

'Against the World'

Michael Field, Female Marriage and the Aura of Amateurism

This article considers the case of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece who lived and wrote together as 'Michael Field' in the fin-de-siècle Aesthetic movement. Bradley's bold statement that she and Cooper were 'closer married' than the Brownings forms the basis for a discussion of their partnership in terms of a 'female marriage', a union that is reflected, as I will argue, in the pages of their writings. However, Michael Field's exclusively collaborative output, though extensive, was no guarantee for success. On the contrary, their case illustrates the notion, valid for most products of co-authorship, that the jointly written work is always surrounded by an aura of amateurism. Since collaboration defied the ingrained notion of the author as the solitary producer of his or her work, critics and readers have time and again attempted to 'parse' the collaboration by dissecting the co-authored work into its constituent halves, a treatment that the Fields too failed to escape.

In André Gide's 1925 novel *Les faux-monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters*), Olivier, in discussion with his friend Armand, boldly claims that '[a]ucun chef d'oeuvre n'est le résultat d'une collaboration'¹. Olivier's conviction that a product of collaboration between authors can never result in a masterpiece reflects the widespread view of co-authorship as a marginal practice, often associated with amateurism. This wary attitude towards collaboration is an immediate by-product of what Jack Stillinger, in his influential 1991 volume on multiple authorship, has termed the 'myth of solitary genius'. This article will discuss one case of co-authorship that illustrates the struggle for recognition in a literary field where the hegemony of the singular Author was all but absolute. Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913), an aunt and niece (both Aestheticists), together formed the writing duo that would become known under the purposely chosen masculine pseudonym of 'Michael Field'. This article discusses the women's private and professional 'marriage', as well as the expression of it on the page. I investigate how 'the Fields' (as their friends dubbed them) interacted with the concept of fame and reputation in turn-of-the-century England. How did their

¹ Gide, *Les faux-monnayeurs*, 356.

collaborative relationship influence the reception of their work? And was that the only factor at play in guiding readers' and critics' responses?

Contrary to other fin-de-siècle authors that only occasionally engaged in a joint literary venture with another author (take for example H. Rider Haggard's collaboration with Andrew Lang on their novel *The World's Desire* (1889)), Bradley and Cooper's co-authored fiction was the primary focus of their productivity, and their only attempt at a claim to fame. Katherine Bradley did publish one collection of poetry (1875's *The New Minnesinger*) on her own, but once she and her niece had struck up their partnership, publication was always shared. Edith too, had written alone as a young adult. Her early poems were collected by Katherine in a posthumous edition, entitled *Dedicated* (1914). Remarkably, she chose to publish these poems equally under their shared pseudonym, presenting it as an 'Early Work of Michael Field'. Katherine thus posthumously inscribes herself as collaborator in a work that was originally Edith's alone. Strikingly, Katherine's first, solitary publication already shows her taste for the 'game of literary androgyny'². She issued the volume under the male pseudonym of 'Arran Leigh' (a clear echo of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, with its female poet protagonist). When Edith joined her in their communal literary effort, she assumed the role of pseudonymous wife: the first published fruit of their collaboration, *Bellerophôn*, was published in 1881 under the names 'Arran and Isla Leigh'. Finally, with the publication of *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund* in 1884, the women decided to merge their separate identities, and two became one in the persona of Michael Field.

Michael Field's 'Female Marriage'

The seeds of affection between the aunt and niece were sown early on, when Katherine lived with the Coopers to help her sister Lissie – an invalid after the birth of her second daughter Amy – with the household and the care for the children. When Edith grew up, she and Katherine attended University College Bristol together, and eventually – after many years of living with Edith's widower father, James Cooper – even shared a house of their own. Their relationship played out against the ambiguous backdrop of fin-de-siècle Victorian England. On the one hand, their love for each other could be interpreted as an example of Victorian 'romantic friendship', a concept which allowed for superfluous

² Donaghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 22.

