From hand to hand: The legend of Ginevra degli Amieri and the Pisan circle

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> Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another? Are we for ever to be twisting, and untwisting the same rope? for ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace?
> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

1. About collaborative writing

Contemporary theories of literary composition have increasingly questioned whether solitary or 'pure' authorship is possible under any circumstances, given the multitude of external factors influencing the processes of writing, editing, and publishing.[1] The creation of a written work, Harold Love suggests, can be conceptualized as a series of interrelated activities (*authemes*) which may be undertaken either by a single individual or collaboratively, and which are declined according to personal choices, specific production contexts, or varying writing cultures (39). In pursuit of a nuanced understanding of literary creation, Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson advocate for a heterotextual model of authorship, which, in conceptual alignment with Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and plurivocality, frames the author as a composite entity "woven of varying strands of influence and agency, absorbing or incorporating different subjectivities, and speaking in multiple voices" (19).

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Whereas theoretical discourse frequently challenges conventional ideas of attribution that scarcely account for the concrete, material, and 'executive' aspects of writing, standard editorial practices continue to adhere to what Jerome McGann characterises as "ideas about the nature of literary production and textual authority which so emphasize the autonomy of the isolated author as to distort our theoretical grasp of the mode of existence of a literary work of art" (8). Fully recognising authorship as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon significantly complicates traditional conceptions of both creative and interpretive processes, leading to a cascade of interrelated theoretical and methodological shifts – including, as genetic criticism has posited, challenging teleological perspectives on writing and problematising the search for authorial intention.

Among the most intricate aspects of the notion of composite authorship are its idiosyncrasies; it is impossible to devise a single theory or model that adequately accounts for the various configurations of joint creation. The dynamics of each collaboration are influenced by the technologies of transmission and may encompass anything from overt co-signature of a work to minor influences on the text. These configurations, moreover, differ not only in terms of the degree of dialogism involved, but also in the stage of the creative process at which the contributions occur (e.g. notetaking, writing, editing), the nature of the relationship between the collaborators, along with the hierarchical dynamics governing it (spouses, relatives, friends, author-assistant, author-editor, author-publisher, etc). Exchanges, therefore, can be explicit, implicit, silent (Elbrecht and Fakundiny 252), disguised (Love 37), contextual, deferred (Hosington 98), unintentional, and sometimes even accidental (Bozant Witcher 115).

In her efforts to reconstruct the prevailing dynamics in women's collaborative writing enterprises, Lorraine York introduces additional layers of complexity to the issue. Referring to Wayne Koestenbaum (1989) and drawing on the works of Karen Burke LeFevre (1987), Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford (1990), she speculates on the ideological value of collaborative acts and their broader social and political implications. York contends that, in most cultures, creative cooperation holds the potential to challenge the status quo, particularly at specific historical moments. However, caution is needed against any *a priori* assumptions, as a "germinally subversive" impetus (York 4) can be constrained, defused and even co-opted to serve reactionary ideologies or reinforce pre-determined

hegemonic structures, thereby resulting in what Susanna Ashton defines as "conservative reactions to the liberal notions of the limitless self" (14).

If there appears to be little consensus on the meaning of collaborative writing and on the means to approach it, much of the scholarly discussion surrounding this topic converges on the recognition that the myth of the lone, unique author is a Romantic construct (e.g. McGann 9; Chartier 28; Greetham 305). Somewhat ironically, however, the Romantic period has also been defined as a time marked by a persistent tension between the image of the singular artist and the social production of art and aesthetic forms. The concept of the solitary Romantic poet is, in other words, more of philosophical than practical significance; this era not only heightened awareness of the multiplicity of agencies involved in the creative process but also brought into focus the social and collective reservoir of knowledge and tradition from which the individual 'genius' draws inspiration. To offer concrete evidence of this dynamic, the following pages will consider an instance of the exchange and circulation of manuscripts among the members of the Pisan circle, with particular focus on Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley (hereafter MWS and PBS), and Leigh Hunt.

Engaging with a group that was considered politically and socially suspect at the time – their views were so radically liberal and reformist that they led to Hunt's imprisonment[2] – inevitably bears implications for the ideological expectations placed on their literary exchanges. Indeed, as Jeffrey Cox observes, the Pisan circle "pursued a coterie mode of literary production that resisted at the concrete point of literary work the subordination of culture to private and privatizing enterprise [and] sought to forge a collective literary practice" (62). Such collective practice found its most significant expression in experimental editorial projects, particularly through journals, culminating in *The Liberal, Verse and Prose from the South*, a periodical published in four issues by John Hunt in London between 1822 and 1823. Examining the writing practices of the Pisan circle offers an opportunity to appreciate the degree to which its liberal authors negotiated with existing conventions, enabling the identification of conservative pressures that proved insurmountable and of traditional mechanisms, including those governing interpersonal relationships, so deeply ingrained in the writers' consciousness that they remained scarcely recognized or acknowledged.

