

# CARDIFF CORVEY: READING THE ROMANTIC TEXT

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MRS ROSS AND ELIZABETH B. LESTER  
New Attributions

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*Peter Garside*

THE FICTION of the early nineteenth century is well known as a minefield for author attribution. According to data compiled for a new *Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, in two volumes (1770–99 and 1800–29),<sup>1</sup> in the case of novels published 1800–29 less than 44% of new titles were directly acknowledged on their title-page by an author. Since then the authorship of approximately another 34% of these titles have become identifiable, at least roughly speaking so, either through the authors themselves later acknowledging earlier anonymous/pseudonymous work or (more frequently) through subsequent bibliographical research. One of the main tools available to modern researchers is the string of earlier works ‘by the author’ which are often found on title-pages. But this can be a double-edged weapon, capable of creating new confusion as it apparently solves old problems. Title-pages were generally set and printed last in the process of production, often without full authorial assent, and in the general disorder and rush to complete mistakes were naturally made. A notable instance is the Minerva Press’s title-page attribution of Amelia Beauclerc’s *Eva of Cambria; or, the Fugitive Daughter* (1811) to Emma de Lisle [the pseudonym of Emma Parker]: a mistake which might well have gone unnoticed had Emma Parker lacked the clout which allowed her to observe the mistake in the Preface of her *Fitz-Edward; or, the Cambrians* (1811):

It is necessary here to observe, that this Work would have appeared many months since; but, owing to a mistake, another manuscript, the production of *another* author, was sent to the press instead of *mine*, and, through inadvertency, printed under a similar supposition. *This* has already been explained as far as it was possible; and I have only here to add, that the following Work is *that* which *was* announced some months ago, as being about to be published under the title of “Eva of Cambria;” but as another person’s Novel has, through an error, been published under that name, it was necessary to give a new title to the present Work.

On other occasions, the desire to boost an author’s credentials apparently involved both authors and publishers in extending the list of cousin titles beyond the bounds of veracity. This kind of licence probably helps explain a complicated chain of some twenty novels, stretching between *The Aunt and the Niece* (1804) and *The Revealer of Secrets* (1817)—the latter ‘by the author of *Eversfield Abbey, Banks of the Wye, Aunt and Niece, Substance and Shadow &c. &c.*’—components of which have been variously and implausibly attributed to Mrs E. M. Foster, James Henry James, or Mrs E. G. Bayfield. A comparable kind of mayhem could stem from identical or similar-looking titles being used by different authors. Integrally connected with the previous mix-up is the confusion between *A Winter in Bath* [1807], ‘by the author of two popular novels’ and Mrs E. G. Bayfield’s *A Winter at Bath* (1807), opportunistically retitled from *Love as It May Be* by its publisher J. F. Hughes (and evidently the main reason why the Mrs Bayfield’s ‘chaste pen’ ever got associated with the chain of potboilers mentioned above). Modern cataloguers have also had to cope with three works of fiction titled *Decision* which came out within fifteen years of each other: *The Decision; a Novel* (3 vols., 1811), ‘by the author of Caroline Ormsby’; *Decision. A Tale* (3 vols., 1819), identifiable as by Anne Raikes Harding; and Barbara Hofland’s single-volumed *Decision. A Tale* (1824). Yet it is the presence of another *The Decision* (1821), a first work by the Evangelical writer Grace Kennedy (1782–1825) and written in the form of a play, which has proved the real fly in the ointment in this case. The title-page description of *Willoughby, or the Reformation* (1823) as ‘by the author of *The Decision, Caroline Ormsby* [etc.]’ has led to this novel and its two associated titles being attributed to Kennedy in some catalogues. At a time when new reputations are being forged from the mass of fiction in this period, there is a need for caution perhaps before singular authoresses are freshly discovered and claimed.

A tale of caution can found in the case of the pleasant-sounding and allegedly ubiquitous Mrs Ross. According to the entry in the excellent *Feminist Companion to Literature in English* (1990), this ‘obscure but remarkable author’ produced ‘at least 13 novels and groups of stories, 1811–25’.<sup>2</sup> A list of titles is not given, but the following works of fiction (all held by the Corvey Library, and available in CME) are almost certainly those in mind.

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1. Oxford University Press, forthcoming, general editors Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schöwerling.
  2. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, edd. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Batsford, 1990), pp. 922–3.

