauthors contributed to their own exile. Their own words revealed themselves a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Hence, this work argues that collaboration in novel writing has been marginalised from its very beginning. It should not come as a surprise, then, that it has plunged into oblivion. Discourses which delegitimise collaboration as both a professional and a valuable aesthetic creative practice, together with coauthorship’s intrinsic destructive potential for culturally and historically established models of authorship, have driven collaborators to the margins. Indeed, looking at coauthored novels means looking at the margins. It seems safe to assert that today’s invisibility of Victorian coauthored novels must be traced in their own time: critical silence has its roots in Victorian notions of authorship and coauthorship. Marginality and invisibility are the ghosts that surround coauthored novels. To study collaboration has meant to study the conditions of its erasure, besides studying the conditions of its existence. The words Franco Moretti (2005, 97) used to describe forgotten literary texts, “[a] lavorare su questi libri […] ci si sente spesso come in un laboratorio di patologia letteraria,” may be applied to the study of these novels.

One of the reasons behind this project has been the desire to rediscover and integrate such extinct lives and texts into literary history, to retrieve from obscurity long-forgotten authors and their writing practices. Even if sometimes their work is not of the highest literary merit, these writing partnerships are nevertheless significant. Firstly, because in their time they made more than a respectable showing in the literary arena – publishing with the best publishers, hiring the best literary agents, receiving notice in the leading periodicals, and selling by thousands. Secondly, because they existed, and their existence needs to be recognised. Besant’s reflection comes in profitably here:

[i]t may be that out of the thousands who now live by letters there are not twenty who will be remembered in a hundred years: that does not affect the question at all. It is enough for us to remember that there are these thousands who actually live by producing attempts at literature, and who do really lead, whether in its higher forms or not, the Literary Life. (Walter Besant, The Pen and the Book, 1899, p. 3)

The present project therefore hopes to fill a gap in late nineteenth-century British literary history, and a huge chasm in the field of bibliography. To reintegrate in the memory the very real presence of collaborators means to gain a fuller understanding of the literary market and of the intensely composite and lively nature of British literary culture.

Another key point of this study is that it demands a rethinking of the cultural values of writing and authorship. A spur for the present research, indeed, has been to answer to the question ‘what can we learn about British culture at the turn of the century by understanding how these collaborations were imagined?’ Their untold stories can add something to the history of authorship. Who gets counted under the category of ‘authors’? Which forms of authorship were sanctioned and which forms marginalised? How can literary property be defined? We have seen that discussions on coauthorship
engendered vigorous legal and aesthetic debates over what it meant to be an author – about the act of authoring itself. Literary collaboration was a phenomenon that called into question the fundamental definition and purpose of authorship. It does not matter that the rigid notion of the singular author-hero was eventually privileged. Coauthorship had the merit to stimulate discussion, to shake what seemed ‘natural’ ideas and were instead cultural constructions, to trigger reflection and even polemics – in brief, to take Victorian imagination into uncharted territories of authorship. It contributed to make it an era of discussion. It broadened late Victorian recognition of alternative literature practices. It basically called attention to the fact that authorship could be configured differently. The study of literary collaboration, thus, offers new perspectives on authorship, its meaning, and its configurations. The cases analysed in this work are proof that authorship has had multiple, if forgotten, histories. This provides us with a fuller understanding of what authorship is and of its several possibilities.

In conclusion, the acknowledgement of the existence and of the significance of late Victorian collaborators advocated in this study has the potential to deepen, and perhaps challenge, history’s understanding and treatment of nineteenth-century literary production in new resonant ways. The late Victorian literary scene might actually look quite different from what we generally imagine it to be – in any case, much busier.
Appendix

Appendix A: The Collaborative Timeline

1836
- Birth of Walter Besant.

1840
- Birth of Rhoda Broughton.

1844
- Birth of Andrew Lang.

1846
- Birth of Katherine Bradley.

1852
- Birth of James Brander Matthews.

1856
- Birth of Henry Rider Haggard.

1858
- Birth of Edith Somerville.

1859
- Erckmann and Chatrian achieve success with *L’Illustre Docteur Matheus*.

1862
- Birth of Elizabeth Bisland.

1862
- Birth of Violet Martin (Martin Ross).
- Birth of Edith Cooper.

1865
- Birth of Mary Findlater.

1866
- Birth of Jane Findlater.

1867
- *No Thoroughfare* by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.
- Besant meets James Rice.
1869

1872
- First novel by Besant and Rice, *Ready-Money Mortiboy*.

1873
- *My Little Girl* by Besant and Rice.