By analysing primarily manuscript materials, my study aligns with the practices of most second-generation Romantics, who frequently

circulated writings intended for consumption even when not yet printed. As Michelle Levy notes, the extensive archival records from this period reveal that manuscript production and diffusion persisted well beyond the advent of print, reflecting a nineteenth-century cultural landscape that alternated between, or even embraced the coexistence of, handwritten culture and the print marketplace (2-3). Amidst the simultaneity of different writing technologies, Romantic authors often favoured manuscript circulation, sometimes due to the controversial nature of the content of their works, but more generally because this mode of dissemination was perceived to be decentralized, non-hierarchical, cooperative, and multi-directional. Whereas print culture was governed by market forces, scribal culture served as a "medium of social intercourse" (Levy 8).

The subversive potential of manuscript circulation must be weighed against the wider pervasiveness and acceptance of joint creativity prior to the 1890s, a period when, as Annachiara Cozzi demonstrates, the lack of clear distinctions between authors and readers, between editors and compilers began to be framed in terms of deviation, contamination, or "a sort of Frankenstein's monster made up of different pieces of diverse origins, the result being unnatural and inharmonious, if not utterly unsettling" (Cozzi).

Today, there persist a tendency within literary criticism and textual editing to regard alterations or revisions deriving from non-authorial sources as forms of impurity or corruption. Collaboration, in other words, is still often seen as unnatural hybridization; as Jack Stillinger observes with particular reference to editorial practice, "where others besides the nominal author have a share in the creation of a text, we usually ignore that share or else call it corruption and try to get rid of it" (vi). Lorraine York and Susanna Ashton provide numerous examples of this inclination, quoting recent studies where co-authorship is associated with the risk of "tainting" one's work (York 17). James S. Leonard and Christine E. Wharton argue (collaboratively) that discursive exchange is commonly believed to generate "untidiness" and injection of "discordant, therefore unwanted, elements" (27).

This infection-related imaginary, when understood in terms of its harmful potential, carries particularly negative connotations. Microbes and germs, as unwelcome and dangerous invaders, reinforce perceptions of a stark divide between 'inside' and 'outside', as Laura Otis explains (5); Heather Schell further adds that, by extension, such metaphors can exacerbate distinctions of nationality, gender, race, sexual orientation,

and social class (806). In its positive import, however, the metaphor of contamination is highly suitable for my purposes, as it highlights how narrative acts serve as fertile starting points for the transmission of ideas, which can spread contagiously. In addition, manuscript dissemination itself offers new insights into the dynamics of cooperation and collaboration within writing processes.

In this context, my contribution presents the preliminary findings of an investigation into the history of a little-known notebook written in MWS's hand, currently preserved in the Brewer-Leigh Hunt Collection at the University of Iowa with the shelf mark MS/S54g.[3] This document has received scant scholarly attention, with the only extensive examination conducted by Will Bowers (2018). The nature of this material is unconventional, for it evades traditional categorizations: the notebook's content and function does not fully conform either to the established models of manuscript transmission or to the standard functions prescribed by print culture. In this contribution, I focus on a particularly nonconformist extract within this eccentric document concerning the ancient Florentine legend of Ginevra degli Amieri (also referred to as "degli Armieri" or "degli Almieri")[4] and its propagation among Romantic literary circles.

2. Ginevra's story in the hands of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Notebook MS/S54g, in MWS's hand, dates to her residence in Pisa, a period when she immersed herself in Italian medieval history studying Dante, Petrarch, Machiavelli and consulting the works of Simonde de Sismondi and Giovanni Villani, among others (see Caputo 2022). This thorough engagement with Italy's past culminated in MWS's second novel, *Valperga* (1823), a project probably conceived as early as 1817 that accompanied her through profound personal tragedies, including the death of her husband in July 1822, while she was also suffering from growing disillusionment with England's reactionary political climate. Despite this, as also evidenced by her "Tale of the Passions", published in The Liberal in 1823, MWS maintained a steadfast focus on her research, drawn to events in Florentine history that resonated with her circle's social, political, and gender-related agenda.

