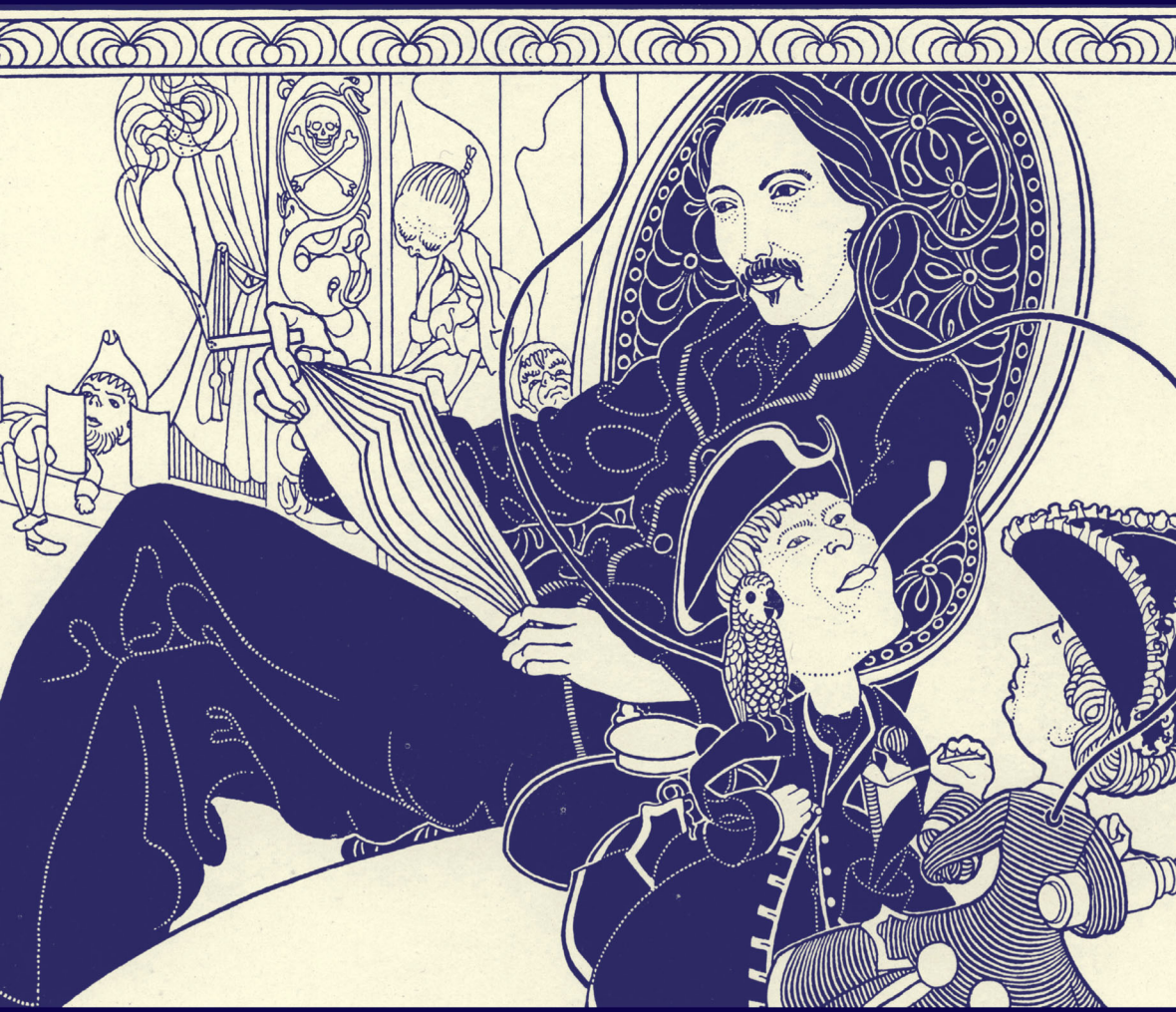
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON AND THE ART OF COLLABORATION



Audrey Murfin

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Collaboration in Theory and Practice