1. *The Cousins; or, a Woman's Promise and a Lover's Vow. A Novel.* 3 vols. 1811. [Anon]. CME 3-628-47346-2.
2. *The Marchioness!!! or, 'the Matured Enchantress',* by Lady ——. 3 vols. 1813. CME 3-628-48083-3.
3. *The Strangers of Lindenfeldt; or, Who is my Father? A Novel.* By Mrs Ross. 3 vols. 1813. CME 3-628-48555-X.
4. *The Modern Calypso; or, Widow's Captivation. A Novel.* By Mrs Ross. 4 vols. 1814. CME 3-628-48553-3.
5. *The Family Estate; or Lost and Won. A Novel.* By Mrs Ross. 3 vols. 1815. CME 3-628-48552-5.
6. *Paired—Not Matched; or, Matrimony in the Nineteenth Century. A Novel.* By Mrs Ross. 4 vols. 1815. CME 3-628-48554-1.
7. *The Balance of Comfort; or the Old Maid and Married Woman. A Novel.* By Mrs Ross. 3 vols. 1816. CME 3-628-48551-7.
8. *The Bachelor and the Married Man, or the Equilibrium of the 'Balance of Comfort'.* 3 vols. 1817. [Anon]. CME 3-628-47089-7.
9. *The Physiognomist. A Novel.* 3 vols. 1818. CME 3-628-48435-9.
10. *Hesitation; or, to Marry, or, not to Marry?* 3 vols. 1819. CME 3-628-47682-8.
11. *Tales of the Imagination.* 3 vols. 1820. CME 3-628-48863-X.
12. *The Woman of Genius.* 3 vols. 1821–2. CME 3-628-48975-X.
13. *Fire-Side Scenes.* 3 vols. 1825. CME 3-628-47551-1.

While each of these titles has been catalogued individually as by Mrs Ross at some point, it hard to find a single source that identifies all of them as by her. *The English Catalogue of Books 1801–1836* (ECB) lists Items 1–7 under Ross (Mrs); but Items 8–13 are given under title without author attribution.<sup>3</sup> Allibone lists just 1–4 and 6.<sup>4</sup> The British Library holds and attributes to 'Ross, Mrs, Novelist' 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7; but treats *The Bachelor and the Married Man* (8) and such of its successors as it holds as unidentified works. Summers in *A Gothic Bibliography* includes 1–4, 6 and 7 under his author entry, while somewhat opaquely cross-referring from 8 to 7 in the main listing of titles.<sup>5</sup> Andrew Block's *The English Novel 1740–1850* lists all of Items 1–7 under Mrs Ross, and also brings in *The Bachelor and the Married Man, or the Equilibrium of the 'Balance of Comfort'* (as such).<sup>6</sup> The most generous attributer of works to Mrs Ross by far is the *National Union Catalog* (NUC). This itemises (from contributing libraries such as Harvard and University of Illinois, Urbana) all of the titles in the above check-list, with the exception *The Modern Calypso* (4), which is apparently very rare (it is also absent from the *Nineteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue*).<sup>7</sup> NUC is likewise fertile as a source of American editions of the claimed Mrs Ross titles, listing early reprints in the case of Items 7–10. In fact, it is possible that it was in America that the first blurring of Items 7 and 8 took place: the 1819 New York edition of *Hesitation* (Item 10) evidently claimed on its title-page authorship 'By the author of *The Balance of Comfort, The Bachelor and Married Man, &c.*'<sup>8</sup>

The crucial point in Mrs Ross's alleged output is to be found at the juncture between Items 7 and 8, two titles which looked at casually give the impression of being companion works. In the forthcoming *Bibliographical Survey*, the entry corresponding to Item 7 will appear much as follows:

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3. *The English Catalogue of Books, Preliminary Volume, 1801–1836*, edd. Robert Alexander Peddie and Quintin Waddington (1914; New York: Kraus Reprint Corporation, 1963).
  4. S. Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature, and British and American Authors* (London and Philadelphia, 1859–71; 3 vols.), II, 1870.
  5. Montague Summers, *A Gothic Bibliography* ([1940]; London: Fortune Press, 1969), pp. 164, 220.
  6. Andrew Block, *The English Novel 1740–1850* (1939, rev. 1961; London: Dawsons, 1968), p. 201.
  7. *The Nineteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue*, Series I: 1801–15 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Averro Publications, 1984–6; 6 vols.); Series II: 1816–70 (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Averro Publications, 1986–95; 56 vols.); CD-ROM version, 1996.
  8. Entry in the *National Union Catalog* (Pre-1956 imprints), based on the copy in the Boston Public Library (not seen by present writer).