The thirty leaves of notebook MS/S54g, measuring 102x150mm in octavo, are not preserved in their original order, as Bowers effectively

argues (513). Material evidence suggests that the notebook was originally larger, with some leaves now missing. Most of the notebook is written in portrait orientation (ff. 1r-9r, 11r-28v, 30r-v) and contains transcriptions of and translations from Homer's *Odyssey,* testifying to MWS's study of Greek. Only two leaves, now in separate gatherings (ff. 10r-v, 29r-v), are written in landscape orientation and include fragmentary transcriptions of two tales from ancient Florence: the story of Ginevra degli Amieri (f. 10r-v) and the account of a famous duel that took place in 1530 during the siege of the city, involving Giovanni Bandini and Lodovico Martelli (f. 29r-v). These texts are in Italian, a language that MWS had become familiar with from the time of her elopement, in 1814.

Neither of these two transcriptions is complete: the first, Ginevra's story, ends abruptly, mid-sentence, with the text reaching the bottom right-hand corner of the verso (f. 10v), suggesting that some leaves may now be missing. The second transcription also ends mid-sentence, but the remaining blank space on the page indicates that it was likely abandoned (f. 29v). It is plausible that the leaves containing the two transcriptions were originally closer together, as suggested by the fact that MWS references the source of both texts only once, on the recto of Ginevra's legend transcription (f. 10r). Here, she writes "Osservatore fiorentino Vol. 1", citing the first volume of the *L'osservatore fiorentino sugli edifizj della sua patria* ("The Florentine observer of its homeland's buildings"), an Italian periodical edited by Marco Lastri, where both stories are narrated just a few pages apart (119-123; 183-192).

L'osservatore provided historical and artistic insights into Florence's streets and monuments, alongside curiosities and anecdotes, often drawn from ancient and authoritative historical accounts of the city. For instance, Ginevra's story is reported in connection with a narrow street near the Duomo of Santa Maria del Fiore, now known as "Via del Campanile" ("Belltower Alley"), but formerly called "Via della Morta" ("Dead Woman's Alley") or "Via della Morte" ("Death Alley"). This periodical was first published between 1776 and 1778, with a second edition in volume form in 1797 and a third edition in 1821, coinciding with the Shelleys' time in Tuscany. According to MWS's journal, she began reading *L'osservatore* on April 10th, 1821, and finished consulting the first volume by April 14th (*Journals* 360-362). It can be assumed, then, the Florentine stories were transcribed around this period.

As is well known, MWS drew from *L'osservatore* for Valperga, but the specific transcriptions in MS/S54g do not appear to have been intended

for that novel. I concur with Bowers (517) in observing that when MWS made notes for *Valperga* her writing was often rough, blending Italian with English and summarizing material. In contrast, the accurate transcription of episodes in MS/S54g reflects a markedly different approach, suggesting another purpose or destination for this material. Incidentally, it is worth noting that *L'osservatore* had a significant influence on the Anglo-Italian community after serving as a source for MWS: it was among the books in George Byron's library, it offered a foundation for Augustus Hare's *Cities of Northern and Central Italy* (1876), and it supplied content for George Eliot's *Romola* (1862).

Due to space constraints, I will focus solely on Ginevra's story, which is helpful to outline here privileging the account that MWS transcribed over other versions of the legend. The events are believed to have occurred either in 1396 or 1400. Ginevra degli Amieri was in love with Antonio Rondinelli, but her father arranged her marriage to a nobleman named Francesco Agolanti, whom she eventually wedded. Ginevra lived unhappily with her husband for four years until, one day, she was found unresponsive and presumed dead. Only seemingly deceased, she awakened in her tomb, managed to escape the crypt, and returned to her marital home. Francesco rejected her, convinced that she was a ghost; thus, Ginevra sought refuge with her father, who, equally frightened by the eerie vision, refused her entry into his house. Finally, she turned to Antonio, her former suitor, who promptly took her in and helped her recover. In the end, Ginevra married Antonio, as the Church nullified her first marriage on the grounds that she had been declared legally dead.

This tale, which presumably started circulating well before the advent of print, first appeared in written form around the mid-sixteenth century. In addition to its presence in *L'osservatore*, it was published in poetic form by Agostino Velletti in *Nuova istoria di Ginevra degl'Armieri, cittadina di Fiorenza* (1572), mentioned by Francesco Rondinelli in *Relazione del contagio* (1634; 55), summarized by Leopoldo del Migliore in *Firenze città nobilissima illustrata* (1684; 16), adapted into a novella and quoted by Domenico Manni respectively in "La sepolta viva"(1744) and *Veglie piacevoli: ovvero notizie de' più bizzarri e giocondi uomini toscani, le quali possono servire di utile trattenimento* (1762; 46-60), and set to music around 1814 in Giuseppe Maria Foppa's *Ginevra degli Almieri, tragicommedia per musica*. According to my research, *L'osservatore* draws heavily on Manni's novella "La sepolta viva", borrowing extracts from its text with only slight modifications.