In 1893 Henry James dispatched two volumes of new stories to Samoa, to his friend Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson had already (too late) written James a letter, advising him 'I have written and ordered your last book, *The Real Thing*, so be sure and don't send it',[1] demonstrating both how eager Stevenson was to read James, and how eager James was to be read by him. The volumes, *The Real Thing and Other Tales* and *The Private Life*, contain some of James's most cynical reflections on the profession of the writer. Thematically, most of the stories focus on the contrast between the idealised writer as inspired artist and the more humdrum reality of writing as a profession. (This topic would recur through much of Stevenson's work, too.) One story from *The Real Thing*, 'Greville Fane', describes a prolific and popular, but insufficiently literary, female novelist. The narrator, a journalist tasked with writing her obituary, is simultaneously embarrassed by her career and respectful, admitting in the first paragraph 'I didn't admire her, but I liked her',[2] exemplifying the reaction of the average reader to her many novels. While 'Greville Fane' (the novelist Mrs Stormer's pen name) toils at producing three novels a year while living the restricted life of a middle-class widow, her children harbour more upper-class aesthetics and tastes. Although she works hard to apprentice her son, Leolin, to her craft, he proves to be an unproductive writer, all the while disparaging his mother's lack of sophistication in both art and society. In the end, the narrator alleges, Leolin only ever uses his mother's work, while simultaneously appropriating her increasingly diminishing earnings. She does not see it this way. Instead, she distinguishes between the 'form' and the 'substance' of art, fondly

crediting her profligate son with providing the latter by means of his extravagant living:

> Leolin had been obliged to recognise insuperable difficulties in the question of *form*, he was so fastidious; so that she had now arrived at a definite understanding with him (it was such a comfort) that *she* would do the form if he would bring home the substance. That was now his position – he foraged for her in the great world at a salary.[3]

There is much to say here about James's ironic treatment of the work of art being split into 'substance' and 'form'. I will limit myself to pointing out the obvious: that within mimetic practice (and Greville Fane is a Trollopian realist) only form can be art, since 'substance' would merely be life.

Robert Louis Stevenson and the fictional Greville Fane were both popular, but in most other ways they were opposite: she is 'matronly, mild, inanimate' while he was a lean, charismatic bohemian; she had 'not contributed a sentence to the language'[4] while he was considered a preeminent stylist. But in 1893 when he received *The Real Thing*, Stevenson was actively bemoaning the lack of success of his latest and longest novel, *The Wrecker* (1892), co-written with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne. Many of his acquaintances, including his publishers at Scribner's, blamed the disappointment on the upstart young man. According to Barry Menikoff, Scribner's believed that

> Stevenson's collaboration with Lloyd Osbourne on *The Wrong Box* and *The Wrecker* was having a deleterious effect on sales: readers assumed that Stevenson was allowing his name to be used to help sell his stepson's work, or else that Osbourne's work was corrupting Stevenson's. In either case, Stevenson was the loser – both in prestige and in his pocketbook.[5]

James's story prompts us to ask many questions about the situation of the author in the late nineteenth century. There is first the question, as I have mentioned, of the discrepancy between the writer as an artist and the writer as a professional catering to a specific market. Greville Fane is adept at only the latter, and sometimes Stevenson worried that he was the same way. It also shows us the discrepancy between the illusion of the author-celebrity writing above the fray, and the reality of that person embedded in a web of relationships and beset by domestic squabbles and difficulties. Finally, most literally, is Robert Louis Stevenson as fond and naive as Greville Fane? Is Lloyd Osbourne Leolin Stormer? Is, in short, collaboration a con?