affection between women without invoking any sexual implications³. Moreover, family ties at the time sanctioned profuse expressions of attachment in letters and diaries – some of which might nowadays be considered inappropriate. This explains, as Emma Donaghue states in *We Are Michael Field*, why ‘none of their family seem to have looked askance at Katherine and Edith’s growing passion, woven as it was into the family web of “darlings” and “dearests”’⁴. Yet, the two women were also entering the fin-de-siècle era, when new theories and legislation would work together to burst the bubble of innocence, and the concept of ‘romantic friendship’ would undergo severe scrutiny for its possibly sexual nature. Suspicion towards same-sex unions arose when ‘medical writers and social thinkers in the 1880s began to equate inversion with the infantile, the primitive, and the undoing of a civilization premised on monogamous, heterosexual marriage’⁵. Of paramount influence in heightening anxiety about homosexuality (and among homosexuals) was the so-called ‘Labouchere Amendment’⁶, under which Oscar Wilde was famously convicted to two years’ hard labour. Wilde, incidentally, was a dear acquaintance of the Fields, who shared his Aesthetic doctrine and grieved deeply at his death in 1900. The increasing wariness and homophobia in the final decades of the nineteenth century meant that in some milieus homosexuality became equivalent to primitivism – a return to a pre-cultural state where ‘anything goes’.

Still, same-sex couples abounded in late-Victorian times. The Fields themselves were very close friends with a couple of artists and fellow aesthetes, Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, whom they affectionately called ‘The Painters’, ‘The Brothers’ or even ‘The Apple and the Pear’⁷. Like Bradley and Cooper, these two men shared their home, lives and work, but made sure to hide the extent of their intimacy from the public. Unlike the more explicit Wilde or John Addington Symonds, they feared society’s

³ According to Carolyn Oulton, the common view saw romantic friendship as a phenomenon that took place mainly in youth (also between men, for example among school friends), but should ultimately give way to something with a broader social base (most often marriage, for example to the brother or sister of the object of friendship) (*Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature*, 10). In literature, examples of romantic friendship abound (e.g. in Jane Austen’s pairs of sisters and friends). See also Lilian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1981).

⁴ Donaghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 28.

⁵ Marcus, *Between Women*, 194.

⁶ Officially called Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, the Labouchere Amendment made it possible to prosecute upon charges of ‘gross indecency’ – most commonly used to put male homosexuals on trial when actual sodomy (which was punishable by death) could not be proven.

⁷ As Donaghue points out, ‘[t]hese silly nicknames had a serious point; the four of them [the Fields and the Painters] were devising a vocabulary to celebrate the non-marital but complementary roles they all played. Instead of husband and wife, they could be apple and pear’ (*We Are Michael Field*, 87).

increasing suspicion of homosexuality. Another prominent example was Frances Power Cobbe, who lived together with her lover, the sculptor Mary Lloyd, for decades. In her correspondence with friends Cobbe explicitly referred to Lloyd in marital terms, calling her both her 'husband' and her 'old woman' or 'wife'⁸. Remarkably, in this instance, a woman could take on either or both gender roles within the so-called 'female marriage'.

The Fields too, thought of their union in terms of heterosexual marriage, though they were careful not to refer to each other publicly as husband and/or wife. Allusions to their 'marriage' and the sexual nature of their relationship were mainly confined to the pages of their letters (in which they exchanged terms of endearment such as 'Sweet Wife' and 'my own husband'⁹) and their joint journal, *Works and Days* (published posthumously in 1933). Yet, their 'female marriage' differs significantly from traditional marriage, precisely because it was a voluntary, fictitious construction, rather than a legal institution. Their union was socially accepted by friends and family, and therefore enforced, but it did not put a binding constraint on the women. To quote Sharon Marcus, '[t]heir legal status as unmarried women allowed them to have a socially recognized spouse and to keep the economic autonomy that legally married wives relinquished under the doctrine of coverture'¹⁰. Katherine was aware of the constraint that traditional marriage sometimes put on women. She observed: 'The wife has to mould her whole nature to her husband's'¹¹. In a female marriage (ideally) this would not be the case. In contemporary discussions about marital reform, some progressive thinkers even believed that same-sex unions presented a model that traditional heterosexual marriage could benefit from, characterized as they were by 'dissolubility, relative egalitarianism, and greater freedom for both spouses'¹². The Fields, moreover, had the added advantage of Katherine's inheritance from her father. Charles Bradley had made his fortune in the tobacco industry, which ultimately allowed his daughter and her niece to live and write independently (even when their writings were anything but lucrative), providing them with Virginia Woolf's beloved 'room of their own'. In their private journal, Katherine compared her union with Edith to that of the Brownings. Robert Browning was a great friend and advocate of the Fields, and by the time of their acquaintance already an

⁸ Marcus, *Between Women*, 52.