MWS was fascinated by a tale that had undergone multiple retellings and rewritings, or, in Del Migliore's words, "una divulgata leggenda, che và fuori per le mani di tutti", "a widely known legend, which passes through everyone's hands" (16).[5] Alessandro D'Ancona, one of the first scholars to comment on Ginevra's story, argues that it emerged from a period in Florence's history when personal events were witnessed not only by family and friends but by an entire community, and every significant episode in an individual's life was "una allegria o un dolore comune", "a shared joy or sorrow" (11). This communal sense, combined with the story's ancient origins and various revisitations, obviously resonated with the Romantic spirit. Furthermore, Ginevra's tale carries the weight of significant literary allusions: it predates the troubled love of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, evokes the Dantean echoes of Paolo and Francesca and bears connections to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The fourth tale of the tenth day, in fact, recounts how "Messer Gentil de' Carisendi, venuto da Modona, trae della sepoltura una donna amata da lui, seppellita per morta; la quale riconfortata partorisce un figliuol maschio […]", "Messer Gentil de' Carisendi from Modena removes from the tomb a woman he loved, who had been buried for dead; once revived, she gives birth to a male child" (Boccaccio 607). However, as D'Ancona sardonically observes, the Church's role in Ginevra's story surpasses even Boccaccio's provocative imagination, as it sanctifies a romantic union despite the existence of a prior marriage (10).

Indeed, D'Ancona emphasizes that the scepticism surrounding Ginevra's story was less focused on her miraculous recovery from apparent death than on the Church's extraordinary decision to annul her first marriage (13-14). This conclusion carries subversive implications for the institution and, more specifically, for women's role within it. Actually, the legend as a whole, in all its versions, is bluntly antimatrimonial as it figuratively equates "Church-sanctified wedlock with a living tomb" (Crook 2021 591). Probably, MWS found these themes in line with the ideals of free love often advocated by the Pisan circle; in addition, they were closely connected to the Shelleys' life experiences, including PBS's attempts in 1821 to extricate his friend Emilia Viviani from an arranged marriage. Nevertheless, MWS never reworked her notes on Ginevra's legend in her literary works, just as she never made use of the story of the Florentine duel. Instead, it seems very probable that she shared her findings not only with her husband but also with other members of her circle, especially

Leigh Hunt. In fact, MWS's transcription arguably provided a source of inspiration for PBS's unfinished narrative poem "Ginevra", posthumously published in 1824, as well as for Hunt's play *A Legend of Florence*, first performed at Covent Garden in 1840. Next, I would like to explore the web of interrelations connecting these works to *L'osservatore* and MWS's transcriptions.

3. Ginevra's story in the hands of Percy Bysshe Shelley

It is well known that the Shelleys began co-writing from the time of their elopement, keeping a shared journal where they sometimes even combined two different hands in the same sentence, a practice that for Betty Bennett is an indication of the intertwining of "a passion for each other and a passion for writing" (1996 xxi). In Pisa, their relationship was reported to be strained after the recent loss of two of their children, yet manuscripts now at the Bodleian Library reveal that between 1819 and 1822 they continued exchanging manuscripts; notebook 17 (MS. Shelley adds. e.17), for instance, contains both MWS's notes for *Valperga* and PBS's poetic drafts.[6] This exchange, often interpreted through a biographical lens, has been viewed as a means for the couple to seek personal reconciliation (Bennett 1992 163; Bozant Witcher 63).

The Shelleys' collaboration extended to the selection of subjects for their literary efforts. In August 1820, PBS composed "The Witch of Atlas", a poem prefaced by a sardonic apology for its metaphysical abstractions addressed "To Mary (on her objecting to the following poem, upon the score of its containing no human interest […])" (*Poetical Works* 3).[7] Examination of the manuscripts housed at the Bodleian Library (MS Shelley adds. e. 6, f. 93) reveal that the prefatory lines were written concurrently with the poem itself, not as a later addition;[8] this placement implies that MWS's reservations arose prior to composition, possibly during discussions of PBS's plans (see Adamson xl-xli). Reportedly, MWS often warned her husband against pursuing grand poetic effects through imaginative verse, rather than engaging with socially and politically relevant themes. For her, literature was an ethical act meant to facilitate the expression of liberal reform – and the story of Ginevra held this potential.

