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*Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and
Late-Victorian Culture* (review)

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Private Sphere to World Stage should prove a useful resource for scholars interested in the particulars of the novels it considers. In rereading these canonical texts Sabiston reminds us of their continued potential to inspire. Given that in many colleges and universities these novels are still studied and taught as a group, Sabiston's suggestive readings will prove helpful to both students and teachers of nineteenth-century women writers.

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

Writers of literary histories have long struggled with incorporating clearly significant biographical material without assuming an easy, one-to-one relationship between author and work. For feminist literary critics, this methodological quandary is particularly fraught as we want both to situate the writers and texts that we examine within ideologies of sex and gender and to avoid reducing these writers to categories of identity. Moreover, when assessing queer writers, this question takes on added urgency, because highlighting an author's non-normative sexuality can potentially lead to an ahistorical vision of sexual identity and authorship that leaves out the dynamic historical context of both categories. Jill R. Ehnenn's *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture* is a welcome addition to this conversation. It focuses on the conditions and consequences of literary production amongst four collaborative pairs of late-Victorian women writers: Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper); Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, AKA Martin Ross); Vernon Lee and Clementia "Kit" Anstruther-Thompson; and Elizabeth Robbins and Florence Bell.

Ehnenn has chosen these particular pairs of women because their collaborations and resultant texts not only reveal the erotic and queer authorial economies at work in 1890s literary partnerships between women but also yield a more nuanced view of England at the turn of the century. As she establishes in her introduction, fittingly titled "Coming Together," Ehnenn's look at these four dyads seeks to intervene in a variety of literary and historical scholarly discourses, including *fin-de-siècle* studies, feminist recovery work, and queer literary studies. Consequently, the central goals of the book are twofold: to reclaim the "life and work of late-Victorian women, who although greatly respected in their day, have since been relegated to the distant margins of literary study," and to situate this project "with its context in LGBT/queer studies and postmodern academia" even as the subjects are contextualized within late-Victorian history

(24). In approaching the twin goals of reclamation and double contextualization, Ehnenn makes the compelling argument that the homosocial textual production that characterizes women's literary collaboration in this period provides an entry point into understanding how these women challenged the conventional idea of the author, both in their writing processes and, thematically, in the texts they produced. It is through looking at how these authors described their work practices and how they coded desire in their literary texts that we can see how they mobilized a queer performative citationality, a way of cultural referencing in which dominant ideologies of sex and gender are both mobilized and unsettled.

For Ehnenn, central to tracing the contours of this literary history are the ways in which these four pairs of late-Victorian literary women subvert conventional ideals of authorship, especially the Romantic ideal of the author as a solitary male genius. In a delicate mix of biography and literature, on the basis of letters and diaries, she argues that each of these dyads constructs its literary partnership in terms of a woman-centered, reciprocal, and fulfilling relationship in which both participants move between positions of creator and audience, so that the work of one constantly unfolds into the other, molding a collaborative literary and aesthetic identity. Their collaborations resist attempts to codify authority within the partnership by utilizing "metaphors of boundlessness," which make identifying who wrote/thought of what nearly impossible (34). Exemplifying this dynamic in the case of Michael Field's work, we have two women who are speaking as one male voice in order to claim a space for the work of their homoerotic collaboration.

The first chapter, "The 'art and mystery of collaboration': Authorial Economies, Queer Pleasures," provides the theoretical foundation for the book and largely concerns itself with laying out a methodology for examining the impact of women's collaborative practices on the literature they wrote. Here and throughout the book, Ehnenn compellingly argues that each of the four pairs of authors is "strikingly performative" in its collaborations and texts, which enables the writers to fashion a "transgressive aesthetic" (2). Borrowing from and extending recent work on notions of performativity, most notably the work of Judith Butler, Ehnenn suggests that these late-Victorian women writers cite normative ideas of sex and gender in their works and descriptions of their literary partnerships. Much like drag or camp, this sort of reference points towards the gaps in heteronormative ideologies even as its relational position gives power to those ideologies. Critically, the commitment to women's collaboration with other women that these authors often express marks both the authorial economies in which they write and the textual economies that they produce. Furthermore, both kinds of economies resist the alienated subject positions that are usually assigned to women within literary production and texts.