⁹ Thain, 'Michael Field', 45.

¹⁰ Marcus, *Between Women*, 194.

¹¹ Qtd. in Donaghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 15.

¹² Marcus, *Between Women*, 206.

elderly poet of established fame¹³ (hence they nicknamed him ‘the old dear’, ‘the old poet’, as well as their ‘father poet’¹⁴). Katherine wrote: ‘Oh! love. I give thanks for my Persian [Edith]: those two poets [Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning], man and wife, wrote alone; each wrote, but did not bless or quicken one another at their work; *we are closer married*’¹⁵. This was quite an ambitious claim to make, since the Brownings were often seen as the quintessential example of marital passion. Katherine here implies that even though she and Edith do not hold the seemingly inseparable epithet ‘man and wife’, their bond is even stronger: they not only share their life, but also the pages of their work. In a letter to Browning, Edith quoted some lines that Katherine wrote for her, in which the latter addresses her as her ‘poet-bride’, stressing once more their union as both poets and lovers¹⁶. Katherine did have a tendency to glorify her authorial partnership. Even though it is by now well-known that the two poets wrote separately and then corrected and edited each other’s work afterwards¹⁷, overall she insisted on the indissolubility of their writing. In a letter to Havelock Ellis (author of *Sexual Inversion* and himself married to a lesbian¹⁸), Katherine described their labour: ‘The work is a perfect mosaic. We cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies; if one begins a character, *his* companion seizes and possesses it; if one conceives a scene or situation, the other corrects, completes, or murderously cuts away...Let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined’¹⁹. Again, Katherine’s description of the collaboration acquires the status of a marital bond, as she invokes the words spoken by a priest at a marriage ceremony. On a private level, her quote from the Marriage Service can also be interpreted as a defence of her and Edith’s female marriage, which they will not allow any ‘man’ to ‘put asunder’²⁰. And yet, as Wayne Koestenbaum points out, while

¹³ The women’s reverence for Browning and his poetic judgement was extensive, as Katherine testified in their diary: ‘we never wrote a song, without thinking how he would react to it’. Browning’s death in 1889 was a severe blow, as Edith wrote: ‘It will half-kill our poetry’ (Field, *Works and Days*, 33, 34).

¹⁴ Field, *Works and Days*, 10-11.

¹⁵ Field, *Works and Days*, 16.

¹⁶ Qtd. in Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’, 97.

¹⁷ As Bradley admitted in a letter to J.M. Gray: ‘I weed Edith’s garden she mine; then examining each other’s withering heaps we exclaim – “Well, you might have spared that” – or, “that weak twining thing had yet a grace” – but the presiding horticulturalist is ruthless, & it is borne away to the barrow’ (Field, *Binary Star*, 50).

¹⁸ In *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Ellis offered his definition of the lesbian ‘invert’. The Fields did not correspond to this type however, lacking as they did ‘unconscious masculine qualities which define the invert’, evident from their ‘feminine wiles and aesthetic feminine dress’. Moreover, the adoption of a male pseudonym, since it was deliberate and not innate, did not fit Ellis’s definition (Thain, ‘*Michael Field*’, 47).

¹⁹ Field, *Binary Star*, 50.

²⁰ Besides being unconventional spouses, the Fields also acted as untraditional mothers towards their surrogate child: their dog Whym Chow. Upon his death in 1906, they wrote an entire book of poems in his

celebrating their inseparable union, Bradley also describes the partnership as ‘a murderous contest for possession’²¹. Interestingly, her assertion shows a refusal to confess to the gender of the co-authors, consciously using a male possessive pronoun to qualify the ‘companion’. This playful attitude towards gender was also reflected in the nicknames that the two women used to address each other with. In language reminiscent of upper-class Etonians, they alternately called each other ‘my fellow’, ‘friend’, ‘comrade’ or ‘my boy’, and sometimes referred to each other as ‘he’. The use of their pseudonym was extended from the page to real life: their friends called them ‘the Michaels’ or ‘the Fields’ or ‘the Michael Fields’. Their alter ego was also split up to provide each partner with an individual nickname: Katherine was ‘Michael’ or ‘Mick’, while Edith was ‘Henry’ or ‘Field’. Only in their diary did they talk of each other in terms of ‘my love’, ‘lover’ or ‘Beloved’.