PBS's fragmentary poem "Ginevra" survived only in untitled rough manuscripts until 1824, when MWS edited *Posthumous Poems of Percy*

Bysshe Shelley.[9] In a footnote to this edition, she credited *L'osservatore* without mentioning her likely mediating role in bringing the story to PBS's attention, specifying: "This fragment is part of a poem which Mr. Shelley intended to write, founded on a story to be found in the first volume of a book entitled 'L'Osservatore Fiorentino'" (229). It remains unclear why MWS did not write something herself based on Ginevra's legend, instead opting to share the material while downplaying her contribution. This choice may align with her characteristic expressions of humility, as seen in her description of PBS's reaction to a portrait of Beatrice after they acquired the Italian manuscript of the Cenci's family story: "Shelley's imagination became strongly excited, and he urged the subject to me as one fitted for a tragedy. More than ever I felt my incompetence; but I entreated him to write it instead; and he began and proceeded swiftly […]" ("Note" 335; see also Crisafulli).

MWS could have similarly "entreated" PBS to write about Ginevra's legend, enacting the strategy that Nora Crook characterises as alternating meekness and boldness (2001 75), or strategically withdrawing from publicity whenever her literary projects and political commitment could provoke undue disapproval. After all, MWS was well aware of the pressure on women writers to normalise their positions, as her mother had been an expample of a reputation damaged by the revelation of an unconventional lifestyle. Bearing in mind these considerations, it cannot be excluded that MWS entrusted a story rich in anti-patriarchal implications to other (male) writers believing this could both shield her from exposure and amplify its impact. The result, however, might seem disappointing, as in this case the Shelleys' collaborative effort to unearth emancipatory subjects from old tales yielded a rather conventional result.

PBS's poem, being unfinished, contains no clear evidence that the author planned to follow the narrative of *L'osservatore*, particularly regarding Ginevra's return to life. Indeed, death is seemingly presented as the primary means of liberation from "the tyrannic will / Of parents" (lines 62-63) when Ginevra describes her arranged marriage to Antonio in terms of a funereal ceremony where "[…] my knell / Will mix its music with that merry bell" (lines 83-84; *The Complete Poetry* 137-138). However, the extant lines provide various subtle hints that death is not a permanent state,[10] particularly in the charcterisation of a ring as "The pledge of vows to be absolved by death" (line 80, *The Complete Poetry* 138). This expression echoes *L'osservatore*'s phrase "disciolto il primo matrimonio

dalla morte", "the first marriage was dissolved by death" (121) and alludes to the Church's final liberatory resolution – or absolution. In Bodleian MS adds e. 8 (f. 122) and e. 18 (f. 2), amid PBS's tangled annotations, an earlier version of the meeting with Antonio reveals Ginevra discussing "A few swift years – perhaps a few slow hours" before "the date of love", lines that perhaps were discarded as too overt in foreshadowing the ending.[11]

One of the most evident divergences between PBS's fragment and *L'osservatore* is the husband's name: Francesco Agolanti becomes "Gherardi", a surname shared with a well-known cast maker who even produced Keats's death mask in February 1821 (see Crook and Webb 315). While "Gherardi" was certainly in PBS's mind for that reason, he could also have chosen it as an homage to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, since Villa Gherardi, as MWS herself notes, was "the first place to which the ladies betook themselves" during the pestilence ("Italian Lives" 61). PBS also considered naming Ginevra's husband "Malespina" (Crook and Webb 315), which, in addition to meaning "evil thorn", is closely related to *Valperga*; Gherardino Malaspina was a Guelph bishop turned traitor who aided Castruccio in acquiring control of Lunigiana. In short, name-changing shows that PBS appropriated the legend by weaving in it a web of connections with the Pisan circle's and the Shelleys' cultural and personal itineraries in Italy.

Even more significant are PBS's changes in the timeline of the events as narrated in *L'osservatore*. According to the Italian periodical, Ginevra remained "in quella dispiacente unione [con Francesco] per anni quattro" ("in that unhappy union [with Francesco] for four years") before her apparent death (119); instead, in PBS's fragment, on the very evening of her wedding she is found "[…] without motion or pulse or breath, / With waxen cheeks, and limbs cold, stiff and white / And open eyes […]" (lines 163-165; *The Complete Poetry* 155). If PBS planned to adhere to the original ending of the legend, such a transformation would sensibly moderate its provocative potential because the marriage between Ginevra and Gherardi was not consummated and therefore not valid yet in the eyes of the Church.

Given the recurring patterns in MWS's other experiences with collaborative authorship, this modification could well have been supported or even instigated by her. For instance, while translating the Italian manuscript of the Cenci, MWS omitted its most disturbing details, deeming them "horrible, and unfit for publication" ("Relation" 297); similarly, she

made “prudent” alterations to Byron’s *Don Juan*, demonstrating an acute awareness of what “would lose the poem readers” (Leader 189). Clearly, as previously mentioned, within the writing couple she possessed the sharper sense of what was appropriate for a nineteenth-century audience and how to avoid potential backlash.