On the contrary, by looking at a selection of texts both collaborative and not, I will argue that understanding literary collaboration is essential to understanding Stevenson's writings. Stevenson often collaborated with family and friends. Early collaborations include three plays with his friend W. E. Henley. Later, he and his wife Fanny co-authored a volume of linked stories, *More New Arabian Nights*, also titled *The Dynamiter* (1885). He collaborated most extensively with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne, with whom he wrote three novels: *The Wrong Box* (1889), *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide* (1894). Stevenson's collaborations with Osbourne typify the critical problem my project addresses. Like Fanny Stevenson's, Osbourne's literary reputation has not been notable. Furthermore, there is evidence that Stevenson's collaborations with Osbourne became frustrating. Why would this famous and successful author practise a writing process that burdened him with inexpert collaborators? The answer to this question can be found in Stevenson's novels, essays and plays, which dramatise the process of collaboration. Stevenson creates an alternate narrative of what it means to write – one that challenges commonly held assumptions about the celebrity cult of the author in Victorian Britain, and notions of authorship more generally.

This book is structured around critical readings of major Stevenson texts, supported and contextualised by archival research into unpublished manuscripts and letters by both Stevenson and his associates. I argue that it is not merely that Stevenson collaborated, but that his work is *about* collaboration – its benefits, but also its pitfalls. Stevenson's self-reflective body of work reimagines authorship by examining the ways that authors choose material, negotiate the marketplace and, ultimately, maintain power over their own words, or let that power go. Characteristically, Stevenson's exploration will not come to firm conclusions; for every moment in which he cedes authority, there is another in which he wants it back. Writing to his cousin Robert Alan Mowbray Stevenson about his co-written novel *The Wrecker*, he allows that collaborative writing leads to 'greater richness of purview, consideration, and invention', but claims the final ownership of the project, calling himself the 'one person being responsible and giving the *coup de pouce* to every part of the work' (*Letters* 8: 364–5). Stevenson's work explores the tensions of the author, the space between the concept of the author as infallible producer of clear and unitary meaning, and the author as a medium through which the ideas of others are made to speak. What does it mean to be an author at the end of the nineteenth century? Stevenson's fictions dramatise the process of collaboration and create an alternate narrative of what it means to write – one that challenges commonly held assumptions about the

celebrity cult of the author in Victorian Britain, replacing the subjectivity of the author with an ever shifting, multifaceted perspective.

Collaborative Criticism

Contemporary thought on collaboration and authorship begins with two foundational articles: Roland Barthes's 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author' challenges the idea that the background or intention of the author has any special authority over the interpretation of a literary text,[6] and Michel Foucault's response, 'What is an Author?' (1969), endorses the creation of what Foucault calls the 'author-function' – an idea of the author separate from the historical personage.[7] Less acknowledged in criticism on collaboration, but equally important, is M. M. Bakhtin, whose notion of heteroglossia, or a multiplicity of voices or discourses, within the novel frees readers from having to think of novelistic style as emerging from a single and entirely unified consciousness.[8] Bakhtin's playful notions of discourse came close to the aesthetic values Stevenson expressed through his literary career, from his multi-plotted experimental works like *New Arabian Nights* and *The Dynamiter* to, near the end of his life, his fascination with the linguistic diversity he found in the Pacific islands.

The most notable subsequent development in criticism on collaboration is Wayne Koestenbaum's 1989 discussion of the erotic nature of male/male literary collaboration. Koestenbaum finds that collaborative writing attained its zenith during the sexually contentious years of the *fin de siècle* as authors enact on the page desires they are forbidden in life. There is something to this – my reading of *The Wrecker* specifically will examine the romance of the male partnership. However, Koestenbaum's discussion of the Stevenson–Osbourne partnership specifically is quite literal, and his claim that '[Stevenson] understood the sexual implications of his relationship with Lloyd' (146) is not borne out in the biographical studies.[9] Not surprisingly, Koestenbaum is also dismissive of Stevenson's collaborations with Fanny.

Related to Koestenbaum's book in approach is a great deal of work that takes on collaboration as a specifically feminist problem, from Bette London's *Writing Double*, which looks at collaborations between women, to Holly Laird's *Women Coauthors*, which looks at female co-authors, regardless of the gender of their writing partner.[10] These feminist approaches elucidate Stevenson's professional relationship with his wife, and in particular the prickly ways in which

the pair negotiated, and not always successfully, the discrepancy between his fame and her literary ambitions. But because Stevenson did not collaborate with one person, or in one type of relationship, but in three, a more multivalent approach is required.