THE BALANCE OF COMFORT; OR THE OLD MAID AND MARRIED WOMAN. A NOVEL. IN THREE VOLUMES. BY MRS. ROSS, AUTHOR OF THE MARCHIONESS, THE COUSINS, FAMILY ESTATE, MODERN CALYPSO, PAIRED—NOT MATCHED, &C.

London: Printed at the Minerva Press for A. K. Newman and Co. Leadenhall-Street, 1817.

I 269p; II 279p; III 282p. 12mo. 15s (ECB, ER, QR).

ER 27: 536 (Dec 1816); QR 16: 283 (Oct 1816).

Corvey; CME 3-628-48551-7; ECB 503; NSTC 2R17990 (BI BL, O; NA MH).

ECB dates Nov 1816.

Further edns: 2nd edn. 1817 (NSTC); 3rd edn. 1817 (NSTC); 4th edn. 1818 (NSTC); New York 1817 (NSTC); French trans., 1818 [as *Le Pour et le contre, ou la vieille fille et la femme mariée* (BN)].

It will be noticed that the works listed as ‘by the author’ here link this title with Items 2, 1, 5, 4 and 6. The missing link in the chain, *The Strangers of Lindenfeldt* (3), on its own title-page, identifies itself as ‘by Mrs Ross, author of the *Cousins &c.*’; and *Strangers of Lindenfeldt* also features as a work by the author on the title-pages of 4 and 5. All these novels were published by A. K. Newman at the Minerva-Press, and there is nothing to suggest that Mrs Ross had ever been anything other than a Minerva author. Apparently alone among these titles in being followed by a subsequent British edition, *The Balance of Comfort* clearly represented the one striking success by the author, helped on perhaps to some degree by an eye-catching title. Generically however it bears a strong resemblance to its predecessors. All these novels are filled with racy fashionable-seeming incidents, address domestic issues in a tolerant wordly-wise way, and offer prudential but good-humoured concluding morals. *The Balance of Comfort* has a title-page epigraph from Cowper; while the chapter mottoes found here and in most earlier titles indicate a range of reading from Shakespeare to more (though not-so) modern writers such as Pope, Thomson and Young. The final sentence of *The Balance* is indicative of an author who recognises the value of a good sound-bite, and who has just about got the Minerva formula right: ‘If lovers of both sexes could be induced to add esteem, prudence, deliberation, and attention to character and temper, we might then, and not till then, hope to see a different inclination of the “Balance of Comfort”’ (III, 281–2). There is little hint of a religious bent, nor any sign of special knowledge of the Classics or of foreign languages.

The same cannot be said of *The Bachelor and the Married Man*, which in the forthcoming *Bibliographical Survey* will appear as follows (albeit with a new author identification and a long explanatory note attached):

THE BACHELOR AND THE MARRIED MAN, OR THE EQUILIBRIUM OF THE “BALANCE OF COMFORT.” IN THREE VOLUMES.

London: Printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster-Row, 1817.

I 254p; II 207p; III 216p. 12mo. 16s 6d (ECB); 16s 6d boards (QR).

ER 29: 512 (Feb 1818); QR 18: 256 (Oct 1817); WSW I: 14.

Corvey; CME 3-628-47089-7; ECB 34; NSTC 2B1385 (BI BL, C).

ECB dates Jan 1818.

As will be seen, the title-page description gives no idea of the author or indication of an authorial track-record. Allusion is plainly made, directly and indirectly, to Mrs Ross’s still high-profile title, but there is nothing to suggest actual kinship. In fact, the relationship between titles matches a fairly familiar practice of re-cycling through gender switching (as in Maturin’s *Wild Irish Boy* (1808), in the wake of Sydney Owenson’s *Wild Irish Girl* (1806)). It is noteworthy too that this title appeared not as a Minerva novel but under the imprint of the more up-market publishers Longmans (a distinction reflected in the different pricing), and that according to the listings in the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews* (ER, QR) about a year elapsed between the two publications (not untypically as a Minerva publication, *The Balance of Comfort* appears to have been post-dated on its title-page). There is little within *The Bachelor and the Married Man* to suggest that it was consciously written as a companion or counter-title to *The Balance of Comfort*, except perhaps for a concluding discussion which ends with the reader being advised to ‘remember what preserves the *equilibrium of the balance of comfort*—equanimity of temper, and rectitude of principle’ (III, 216). As this might suggest, the old Johnsonian chestnut as to whether ‘more happiness is to be found in connubial than in single life’ is subsumed by a kind of

moral severity quite unlike anything found in the earlier novels mentioned: 'If the dictates of conscience, and, consequently of religion, were regarded as they ought to be, what state could be unhappy' (III, 216). It is not implausible that Longmans suggested the title of this work to the author as a means of attracting sales after the main manuscript had been submitted to them (there are several comparable cases in the Longman Letter Books). Unlike most of the preceding Mrs Ross titles, there are no mottoes in this work. The author however seems confident with Latin phrases (*Suis cuique mos est* on page two!), and the text is flecked with French expressions (*tant mieux, entre nous* etc.).