4. Ginevra’s story in the hands of Leigh Hunt

Besides exchanging notebooks with PBS, MWS was also in the habit of sending her materials to Hunt. In a letter addressed to him dated April 17, 1821, she enclosed a transcription of the Florentine duel between Bandini and Martelli as found in *L’osservatore*, in Italian and this time in its complete form (*Letters* 189-197). In the accompanying text, she noted that she found the story especially suitable for the *Indicator*, evidently unaware that this journal had ceased publication just a month earlier, on March 21. Like the legend of Ginevra, the tale of the duel has as a long tradition; *L’osservatore* drew the account from Benedetto Varchi’s *Storia Fiorentina* (written 1527-1538) and mentioned it as a demonstration of how personal strife can be transformed into political fervour (188). Noteworthy in this letter is the fact that MWS transcribed the story of the duel explicitly for dissemination, suggesting that both Florentine legends probably existed in other copies, or where transmitted by means beyond notebook MS/S54g. This also shows that MWS sent the materials to Hunt only a few days after her completing her consultation of *L’osservatore*’s first volume: she had already decided that she would not reuse them herself. This raises the question of whether she ever transcribed the story for her own purposes.

In his position as editor, Hunt had the ability to solicit articles and literary pieces from his coterie,[12] so, rather than offering the transcription to him personally, MWS was addressing a broader community of peers. This act underscores the value that MWS attached to her Florentine tales and the purpose she saw in them: rather than merely circulating specific texts, she was exporting ‘corrupting’ foreignness and contributing to the construction of Italy as a symbolic space of creative resistance and liberation, a place where struggles for social and political rights could be imaginatively vindicated. In this sense, sharing both the duel and Ginevra’s story, MWS was drawing attention to liberal impulses that have always existed and find their roots in ancient legends, but have been suppressed or normalized by

institutionalised discourse. Equality could be rediscovered and reclaimed through the varied, oral-based tradition of storytelling and its transgressive elements.

Hunt never acted on the proposal of taking inspiration from the Florentine duel, but in the same letter MWS announced to him that she had "another Itali[a]n story for you" that she could "relate […] as I heard it" (*Letters* 189). This story was possibly Ginevra's, which she planned to convey orally. Indeed, Hunt's *A Legend of Florence* openly revisits this legend from *L'osservatore*, acknowledging the Italian periodical in his prefatory "word respecting the story of my play" (vii).

The paratextual information accompanying *A Legend of Florence* is particularly rich and intriguing. Hunt not only specifies the title of the Florentine journal in a footnote, but also hints to the "melancholy" fact that "the beloved friend whom I lost in [Italy] had chosen the same subject for a poem, of which he has left a fragment" (viii). The vagueness of Hunt's words – who does not indicate having read the story of Ginevra himself – leaves open the possibility of MWS's mediation. Additionally, while crediting the two main sources available to him, Hunt implies that his play and PBS's fragment share a common source, though he did not draw on his friend's work directly.

Despite the emphasis on the derivational nature of the play, in its printed version Hunt appears somewhat reticent in acknowledging the full extent of his collaborations during its composition. His letters reveal that he often sought advice and suggestions from a wide circle of friends, including Robert Bell, Thomas and Jane Carlyle, George Craik, Charles Dickens, John Forster, Thornton Hunt, John Hunter, James Knowles, and Bryan Proctor – even organising readings of the play for their feedback (Robinson 46-47). He presented another reading at Covent Garden to gather the impressions of the stage professionals working alongside him, yet in his "Preface", he mentions only vaguely their "willingness to hear" and "freshness of imagination" (v, vii). Given that none of the documented assistance that Hunt received is explicitly recognised, it would not be surprising if MWS's mediation was similarly overlooked.

There are contrasting tensions in Hunt's conception and elaboration of *A Legend of Florence*. On the one hand, Jeffrey Cox observes, Hunt "clearly saw writing as a social activity or even what we would call an ideological activity" (7). With this work, he pursued his ideal of group authorship to such a radical extent that, as Charles Robinson notes,

he ultimately "sacrific[ed] his initial aesthetic judgments and artistic control to friends, actors, designers, stage and acting managers, and the commercialism of the theatre itself" (44). Yet, when presenting the play in its printed form, Hunt reinforced conventional authorship attributions, obscuring the complexities of his role in the creation of the work:

> When I resided near Florence, some years ago, I was in the habit of going through a street in that city, called the "Street of Death", (*Via della Morte*), – a name given it from the circumstance of a lady's having passed through it at night-time in her grave-clothes, who had been buried during a trance. (Hunt *Legend* vii)

Recalling his habit of walking through the street of Florence where Ginevra was said to have escaped her crypt, Hunt presents himself as a typical *connoisseur* and *raconteur* who emphasizes his active involvement in the narrative rather than passive reception of it. By integrating the story into his personal experience, Hunt seems to reassert his authorial voice, along with his presence and status.