Other works that deal with literary production and the networks and negotiations involved in publication are relevant to my thinking about collaboration, though they may not specifically address the kind of partnered collaboration I look at in this study. Jack Stillinger's challenge to the romantic conception of the 'solitary genius' and Jerome McGann's observations that texts reflect a series of negotiations rather than the intent of a single author both argue that literary production involves a vast network of players, including editors and publishers, a network obscured by any focus on authorial intent (McGann) or on genius (Stillinger).[11]

Adding to this discussion, I posit that in order to define collaboration, we must consider four essential questions: is it acknowledged? is it mutual? is it equal? and is it separable? All authors receive advice from others, making all texts in a sense collaborative, but I propose that texts in which the collaboration is mutually undertaken and overtly acknowledged differ fundamentally from traditionally authored texts. On the other hand, I argue that criticism of collaboration has been hampered by the assumption that true collaboration must be evenly divided (all of Stevenson's collaborations were, in one way or another, unequal ones), and that the business of the critic is to solve the 'problem' of who has written what, a project which I argue shows an a priori scepticism about the possibility of collaboration at all. Like Stevenson and his associates, I believe that collaborative writing encompasses more than the sum of its parts.

Is it acknowledged?

Literary labour, by its nature, is almost always collaborative in some sense or other. Every author responds to the influence of literary history, speaks back to his or her contemporaries, and gets feedback from family, friends, editors and publishers. Authors are social beings after all. Jerome McGann argues that texts come not from a single author but from a series of discussions and compromises between authors, editors, publishers and others tasked with turning an author's earliest ideas into a book.[12] This shows how central collaboration is to authorship, but it also threatens our ability to look at collaboration as a focused and specific endeavour. In seeing the

collaborative nature of all writing (or at least all published writing), we must also take care to distinguish this ordinary, unavoidable kind of collaboration from that work that is undertaken from the beginning in a collaborative process, which therefore remains differently thought of from its very conception. Koestenbaum finds the dual author title page to be a significant boundary of collaboration:

> A text is most precisely and satisfyingly collaborative if it is composed by two writers who admit the act by placing both of their names on the title page. A double signature confers enormous interpretive freedom: it permits the reader to see the act of collaboration shadowing every word in the text. Collaborative works are intrinsically *different* than books written by one author alone: even if both names do not appear, or one writer eventually produces more material, the decision to collaborate determines the work's contours, and the way in which it can be read. Books with two authors are specimens of a relation and show writing to be a quality of motion and exchange, not a fixed thing.[13]

Focusing on the decision to collaborate within a specific relationship means that the kinds of collaborations that I am most interested in are primary collaborations between author and author, and not the ways in which the literary marketplace is collaborative, although this is of course true, and important for Stevenson as well. Critics have long noted the interventions of various of his friends, family and associates in the final form his texts took, and with varying levels of consent from Stevenson himself.

The most important figure in this context is Stevenson's friend Sidney Colvin, who has often been credited with, or accused of, editing or censoring Stevenson's work. In Barry Menikoff's re-edited version of Stevenson's late Pacific novella, *The Beach of Falesá* (1892), for instance, Menikoff writes:

> But in truth he had become the source of production with little control over the final product. Stevenson was a machine whose creative workings were alien to all those around him. He supplied the art: a variety of producers were integral in its finishing, marketing, and distribution.[14]

Menikoff critiques Colvin's decision to edit *The Beach of Falesá* in such a way as to bring it more in line with a late-Victorian sense of propriety by revising the fake marriage certificate with which the young Pacific Islander Uma is married to the ugly white colonial trader

Wiltshire. In the earlier version the certificate had Uma married to Wiltshire for one night, but periodical publications either left this out or changed the duration to one week, which seems hardly better.[15] Menikoff's own work was to reissue the novel in order to restore Stevenson's original intentions more fully. However, as McGann points out, intentions need not be everything, because editors routinely surpass or undermine authorial intentions by, for example, publishing work that was never intended for publication, even as they gesture to authorial intention as a final goal.[16] If we follow McGann instead of Menikoff, perhaps Colvin should truly be seen as a collaborator, and *The Beach of Falesá*, as originally published, a co-authored text. There is much to say about the Stevenson/Colvin relationship, but I have not, in my analysis, chosen to view Sidney Colvin as one of Stevenson's collaborators, for the simple reason that Stevenson appears not to have viewed him that way, and thus the writing is not relational in the same way as his explicit, acknowledged collaborations.