1874
- *With Harp and Crown* by Besant and Rice.

1876
- *The Golden Butterfly* by Besant and Rice.
- *This Son of Vulcan* by Besant and Rice.

1878
- *The Monks of Thelema* by Besant and Rice.
- *By Celia's Arbour* by Besant and Rice.

1879
- *The Chaplain of the Fleet* by Besant and Rice.

1880
- *Reata. What's in a Name* by E.D. Gerard.

1881
- Last novel by Besant and Rice, *The Seamy Side*.

1882
- Death of James Rice. End of Besant-Rice partnership.
- *Beggar My Neighbour* by E.D. Gerard.

1884
- Besant establishes the Society of Authors.
- Besant writes *The Art of Fiction*. It so irritated Henry James to spur him to write his own *Art of Fiction* in reply in the same year.
- *My Ducats and My Daughter* by Hay Hunter and Walter Whyte.

1885
- Besant resigns from his job as a secretary to live only by his pen.
- *The Waters of Hercules* by E.D. Gerard.

1886
- Somerville and Ross meet in the church of Castle Townshend. Ross is 24 and Somerville 28.
- *The Right Honourable* by Justin McCarthy and Rosa Campbell Praed.
1887
- Somerville and Ross start writing *An Irish Cousin*.
- The ‘Palace of Delight’ in London’s East End is opened.
- Dorothea Gerard’s marriage interrupts the collaboration with her sister Emily.
- *One Traveller Returns* by David Christie Murray and Henry Herman.
- *He*, a parody of Haggard’s *She*, by Andrew Lang and Walter H Pollock.

1888
- *The Second Son* by Mrs. Oliphant and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.
- *The Ladies’ Gallery* by Justin McCarthy and Rosa Campbell Praed.

1889
- *An Irish Cousin* (Bentley) first coauthored novel by Somerville and Ross, published.
- *The Wrong Box* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne.
- End of the 40-year-old partnership of Erckmann and Chatrian.
- The American journalist Elizabeth Bisland embarks on a seventy-six day world-race. She and her competitor, Nellie Bly, are the first to have tried such a tour.
- *Wild Darrie and A Dangerous Catspaw* by David Christie Murray and Henry Herman.
- *Violet Vyvian M.F.H* by May Crommelin and James Moray Brown.

1890
- Brander Matthews’s “The Art and Mystery of Collaboration” originally appears in an 1890 issue of *Longman’s* magazine. It was reprinted as a preface to his 1891 collection of collaborative fiction *With My Friends: Tales Told in Partnership* and was later included in his 1896 essay collection *Aspects of Fiction*.
- Chatrian dies.
- *The World’s Desire* by H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang.
- *Sybil Ross’s Marriage* and *The Scudamores* by Francis Charles Philips and Charles James Wills.
- *A Daughter’s Sacrifice* by Francis Charles Philips and Percy Fendall.
- *The Bishop’s Bible* and *He Fell Among Thieves* by David Christie Murray and Henry Herman.
- *The Rival Princess* by Justin McCarthy and Rosa Campbell Praed.

1891
- *A Widower Indeed* by Rhoda Broughton and Elizabeth Bisland.
- *Naboth’s Vineyard* by Somerville and Ross.
- *A Sensitive Plant* by E.D. Gerard.
- *A Maiden Fair to See* and *Margaret Byng* by Francis Charles Philips and Charles James Wills.
- *My Face is my Fortune* by Francis Charles Philips and Percy Fendall.
- *Only a Shadow* by David Christie Murray and Henry Herman.
- *Master of her Life* by Lady Constance Howard and Ada Fielder-King.

1892
- *The Fate of Fenella* by twenty-four authors.
- *The Naulahka* by Rudyard Kipling and Wolcott Balestier.
- *A Fellowe and his Wife* by Blanche Willis Howard and William Sharp.

1893
- May: Somerville and Ross sell *The Real Charlotte* to Ward and Downey for 250 pounds.
- Walter Besant’s tour in the US.
- *Underneath the Bough*, collection of co-written poems by Michael Field.
- *A Comedy of Masks* by Ernest Dowson and Arthur Moore.

1894
- *The Real Charlotte*, Somerville and Ross’s first three-decker novel, finally published.
- *The Green Bay Tree* by W.H. Wilkins and Herbert Vivian.

1895
- Besant is knighted, more for his work as a philanthropist and social reformist rather than for his popular fiction.
- Mary Findlater’s first publication, a collection of poems, *Songs and Sonnets*.

1896

1897
- *The Silver Fox* by Somerville and Ross.
- Birth of Marjorie Barnard.
- Birth of Flora Eldershaw.