The "Preface" to *A Legend of Florence* also rhetorically questions whether the author's "remembrance of the account given in a Florentine publication" is accurate (viii). Referring to a faulty memory can serve as a useful expedient to anticipate that the original source has been altered and transformed. Indeed, Hunt adds new characters, settings, and storylines to the Italian legend in his play. These additions offer multiple opportunities to emphasise the theme of sexual liberation, a topic that he had previously explored in the poem *The Story of Rimini* and in "The Florentine Lovers", another tale inspired by *L'ossevatore* and published in the first issue of *The Liberal*. For instance, in *A Legend of Florence*, the newly devised characters of Fulvio Da Riva and Cesare Colonna denounce the institution of marriage repeatedly discussing the "hundreds" of "ill assorted" and "lover-hated" unions in Florence (25). Later, when they confront Francesco Agolanti about his cruelty to his wife, they can reply with difficulty to his objection: "Why select me", he says, "as the scape-goat of a common / And self-resented misery?" (*Legend* 40). After listing unhappy unions in Florence enduring with abuse and reciprocal damage, he explains that marriage itself inevitably leads to "A hell, the worse for being carried about / With quiet looks" (*Legend* 40).

As he states in his "Preface", Hunt seems to have reworked the original Italian text and not PBS's poem: *A Legend of Florence* opens

when Ginevra has already been trapped in an unhappy marriage with the tyrannic Agolanti for four years, as narrated in *L'osservatore*. The most significant change of Hunt's revisitation lies in the ending, where the Church's involvement proves unnecessary, as the cruel Francesco is killed by Cesare, and Ginevra is free to remarry Antonio. Once again, the alteration significantly diminishes the subversive potential of the source, favouring its triumphal success in the theatre. However, in this case there is evidence that Hunt made this change reluctantly: in its earlier drafts, the play closed with the Church's unorthodox decision to annul the marriage, but feedback from Hunt's literary circle and the acting company pressured him to revise the ending. After the reading held in Covent Garden theatre in December 1839, Hunt wrote to Sarah Flowers: "you will find great alterations to the fifth [and final] act. They feared the *divorce*" (7 February 1840, original emphasis; *Letters* 360). Similarly, in a letter to Anna Cora Mowatt, he admitted: "They cut down the *Legend of Florence* a good deal at Covent Garden, & I disputed not a syllable […] though I would fain not have *altered* the fifth act from its final intention" (9 February 1841, original emphasis; qtd in Barnes).

Hunt remained committed to his collaborative philosophy rather than adherence to the Florentine tale, but this was not without some degree of negotiation to preserve the social and political message of his play: the manager of Covent Garden, Madame Vestris, requested "a more radical change: she wanted Hunt to reform Agolanti and to give him his wife back" (Robinson 49). For Hunt, Francesco Agolanti was beyond reform; as the manifestation of a system devoid of equality or freedom and in need of reformation, he represented oppressive institutions that trapped women in harmful relationships with little chance of escape. In this sense, Hunt insisted that with *A Legend of Florence* he had a "piece of legislation in my hands, the duty of which I could not give up" (Qtd in Robinson 54). This is the legislation of a counter-government, which, in order to exist within a hegemonic discourse, must accommodate both dissent and compromise.

5. *A conclusive note*

The complex dynamics of joint writing within the Pisan circle illustrate many of the challenges and indeterminacies explored in the theoretical debate on collaborative writing, exposing the porous and unstable boundaries of a

practice that defies exact definition. The literary collaborations between the Shelleys and Hunt prompt questions, for instance, about the distinction between co-authorship, advice, and assistance, issues that intersect with broader complexities regarding concepts of authorial inspiration and originality. Further specificities arise from the often-blurred lines between writing and re-writing, particularly when the latter overlaps the inevitable adaptations that occur when shifting from one genre to another.

As for the specific case at hand, the Shelleys' exchanges of notebooks and drafts have often been framed in terms of their affective relationship and interpreted as an "intersubjective connection" or sympathetic exchange (Bozant Witcher 37). While this emotional bond was probably the initial catalyst for their collaborative working relationship, by 1821, when their personal circumstances changed, perhaps the comradeship continued because its meaning had expanded beyond the couple's private sphere and translated into a form of activism, an ideological and political practice based on a notion of authorship conceived in terms of a collective and plural self.

