

### Collaborating Women

*Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*. Jill R. Ehnenn. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. 236 pp.

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<1> In *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*, Jill R. Ehnenn picks up where earlier studies of literary collaboration, most devoted primarily, even exclusively, to male partnerships, left off.<sup>(1)</sup> Locating in women's literary collaboration "an eroticized potential that is both intellectual and sensual" (5), Ehnenn embarks on a project she conceives as at once intensely personal and strikingly political. "I first came to this project when I was coming out" (1), she begins, establishing from the very outset her tone and the stakes of the undertaking.

<2> Unlike men, whose bonds are often developed and solidified through the exchange of women<sup>(2)</sup> – thus reconfirming what Gayle Rubin has termed the sex/gender system<sup>(3)</sup> – women coming together have the potential to subvert that system. The possibility of subversion animates Ehnenn's study.<sup>(4)</sup> The female dyads at the heart of *Women's Literary Collaboration* arrive at the page having already joined their lives in multivalent ways, and, in looking at collaborating women writers, Ehnenn seeks to show not only how women wrote but "how they invented themselves in ways that society did not otherwise permit" (12). The writing partners discussed in *Women's Literary Collaboration* – Michael Field (Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper), Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin), Vernon Lee (who wrote in partnership with A. Mary F. Robinson and later with Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thomson), and Elizabeth Robins (who was a part of two long-term collaborations, first with Florence Bell, then Octavia Wilberforce) – were ultimately involved in "an ongoing practice of living and loving, writing and talking together that rarely pause[d]" (6). This "practice" is significant in a number of ways: on the most basic level, it fundamentally distinguishes women's collaborations from men's collaborations in which men are joined at and by the textual site. More importantly, it allows Ehnenn to consider the intersections of text, body, and writing, and more importantly still, to consider the implications of these intersections in the context of the sex/gender system of a particular time and place.

<3> Ehnenn seeks to avoid essentializing arguments, noting that she does not wish to posit a special connection between women and collaboration. In fact, she is most interested in the performative, in how rigid categories, including gender as well as authorship, can be

denaturalized, revealed as ideological formations deeply bound up with heteropatriarchy.(5) She is interested too in queering ideologies of sex and gender, notions of subjectivity and authorship. (6) Ehnenn promises by way of introduction that her book “will show how women’s collaboration becomes performative, problematic, and threatens the dominant discourse when women’s actions reveal an ontological dislinkage from that discourse; it becomes unfixed, and threatens to expose and challenge the ideologies that previously sanctioned and enabled it” (11). Her focus on Michael Field, the male pseudonym of two women writing and living together, handily illustrates precisely how women’s collaboration is both performative and problematic, how it begins to unsettle long- and deeply-cherished notions about individual genius, male creativity, and heteronormative productivity. What is more, when Ehnenn writes about Michael Field, who wrote about the poet Sappho, they “come together in a text that blends [their] three voices” (3).(7)

<4> Ehnenn’s goal is, finally, two-fold: she aims to recover lost texts and authors so as to expand the canon, and to demonstrate how literary partnerships between late-Victorian women writers have contributed to the development of what we today call “queer strategies” and “lesbian identity.” Taking the period from 1885 to 1918 in England as her historical and cultural moment – a period marked by increased attention to matters of sexuality, as well as the emergence of distinct sexual identities(8) – Ehnenn considers women’s literary collaborations, as they “articulate ... lives, loves, and goals within new modes of scholastic, artistic and erotic expression” (18), closely attending to the resultant texts, as well as autobiographical writing and biography. She organizes her book thematically, choosing to forego individual considerations of each partnership. This proves to be a particularly canny choice, as Ehnenn is able to focus on interrelated characteristics and strategies, on contiguous responses to cultural tensions and debates, rather than diverting her attention to artificial unwindings and separations.

<5> In the study’s first chapter, Ehnenn establishes an epistemological framework for approaching women’s literary collaborations as a performative strategy, one that rearticulates notions of self and authority. As the chapter’s title, “The ‘Art and Mystery of Collaboration’: Authorial Economies, Queer Pleasures,” begins to suggest, Ehnenn focuses here on the ways in which collaborating female authors collapse separate writing selves into a distinct writing unit. In the process they enact a multiple, shifting self-in-process, a “poet” perpetually, pleasurably, blissfully (in the Barthean sense) coming into being. The collaborative, collaborated text functions as performative utterance, generating its “author” while simultaneously troubling the conventions underlying authorship. At the same time, the relationships underlying the work are strongly homosocial or even explicitly homoerotic, thus troubling the sex/gender system and exposing patriarchal ideas about female purpose, creativity, and power as ideologically determined. Ehnenn is careful to stress the varying strategies and assumptions of the author-dyads she considers, noting that while some rejected Victorian constructions of the male Poet, others embodied the figure, adopting a male pseudonym, explaining – as Bradley and Cooper did, in asking their associates to keep the secret of Michael Field’s identity – that they “had much to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips” (19). And, in contrasting women’s collaboration with men’s during the period discussed, Ehnenn makes clear that the physical facts of writing differed from dyad to dyad. Somerville and Ross, for example, wrote in separate residences, their collaboration taking the form of detailed editorial remarks and revisions of short story and novel drafts, while Bradley and Cooper described their partnership in terms of merging

and fluidity. Still, unlike male partnerships, marked by the planning and mapping out of creative activity, women's collaborations were remarkable for their mutual reliance, their embrace of collaborative labor, their vision of "partnership-as-self that favors self-in-process and self-in-connection to others" (32). Somerville notably continued to publish under the signature "Somerville and Ross" long after Martin's death, believing that Martin collaborated with her from beyond the grave via automatic writing.