Arguments such as McGann's or Stillinger's are necessary and important because they highlight that the ways we have conventionally thought of authorship, one person as the single originator of meaning and text, is wrong. Writing has always been social, and so the collaborative mode of writing is not as revolutionary as some might have it. And yet, this is not to say that there should be no distinction between writing intended as collaborative and that which merely, as all writing must, shows the influence of other people. Not every text I will consider in this book bears the name of two authors. And yet, many of Stevenson's books *do* bear the names of two authors, and this merits consideration, because it represents a deeper commitment to collaboration throughout the writing process.

This question of acknowledged or unacknowledged collaborators has been an especially fraught one within feminist criticism, where it has long been recognised that women's labour is not acknowledged at the same rate as men's, and that the work of many men of genius has been aided by wives or other female family members who have received little credit for their talents. The evidence for this is in the renewed interest in thinkers such as Dorothy Wordsworth, whose journals formed a significant portion of the writings of her better-known brother.[17] Stevenson was unusual in crediting his wife Fanny for her co-authorship of *The Dynamiter*. He certainly didn't have to, as far the world was concerned, and it might have been better received if he had not. It is in a way ironic that Stevenson is an unacknowledged collaborator on his wife's own publication, *The Cruise of the*

Janet Nichol *among the South Sea Islands*, published years after his death, her purportedly private diary which describes one of the family's cruises in the Pacific.

Is it mutual?

Another reason that I have decided to exclude Sidney Colvin's influence on Stevenson's work from this work on collaboration is that collaboration minimally requires a mutual conversation between collaborators. Where I have found it in some cases relevant to consider contributors who were unacknowledged, in all cases they were working with Stevenson's consent and feedback. In her discussion of Colvin's work on Stevenson's Complete Works, for instance, biographer Jenni Calder notes that while Stevenson was in Samoa and far away from the publishing world, 'it was virtually impossible for him to be more involved than he was, but he was also willing to leave editorial problems to Colvin – in spite of the fact that he did not trust Colvin on some issues.'[18] This editing after the fact, with or without Stevenson's approval, does not rise to the level of working together because there is little give and take. Still less do I consider posthumous revisions such as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's completion of Stevenson's unfinished novel *St. Ives*. Stevenson had no thought, when he died, that this was a collaborative novel, nor did Quiller-Couch have the benefit of feedback and conversation with Stevenson about it. One cannot, as a rule, collaborate with the dead, and collaboration is not the same thing as influence (Bette London's choice to include mediums in her study of collaborations notwithstanding). When, in his essay 'My First Book' (often used as the Preface to *Treasure Island*), Stevenson credits Washington Irving with originating many of the ideas in that novel,[19] it does not make *Treasure Island* a collaboration between Irving and Stevenson.

Nor is plagiarism collaboration, which seems like it should be an obvious point, and yet is a problem that caused the Stevensons some trouble. In my third chapter, on Fanny Stevenson's collaborations, I present evidence that Fanny may have believed that she was collaborating with Louis's cousin Katharine de Mattos when she published her short story 'The Nixie' in *Scribner's* in 1888. De Mattos, who claimed that the original idea for the story had been her own, was furious at the theft, and the resulting accusation of plagiarism was one of the motivating causes for the final rift between Louis and his own collaborator, W. E. Henley. This is collaborative failure.

Is it equal?