FIG 1. THE BALANCE OF COMFORT

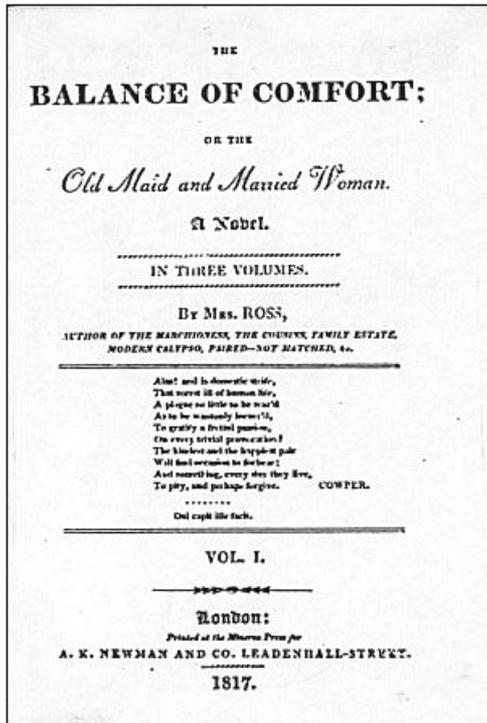
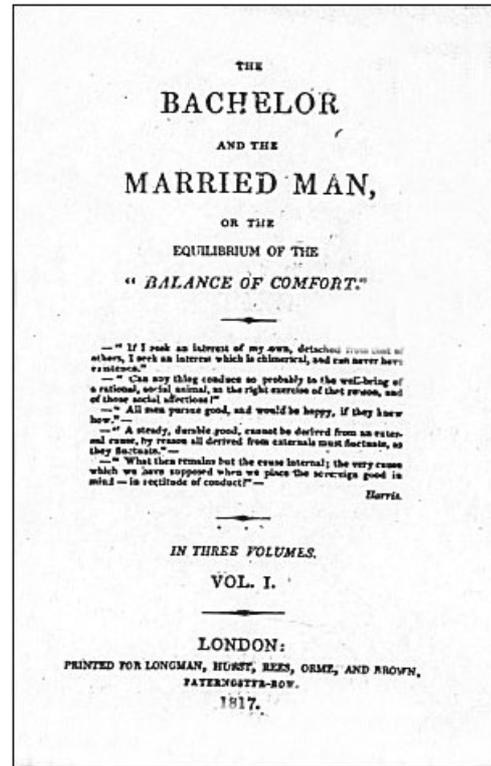


FIG 2. THE BACHELOR AND THE MARRIED MAN



*The Bachelor and the Married Man*, in turn, subsequently became the root title by which the remaining parts of the 'Ross' chain are identified by association. *Tales of the Imagination* (Item 11) has on its title-page 'by the author of *The Bachelor and the Married Man*, *The Physiognomist*, and *Hesitation*'; *Fire-Side Scenes* (13) has 'by the author of *The Bachelor and the Married Man*'. *The Woman of Genius* (12) mentions no other titles, but in a List of 'Popular Novels' by Longmans found at the end of the second volume of the Corvey copy of *Fire-Side Scenes* this work is advertised as 'By the Author of the "Bachelor and Married Man"'. Just as Items 1–7 were all published by Newman, 8–13 each appeared under Longmans' imprint. At no point is there any crossover between the two groupings in terms of claimed titles 'by the author'. Items 9–13 moreover share several attributes with *The Bachelor and the Married Man*: Latin quotations, a serious 'literary' tone with touches of melodrama (similar in some respects to Amelia Opie), and a (deepening) Evangelical tone. *Fire-Side Scenes*, essentially a collection of cameo stories and essays, includes some fairly lengthy 'Serious Reflections' (II, [109]–141) on Catholic Emancipation, warning against any relaxation of limitations: 'A Roman Catholic cannot be free: his confessor is his master' (II, 126); Catholics should be allowed 'the rights of citizenship—but no more!' (II, 130). A far cry from jolly Mrs Ross!