<6> In the second chapter, Ehnenn shifts her focus to an examination of "looking," of how female collaborators view their surroundings, one another, as well as other creative women. Examining "Beauty and Ugliness" (1897), Lee and Antstruther-Thomson's treatise on psychological aesthetics, and *Sight and Song* (1892), Michael Field's collection of picture-poems, she argues that these collaborative texts critique fin-de-siècle conceptions of femininity and beauty, rewriting male-authored texts from the perspective of a female spectator, thereby establishing spaces for women's voices and women's desires, including the desire for other women. These works ultimately reconfigure the relationship between "the subject of [the] aesthetic gaze" and "the subject of [the] erotic gaze" into one of empathy or "*feeling-into*" (72).

<7> In Chapter 3, Ehnenn turns her attention to the performance of silence and the refusal of representation. Taking up Michael Field's *A Question of Memory* (1893) and Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell's *Alan's Wife* (1893) – two plays that have been largely neglected by scholars – Ehnenn analyzes how these works can be said to prefigure feminist and queer theories of performance. Through their exploration of silence – a feature of the plays much maligned by contemporary reviewers who complained that the main characters were mad and the plays unnatural, incomprehensible, downright offensive – the dramatic works blur the boundaries between performer and spectator, a blurring made possible by the mingling of author and audience implicit in the collaborative dyads.

<8> Michael Field's *The Tragic Mary* (1890) – another drama – and Somerville and Ross's novel *The Real Charlotte* (1894) are the subject of Chapter 4, which investigates, as the chapter's title declares, "collaborating with history." The inclusion of a historical subject whose story will be retold opens up the dyad, Ehnenn argues, to include a third. In "engag[ing] figures implicitly or explicitly appropriated from the past, [the co-authors] create a textual space for the interplay and critique of issues including gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality, and national identity" (136). Furthermore, in making use of historical female figures as characters, these author-pairs "make recognizable the ways that their characters' performances of femininity challenge the stability of the category 'woman'" (169), and thus deploy the strategy of disidentification, which José Esteban Muñoz has explained as the adoption of the majority culture by cultural outsiders for their own purposes.

<9> The concluding chapter begins by reasserting Ehnenn's understanding of women's collaboration as a mode of articulation, a challenge to received, ideological notions, and a redefining of authorship, literature, and the sex/gender system, and ends with a call for further exploration of female collaboration, for "future study of women who lived, loved and worked together" (24). *Women's Literary Collaboration* – a significant contribution to Victorian studies,

a notable effort at canon expansion, a meaningful, necessary strand of queer-feminist discourse – stands as a testament to the worth of such an endeavor.

## Endnotes

(1)Ehnenn cites Wayne Koestenbaum's *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (New York: Routledge, 1989), Jeffrey Masten's *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Jack Stillinger's *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) as germane studies of men's literary collaboration. Koestenbaum's text is a particularly significant point of departure in its assertion that male literary partnerships play out a complex sexual drama, with the mutually produced text standing in, variously, for a woman, a baby, a dildo. The collaborative textual site ultimately reveals itself as a sexual site.(^)

(2)Such theories of exchange have been advanced by thinkers including Claude Levi-Stauss, Gayle Rubin, Luce Irigaray, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Women and women's bodies serve, these critics contend, as tokens of exchange necessary for establishing and cementing male bonds, while at the same time providing a socially sanctioned site for male homosociality and homoeroticism.(^)

(3)See Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" in Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975): 157-210.(^)

(4)Early on in "Coming Together: An Introduction," Ehnenn quotes Adrienne Rich's plea that female critics and writers look to the past with "fresh eyes," in the hope that "a radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, ... and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh" (Rich qtd. in Ehnenn 3-4). She notes too that "collusion," with its connotation of betrayal and subterfuge, is sometimes a synonym for collaboration, hinting at the buried but ever-present prospect of subversion in the act of collaboration.(^)

(5)Here, Ehnenn admittedly follows the work of Judith Butler, particularly Butler's argument about how the performative operates within and against ideologies of gender, thereby highlighting and critiquing the constructedness of gender as a category.(^)

(6)As Ehnenn notes, the long history of willful ignorance of queer sexualities is analogous in some respects to literary collaboration. Both, she observes, challenge received ideas: in the first instance, the "naturalness" of heterosexuality; in the second, the privileged, Romantic conception of solitary authorship (3).(^)

(7) Ehnenn's notion of "double triangulation" – inspired by Elaine Marks's conception of "lesbian intertextuality" – leads her to see "a twinned triple ménage of writers from past and present" (3). The image of a triangulated relationship – a female author-dyad opening to include a third term – is helpful in illuminating the importance of continuity between female authors, who "collaborate" with their literary precursors, as well as in introducing sexuality into the equation, following formulations of the "triangulation of desire," advanced by such critics as René Girard, Gayle Rubin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (^)

(8) As a number of scholars, following Michel Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality*, have demonstrated, the late nineteenth century developed and proliferated discourses about sexuality, "inventing" homosexuality and cementing the identity in the period following Oscar Wilde's trials and conviction for "gross indecency" in 1895. Ehnenn acknowledges that the discourse tended to focus on male homosexuality, but convincingly argues that it certainly had relevance for "homosexually-inclined" women. (^)