Of course, *Works and Days* was not the only place in which the women could give free rein to their passionate feelings. Their work, and the special licence with which a poet can write in verse what may be not be said aloud (‘the love that dare not speak its name’), provided ample space to pour out their inner selves. Hiding behind the mask of the male Michael addressing his female beloved, they could pose as a heterosexual poet writing in the age-old tradition of amatory poetry. In the guise of their male alter ego, the Fields did not have qualms about including erotic imagery in their poetry. Desire for women, both of the heart and the body, was a recurring theme in their work, as for example in the Fields’ most celebrated volume of poetry, *Underneath the Bough* (1893). The poem titled ‘A Girl’ aptly illustrates this:

A girl,
Her soul a deep-wave pearl
Dim, lucent of all love mysteries;
A face flowered for heart’s ease,
A brow’s grace soft as seas
Seen through faint forest-trees:
A mouth, the lips apart,
Like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze

honour, which was sentimentally titled *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*. The book unites the dog with that other surrogate offspring of theirs: their poetry. Edith felt that women had to ‘create’ in one way or another: ‘They must be mothers in body or brain ... The child or the Poem!’ (qtd. in Donaghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 58).

²¹ Koestenbaum, *Double Talk*, 53.

From her tempestuous heart.
 Such: and our souls so knit,
 I leave a page half-writ –
 The work begun
 Will be to heaven's conception done,
 If she come to it.²²

The poem describes how the speaker (presumed to be male by the reader of *Michael Field's* volume), unseen in his hiding spot, observes the object of his desire 'through faint forest trees', as though looking is forbidden. The sensuality of the lines is evident; the girl's lips are parted, and compared to 'aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze'. Of course, since Michael Field is but a pseudonym for Bradley and Cooper, one can argue that the voyeuristic gaze is actually female – the woman's eyes hidden behind a man's mask. Laura Mulvey's concept of the 'scopophilic gaze', which she described in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' as 'pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight'²³, is applicable here. However, whereas in Mulvey's view the scopophilic gaze indicated the commodification of the woman-object by a male subject ('active/male' versus 'passive/female'²⁴), the notion can be extended here to describe an instance of gazing in which both the observer and the observed are female. Moreover, the poem offers an interesting turn in its final five lines. Suddenly, the viewer and his (her) object are united, as the solitary 'girl' in the first verse makes way for 'our souls', which are 'knit', united, intertwined: the lovers are together now. In the final lines, the lovers turn out to be poets, in what can be interpreted as a direct reference to the Fields' co-authorship. The speaker 'leaves a page half-writ', waiting for the other to complete the work that she has begun. The poem, by insisting that the poem requires a second poet to finish it, thus defies the traditional premises of amatory poetry.

The eroticism of 'A Girl' is even stronger in the imagery of another *Underneath the Bough* poem, called 'Unbosoming':

The love that breeds
 In my heart for thee!
 As the iris is full, brimful of seeds,
 And all that it flowered for among the reeds

²² Field, *Underneath the Bough*, 68-69.

²³ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", 10.

²⁴ Ibid. 11.