One particular problem that has dogged consideration of Stevenson's collaborations is the question of the relative talent, and contribution, of the partners. Of Stevenson's three principal collaborators, W. E. Henley, Fanny Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, only Henley would likely have had a respectable career in letters independent of his relationship with Stevenson. His series of poems, *In Hospital*, describing the operations on his legs at the Edinburgh hospital are still anthologised in Victorian poetry collections, and his poem 'Invictus' remains popular among readers who admire its stoic self-determinism. Its final lines, 'I am the master of my fate, / I am the captain of my soul', have made it something of a conservative rallying cry in Britain, and kept it frequently in the news. [20] As quotable as Henley's famous poem remains, his reputation has been greatly overshadowed by the more famous Stevenson. Furthermore, with the possible exception of *The Wrong Box*, which Osbourne conceived of and carried out a significant portion of before Stevenson's involvement, Stevenson saw himself as the chief author on each work on which he collaborated. Not only did he take responsibility for the final decisions on each one, but in most cases he dictated the terms of the collaboration, giving his partners assignments to fulfil and then checking them over.

This acknowledged inequality of partners has led critics to dismiss the collaborations. Edwin Eigner, for example, says that *The Wrecker* and *The Ebb-Tide* 'can be regarded as almost entirely Stevenson's own' and that he will therefore treat those texts 'without reference to the influence of his collaborator, which is anyway . . . almost impossible to perceive'.[21] After all, if Stevenson admits to having the larger part in the project, why consider the lesser partner at all? And particularly since Fanny Stevenson and Osbourne have, traditionally, found little respect among critics for their other literary productions, readers have felt that their contributions could only harm and not help any project to which they contributed. For instance, biographer Ian Bell writes of *The Wrecker*: 'Had [Stevenson] put aside his desire to help Lloyd – or quelled his own laziness – it would have been a better novel than it is.'[22] Furthermore, my reading of the criticism shows that critical evaluations of the works themselves affect the determination of whose contribution is greater, and vice versa. Critics who wish to dismiss a work from the canon inevitably claim that it is mostly the work of Stevenson's collaborator. Critics who argue for its greater significance tend to minimise this contribution. This pattern maintains across readings of all of Stevenson's works, but

is particularly strong in relation to the novels *The Dynamiter* (with Fanny) and *The Wrong Box* (with Osbourne). However, it is not self-evident why readers should feel this way.

In the case of Stevenson's collaborations, all of which he undertook with authors of lesser reputations, one suspects a defensiveness at play, against readers wary of being tricked into a too positive appraisal of a hack writer. If (as in my earlier question of whether the collaboration is equal) we are able to parse out the authorship of different sections of a text, we may not have to deal with the tricky elements of collaboration at all. Any textual study I do that would identify anything as written by one author as opposed to another is from interest in the process only. I do not intend to excise the perennially unpopular Lloyd Osbourne, or any other collaborator, from Stevenson's writings. Nor do I intend to recover Fanny, Lloyd, Henley or anyone else as the true author of any of the works I discuss. Nor is it fair, in this context, to draw conclusions about the relative talents and contributions of Stevenson's collaborators, partly because it was Stevenson himself who set the terms of the partnerships and divided the labour. Ironically, for an author who is experimenting in this way with collaborative writing, Stevenson remains as authoritarian in regard to his work as he could possibly be. It is certainly worthwhile work to look at independent publications of his partners, as, for instance, Gordon Hirsch has done with regard to Osbourne and Hilary Beattie with regard to Fanny Stevenson.[23] As a poet, Henley requires no defence. But to critique their contributions to the texts on which they each collaborated is to miss the point that their roles were circumscribed by Stevenson's overarching vision. Rather, I want to discover how the work of authorship may inhere in the relationships and the space between the collaborators.

The literature on collaboration is full of other similarly unequal partners. Renaissance dramatists Beaumont and Fletcher, for instance, were famously unequal partners,[24] and Stevenson jokingly refers to their lopsided partnership in a letter to Henley (*Letters* 2: 277). This idea that collaborative labour is not relevant unless it is equal is an easy way to dismiss the collaborative because it is much easier to prove an unequal contribution than a truly equal one, which is unlikely mathematically, at least. If one person may be proved to have contributed more, he (in this case) becomes the author and authority. This tendency is more legal than descriptive, as one author simply seems easier if one person might be said to have contributed more.