In looking at the texts that come out of these fascinating dyads, Ehnenn highlights the radical and the recuperative constituents of this performative aesthetic. The second chapter, "Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in

‘Beauty and Ugliness’ and *Sight and Song*,” contends that Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thompson’s “Beauty and Ugliness,” an essay on psychological aesthetics, and Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*, a book of *ekphrastic* poems, both demonstrate a “lesbian scopophilia” in which the conventional male, objectifying gaze has been unsettled by a different form of looking between women, one founded on exchange rather than mastery (71). Turning to the dramatic texts of Michael Field’s *A Question of Memory* and Elizabeth Robbins and Florence Bell’s *Alan’s Wife*, Chapter Three focuses on how these playwriting partnerships paradoxically use silence to give voice to the unrepresentable and hysterical, namely gender and sexual instability. Notably, both plays not only depict mentally unstable characters; they also caused hysterical reactions in theatergoers. The off-stage matricide in *Alan’s Wife* was evidently so disturbing that audience members remembered seeing the event in reviews of the play (131). In the fourth chapter, Ehnenn examines two texts, Michael Field’s *Tragic Mary* and Somerville and Ross’s *Real Charlotte*, in which the collaborative dyad becomes a triad whereby these Victorian women writers take other women’s lives as their subject. As such, these women reading, telling, and, in a sense, collaborating with other women in the past invite the reader to participate in the creation of the text, much like the collaborative writing process where each partner moves between the roles of writer and reader.

Connecting these nineteenth-century concerns to currently mobilized collaborations, the final chapter argues for further study of this complex form of literary production in its various incarnations, including study of non-transgressive models of collaboration and of the racial, class, and national politics at work in collaborative writing. Ehnenn also links research on collaboration to pedagogical uses, interrogating the extent to which collaboration in the classroom is often utilized without a proper understanding of its historical or cultural baggage and tends to conform to a highly corporate and hierarchical model. A nuanced and full history of collaborative literary practices could help teachers who want to incorporate group projects into their classes, particularly in the writing classroom, to recognize the potential and limitations of collaboration within educational institutions.

For Ehnenn, a key part of this history is being sensitive to the queerness of the partnerships of these late-Victorian women writers. Though it would be anachronistic to suggest that these women were lesbians in terms of self-identification and cultural identity, Ehnenn claims a space for thinking through their literary collaborations as mobilizing a “queer disidentification”: the authors in question constructed their shared collaborative identity within and against the ideas of “author, lover, and marriage” (16–17). What Ehnenn proposes, then, is that we can envision this queer — in the sense of both unusual and homoerotic — approach to literary production as a “marker for lesbian-as-strategy” (17). Here, the term “lesbian” acts not as descriptor of one’s sexual identity but rather as a way of writing and reading that concerns itself with exchange between women

in its production and in the limits of the ideologies of sex and gender within its thematics and aesthetics (17). Thus Ehnenn argues for a new sort of reading that participates in textual exchange and is sensitized to the way in which such texts self-reflexively *perform* gender and sex, thereby denaturalizing both categories.

As Ehnenn explains, a key part of this queer reading/writing practice is the search for and collaboration with women of the past, “foremothers” (140). For the writers in this study, collaborators from the past included well-known figures (Sappho, Charlotte Brontë, and others) as well as less obvious choices, as in the case of Sommerville and Ross’s collaborative re-telling of a distant female relative’s life in *The Real Charlotte*. Perceptively, Ehnenn sees her own role as continuing this tradition. She notes that her interest in Michael Field and Sommerville and Ross began when she herself was coming out and looking for lesbian foremothers. Thus the critic here acknowledges her place in allying herself with these collaborative pairs to create the texts through her readings; the dyad is always becoming a triad. In effect, Ehnenn seeks to argue for the queerness not only of the four partnerships but also of critical practice itself.

Clearly, these understudied women writers are in need of such close and insightful critical attention. Particularly, Ehnenn’s balancing of biographical and literary texts in this study is a useful contribution to feminist and queer scholarly debates about how to integrate biographical information without falling into an essentialist argument about a writer’s sex, gender, and sexuality. However, the extent to which she almost exclusively recurs to ideologies of sex and gender makes the analysis seem repetitive at times. Stylistically, this issue is exacerbated by the author’s tendency to locate her central claims in the middle of paragraphs, which tends to obscure the development and nuances of those arguments. The book would benefit from more attention to what she calls the “gaps and ruptures” (141) in these collaborative couples and their texts — likely occurring where sex and gender intersect with other powerful ideologies of identity, including race, nationality, and class. In all fairness, Ehnenn does touch upon this point in her discussion of Sommerville and Ross’s racism in *The Real Charlotte*, but addressing these issues at more length would enhance the book. Though the author does call for this kind of further study in her final chapter, isolating categories of identity not only limits the explanatory power of such arguments but also implicitly suggests that such categories *can* be separated.

These relatively minor points aside, *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture* offers both valuable readings of collaborative texts and theorization of women’s collaboration with other women. Moreover, its contextualization of these four pairs of late-Victorian women writers in terms of discourses of aesthetics and authorship makes a compelling case for their centrality to late-Victorian literary culture, as well as to histories of queer literary cultures.

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