The reconstruction of the multiple exchanges and transmissions surrounding the Florentine legend of Ginevra degli Amieri, although necessarily incomplete, undermines the prevailing perception of MWS as merely "a transparent medium through which passed the ideas of those around her" (Moers 82). Far from occupying a peripheral role within the Pisan circle, MWS was actively engaged in shaping its direction, critically interrogating the projects of its members and steering both their literary and political efforts, which, for her, were inseparably linked. MWS's awareness of the limitations inherent in the conventional image of the authorial self as a singular, autonomous figure is closely related to her recognition of the dynamics of gendered authorship, which brought about a tension between the self-effacement expected of women and the self-assertiveness typically associated with literary creation. In this way, MWS's rapport with authorship is marked by a complex ambivalence, where being a writer becomes a performative act that involves strategically oscillating between avoiding publicity and validating her role and status.

Equally ambiguous is Hunt's notion of the authorial self. While he genuinely pursued an ideal of collaborative and socialized creativity, once *A Legend of Florence* appeared on the printed page, he found himself responding to coeval cultural and societal pressures by presenting a more traditional, individualistic authorial identity. As previously noted, in his

“Preface” Hunt seems to claim control over the Florentine legend, as if the book-object activated a conservative impulse toward literary appropriation and an explicit effort to shape his public persona. In this light, there emerges a risk that group-shared writing and collaborative creativity might be seen, paradoxically, as tactics for exerting greater influence over audience reception, subtly reinforcing the dominance of the author.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Leigh Hunt embody a Romantic ethos that conceptualises literary creation as a non-rivalrous, noncompetitive process emerging from a communal, hive-like form of knowledge. Their reliance on old tales rooted in popular culture reinforces the idea that storytelling is not an isolated endeavour but a social good produced by and for the community. This revolutionary ideology, however, is prudently tempered by its grounding in a long-term vision of freedom that seeks to avoid outright provocation and instead promotes latent, gradual structural reform. The circle’s approach views creativity as a transformative tool, but one that works subtly negotiating with established cultural frameworks. Through this broader vision of societal change, the ‘grand Pisan conspiracy’ pushes boundaries while respecting continuity, in order to ensure that the members’ power to communicate remains intact and effective over time.

1 This contribution is based on a paper that I delivered at the *SHARP Conference 2024*, *Global Book Cultures: Materialities, Collaborations, Access*, held at the University of Reading, UK.

2 The article for which Hunt was imprisoned, "The Prince on St. Patrick's Day", attacked the Prince of Wales, recently declared Regent. It was published on 22 March 1812 in *The Examiner*.

3 I was able to consult the photographic reproductions of the notebook with the kind assistance of the librarians at the Special Collections and University Archives, University of Iowa. Special thanks to Meaghan Lemmenes and Lindsay Moen for their invaluable help.

4 I adopt "degli Amieri", the surname mentioned in *L'osservatore*, which, according to D'Ancona, is the correct one; he asserts that other variants are merely 'corruptions' that arose from 'popular' retellings of the story (13).

5 Translations from Italian into English not otherwise acknowledged are mine.

6 The digital reproduction of Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 17 can be consulted at "Bodleian Library Ms. Shelley Adds. E. 17." *Digital Bodleian*, digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/0f0cba27-6264-4c4e-8b03-3a83c700c1f5/. Accessed 19 Oct. 2024.

7 This prefatory apology was not included in the 1824 edition of "The Witch of Atlas" included in the *Posthumous Poems* edited by MWS.

8 The digital reproduction of Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 6 can be consulted at "Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 6." *Digital Bodleian*, digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/07ce40f9-6a9f-4ff6-9ffd-7b9528f71374/ Accessed 19 Oct. 2024.

9 The drafts of the poem now known as "Ginevra" are included in Bodleian MS Shelley adds. e. 6, e. 8, and e. 18. MWS's role as editor is not explicitly stated in the cover title of the 1824 book.

10 In this sense, see also the repetitions of "if it be dead…" in lines 162-169 (*The Complete Poetry* 155).

11 The digital reproduction of Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 8 and e. 18 can be consulted at "Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 8." *Digital Bodleian*, digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/b03d4d34-d3a1-428d-b267-a78f73e3fbfa/ and "Bodleian Library MS. Shelley adds. e. 18." *Digital Bodleian*, digital.bodleian.

ox.ac.uk/objects/5fcbaa1b-e54f-4536-a2ff-aeeab1f24c85/surfaces/9c75e766-a056-450b-a246-0aafec1b1c3c/. Accessed 19 Oct. 2024.

12 For further insights into Leigh Hunt's editiorial role, see Baiesi.

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