A number of critical assessments of collaboration and ideas of authorship have indeed found that the idea of the author originates in

the material and legal status of copyright. For instance, Peter Jaszi and Martha Woodmansee describe the ways that our idea of the author at once creates and is constrained by the law. At first the 'ideology of "authorship" informed English – and ultimately American – copyright doctrine', but this very ideology obscures the collaborative and corporate way that writing actually progresses.[25] Thus, the law becomes 'one of the most powerful vehicles of the modern authorship construct'.[26] The specifics of copyright law can have a chilling effect on experimentation with authorship. Clare Pettitt has argued that early Victorian debates about intellectual property law affected, and were affected by, nineteenth-century ideas of authorship, and that the idea of the solitary writer was

> underwritten and perpetuated by the changes in intellectual property law in the nineteenth century. The debate around the reform of intellectual property law at this time is an important one as it shows the tenacity of literary writers such as Dickens in protecting such an obsolescent idea against the arguments of the free-trade anti-monopolists who wanted to abolish both copyright and patent protections.[27]

However, this construction was at odds with the changing nature of early and mid-Victorian authorship, which was influenced by the rapidly changing technology and dispersal of novels. Pettitt argues of Dickens, for example, that

> The double-text of *Bleak House*, therefore, raises questions about the origin of art, and the ownership of the art object. Many mid-Victorian novels reflect both explicitly and silently upon such questions at a time when the Romantic notion of the single author was coming under unprecedented pressure.[28]

Meanwhile, in America during the same period, critic David Dowling argues that authorship is 'socially driven, diverse, and dependent on the economies of circulation in the literary market, a perspective that dismantles the myth of the autonomous romantic artist'.[29] The legal and financial pressures of authorship limits the creative possibilities for thinking about collaboration, and encourages both authors and critics to find, and credit, the single voice, a necessity that goes strongly against Stevenson's own broad experimentations with different modes of authorship.

The material basis for the construction of authorship could go the other way too, though, as Ernest Mehew has found in discussion of

Stevenson's collaborations with Osbourne. As an American, Osbourne was able to secure the American copyright, a treasured possession when Stevenson, like so many authors, was beset by plagiarisms from across the pond.[30] While I acknowledge the importance of economic pressures on the idea of authorship, a survey of British and American copyright effects is beyond the scope of this book, and besides, I find that Stevenson's creative practice exceeds these considerations even as it is affected by them, or as Pettitt allows, 'The aesthetic is necessarily more than an ideological category.'[31]

Is it separable?

Of all of the questions that arise when we examine collaborative writing, however, the most persistent is whether it is possible, or advisable, to separate out the true authors of different sections of a collaborative text. When faced with a collaborative text, most critics and readers will ask: who wrote what? A recent intervention into collaborative Stevenson is the work of digital scholars Anouk Lang and Robyn Pritzker, who have been using stylometric tools to analyse *The Dynamiter* (as well as other collaborative Stevenson works) to see 'where Fanny's authorial signal comes through the text most strongly'.[32] This quantitative, digital approach follows a long tradition of critics who have argued strongly for their own abilities as merely experienced readers to easily detect Fanny's 'authorial signal', as I will discuss in my own treatment of *The Dynamiter.* Where reliable manuscript evidence tells us that certain sections of text have been written by one or another author, I share it, because one of the main investigations of this book is to discover the process used by Stevenson and his collaborators. However, there are several problems with this 'separation style' of criticism as a main approach to collaborative texts.

The principal problem with separating out the authors of a collaborative work is that this kind of focus directly undermines the aim of collaboration. Consider the case of the late-Victorian poet (or poets) Michael Field – Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, aunt/niece and lovers who wrote under the masculine pseudonym. The pair were troubled by frequent attempts to parse their writing – to figure out who wrote what, reportedly responding to Havelock Ellis, 'As to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what god has joined.'[33] Critic Lorraine York continues, 'Authorship itself is not significantly re-theorized or rethought in this view of collaboration.