1898
- *The Pride of Jennico* by Agnes and Egerton Castle.

1899
- *Some Experiences of an Irish R.M.* by Somerville and Ross.
- *The Pen and the Book* by Besant.
- *The Etchingham Letters* by Ella Fuller Maitland and Sir Frederick Pollock.
- *Adrian Rome* by Ernest Dowson and Arthur Moore.
- *The High Commission* by Fredericka Spangler Cantwell and Dora Eastwick Martyn.
- *Parson Kelly* by Andrew Lang and A.E.W. Mason.
- *The Premier and the Painter* by Israel Zangwill and Louis Cowan.
- Erckmann dies.
1900
- *The Bath Comedy* by Agnes and Egerton Castle.

1901
- Death of Besant.
- *The Inheritors* by Conrad and Ford Madox Ford.

1902
- Besant’s *Autobiography* published posthumously.
- *The Lightning Conductor* by C.N. and A.M. Williamson.

1903
- *A Girl Among the Anarchists* by Helen and Olivia Rossetti.

1904
- *The Affair at the Inn* by Mary and Jane Findlater, Kate Douglas Wiggin, and Allan McAulay.

1905
- *The Princess Passes* by C.N. and A.M. Williamson.

1906
- *The Whole Family* by 12 American authors, including Henry James.

1908
- *Crossriggs*, first coauthored novel by Mary and Jane Findlater.
- *Disciples of Plato* by Francis Charles Philips and Percy Fendall.

1909

1910

1911
- *Robinetta* by Mary and Jane Findlater, Kate Douglas Wiggin, and Allan McAulay.

1912
- Death of Andrew Lang.

1913
- Death of Edith Cooper. End of the ‘Michael Field’ partnership.

1914
- Death of Katherine Bradley.
1915
- Death of Martin Ross. End of Somerville and Ross’s partnership. Somerville turns to automatic writing and will continue to publish fiction under the dual signature.

1917
- *Irish Memories* by Somerville.

1920
- Death of C.N. Williamson. His wife goes on writing on her own.
- Death of Egerton Castle.
- Death of Rhoda Broughton.

1922
- Death of Agnes Castle.

1924

1925
- *The Big House of Inver* by Somerville (but signed ‘Somerville and Ross’).
- Death of H. Rider Haggard.

1929
- Death of Brander Matthews.
- Death of Elizabeth Bisland.

1933
- Death of A.M. Williamson.

1946
- “Two of a Trade” by Somerville.
- Death of Jane Findlater.

1949
- Death of Somerville.

1956
- Death of Flora Eldershaw. End of the partnership ‘M. Barnard Eldershaw.’

1963
- Death of Mary Findlater.

1977
1987
- Death of Marjorie Barnard.
Appendix B: Articles on Collaboration in the British Newspaper Archive

The list reported here includes the periodicals that hosted the highest number of articles dealing with ‘literary collaboration.’

1880-1889: 1,546

Periodicals: The Era (110); London Evening Standard (94); Pall Mall Gazette (54); St. James’s Gazette (50); The Stage (42).

1880: 51
1881: 50
1882: 111
1883: 103
1884: 170
1885: 155
1886: 133
1887: 140
1888: 223
1889: 410

1890-1899: 3,851

Periodicals: The Era (172); Glasgow Herald (164); Globe (136); London Evening Standard (109); Morning Post (104).

1890: 380
1891: 297
1892: 514
1893: 363
1894: 561
1895: 416
1896: 406
1897: 260
1898: 311
1899: 343

1900-1909: 2,754

Periodicals: The Scotsman (181); London Daily News (120); London Evening Standard (117); Northern Whig (101); Morning Post (78).

1900: 217
1901: 369
1902: 259
1903: 341
1904: 292
1905: 259
1906: 268
1907: 249
1908: 240
1909: 260

1910-1919: 1,147
Periodicals: The Scotsman (129); Aberdeen Press and Journal (70); Globe (49); Northern Whig (49); Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer (47)

1910: 155
1911: 174
1912: 143
1913: 131
1914: 143
1915: 86
1916: 102
1917: 84
1918: 59
1919: 70

1920-1929: 1,125
Periodicals: Aberdeen Press and Journal (108); The Scotsman (106); Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer (59); Sheffield Daily Telegraph (48); The Stage (41).

1920: 79
1921: 110
1922: 105
1923: 123
1924: 126
1925: 100
1926: 114
1927: 121
1928: 133
1929: 114
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Gerard, Emily, and Dorothea Gerard.


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