So are we to believe that, some time in 1817, Mrs Ross left the Minerva fold for Longmans, adopted an Evangelical air, and took to quoting Latin? Or are two separate authors involved? Owing to a recent discovery in the Longman Letter Books these questions can be answered with some confidence. On 1 April 1818, Longmans addressed the following to 'Miss E. B. Lester':

We have looked over the *Physiognomist* and will with pleasure put it to press on the same terms as were arranged for the *Bachelor & Married Man*—your early answer will oblige. (Longman Archives, Reading University, I, 100, no. 239)<sup>9</sup>

On 20 November the same year they wrote again to ‘Miss Lester’, apparently referring to yet another novel:

Agreeably to your request we now send you a copy of the opinion & suggestions of our literary friend and by adopting them we have no doubt you will add greatly to the interest of the Novel. We do not think the Title a happy one—if you could give us several we would point out the one we thought best. Our friend suggest[s] *Isadora* or *the Force of First Love*. The *Batchelor [sic] & Married Man* was an excellent title—as soon as we hit upon a good title the work should be announced. (Longman I, 100, no. 248)

*Isadora Argyle* is the heroine of *Hesitation; or, to Marry, or, not to Marry?*, and it is plainly this novel that is under discussion. (Longmans’ concern for the title, as suggested earlier, is fairly characteristic.) Interestingly Ledgers also in the Longman Archives provide a record of impression numbers and sales for each of Items 8–13. In the case of *The Bachelor and the Married Man* a first edition of 750 was issued in December 1817, followed by a second edition of 500 in June 1818—265 of which were left unsold June 1820. The overall picture points to a declining popularity: of 500 copies printed of *Fire-Side Scenes* in December 1824, 143 remained unsold in September 1825.<sup>10</sup>

Almost certainly the Miss E. B. Lester mentioned in the Longman Letter Books was Elizabeth B. Lester, the named author of *The Quakers; a Tale*, which will appear in the *Bibliographical Survey* much as below:

THE QUAKERS; A TALE. BY ELIZABETH B. LESTER.  
London: Printed for Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, Paternoster-Row, 1817.  
269p. 12mo. 6s (ECB, ER); 6s boards (QR).  
ER 29: 512 (Feb 1818); QR 18: 256 (Oct 1817); WSW I: 370.  
Corvey; CME 3-628-48038-8; ECB 339; NSTC 2L12419 (BI BL, C).  
Further edn: New York 1818 (NSTC).

This Opie-esque tale bears a number of clear similarities with items 8–13, not least in its use of Latin and French quotations, confident-seeming literary style, and broad Evangelical emphasis. The central character, Kezia, a young Quakeress, strays and becomes vulnerable through vanity but then returns to the religious fold and a happy marriage. It seems difficult to tell whether the author herself was a member of the Society of Friends, but her sympathies clearly lie in that direction as towards good Anglicans: the religious villains of the piece are the ‘nominal Christians’ living it up in the rectory. In the light of all the available evidence, it appears fairly indisputable that the last six titles sometimes connected with Mrs Ross were in fact authored by Elizabeth Lester.

Apart from the (sadly address-less) copies in the Longman Letter Books, I have been unable to find any other evidence about the identity of Elizabeth Lester. The letter of 20 November 1818 quoted above ends by stating that ‘The MS will be enclosed in a parcel to Mr. Coombe’, and there is a possibility that Coombe was a local bookseller, though no such a figure so far has been identified. As to Mrs Ross, she remains almost a fictional character herself. Links with Anne Ross (a Scottish poetess of the late eighteenth century), ‘Mrs Ross of New York’, and the actress Anna (Brown) Ross, later Brunton (see *Feminist Companion* under Mrs Ross), fail to tally with what we can infer generally about Mrs Ross the Minerva novelist. A later novel, *The Governess; or, Politics in Private Life* (1836), was published as ‘By the daughter of the author of “The Balance of Comfort”’—a title-page association which again tantalises, though the work itself offers no real clues.

9. Thanks are due to Reading University Library for allowing access to the Longman archives lodged there, and in particular to Michael Bott and Frances Miller for answering queries concerning material in the Letter Books.

10. Longman Archives, Divider Ledger D2, pp. 73, 92, 143, 112, 195; Impression Ledger 6, ff. 124v, 169.

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## REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

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His other involvements include participation in the advisory board of the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels (from 1985) and the Stirling/South Carolina Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg (from 1991), as well as editing for both projects. He has published widely in the field of Scottish fiction, publishing history, and Romantic literature, and recent publications relevant to fiction of the Romantic period include a chapter on 'Romantic Gothic', in *Literature of the Romantic Period*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Oxford, 1998), pp. 315–40.