Is packed in a thousand vermillion-beads
 That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip,
 Till they burst the sides of the silver scrip,
 And at last we see
 What the bloom, with its tremulous, bowery
 fold
 Of zephyr-petal at heart did hold:
 So my breast is rent
 With the burthen and strain of its great
 content;
 For the summer of fragrance and sighs is dead,
 The harvest-secret is burning red,
 And I would give thee, after my kind,
 The final issues of heart and mind.²⁵

Reminiscent of Rossetti's eroticizing of nature in *Goblin Market's* description of the 'luscious' fruit²⁶ (sweetly 'sucked' by Laura²⁷), the Fields employ the image of flowers to enrobe their message²⁸. The title already hints at the theme of the poem: the speaker has a secret to 'unbosom'. Michael Field here uses the iris as a powerful metaphor for the secret that is bursting to get out. In Victorian floriography (or the 'language of flowers')²⁹, the iris was said to stand for 'eloquence', which can be related to the poem's theme of 'unbosoming': voicing the secret about which the speaker has been silent before. The flower is 'brimful of seeds / That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip' until the iris – inevitably, so the reader feels – 'burst[s]' open to reveal its core. The language is almost orgasmic, with its references to the bursting and trembling of the flower (the latter echoes the 'trembling' aspen-leaflets in 'A Girl'). The second part of the poem relates the metaphor to the speaker. The secret is out: 'the love that breeds / In my heart

²⁵ Field, *Underneath the Bough*, 77-78.

²⁶ Rossetti, "Goblin Market" in the *Norton Anthology*, 1467, v. 61.

²⁷ Ibid. 1468, v. 134.

²⁸ Marcus points out how "Goblin Market" too, hints at lesbian tension, with Lizzie urging her sister: 'Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices/.../ Eat me, drink me, love me' (*Norton Anthology*, 1476, v. 468-471), yet '[t]he fact that the speaker of these lines is a woman addressing her sister did not faze Victorian readers', who even included the poem in an anthology for schoolgirls (Marcus, *Between Women*, 15). As in romantic friendships between women, excessive affection between sisters was rarely perceived as abnormal or extraordinary.

²⁹ Floriography provided Victorians with a means (e.g. for lovers) of indirectly communicating clandestine messages through the choice of a particular flower. Each flower carried a specific hidden meaning (some of which still endure to this day): red roses stood for passion, yellow roses for friendship etc.

for thee' is 'at last' free for all to see. However, the speaker feels ambiguous about this unbosoming: the secret was a 'burthen and strain' and, once out in the open, is 'burning red'. Why was the secret so hard to bear, and why should this 'love' burn red once it has been made public? Unless of course the love is blushing for its own existence – perhaps it 'dare not speak its name'. In this interpretation, Michael Field's poem again becomes an indirect testimony to the love of a woman, for a woman, and the reader can glimpse once more the double female behind the man's mask.

A different strategy to write about same-sex affection was to speak 'through' another woman, albeit in a safely distant past. In 1889, Michael Field published *Long Ago*, a book of poems inspired by Sappho, that moved a praising Browning to call them his 'two dear Greek women'³⁰. Though speaking through Sappho (who is praised in the book's Preface as 'the one woman who has dared to speak unfalteringly of the fearful mastery of love'³¹), Bradley and Cooper were not entering a ready-made female homoerotic discourse. Despite more and more women being educated in Latin and Greek, the classics were still very much a male territory. Moreover, at the end of the nineteenth century, Sappho was not yet read in a lesbian context, since she was known mainly through Ovid's 'Sappho to Phaon', which had 'construed [her] as the heterosexual abandoned woman, lamenting the loss of her man'³². Hence, the Fields were not making an obviously 'lesbian' statement by writing 'as' Sappho in their book of poetry³³. What is more, they still included poems in which Sappho asserts her love for Phaon, alongside others that describe same-sex attraction, populating the volume with what Thain calls 'a veritable orgy of loves'³⁴. The verses in *Long Ago* are at times transparently homoerotic, as in 'Poem XXVII':

But when Mnasidica doth raise
Her arm to feed the lamp I gaze
Glad at the lovely curve;
And when her pitcher at the spring

³⁰ Field, *Works and Days*, 20.

³¹ Field, *Long Ago*, 44-45.

³² Thain, 'Michael Field', 52.

³³ For further discussion of Michael Field's adoption of Sappho, see Yopie Prins's chapter on *Long Ago* in her book *Victorian Sappho* (1999). In her discussion, Prins argues how Bradley and Cooper used the Sapphic fragments 'in order to develop a model of lyric authorship in which voice is the effect of an eroticized textual mediation between the two of them rather than the representation of an unmediated solitary utterance' (Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 76).

³⁴ Thain, 'Michael Field', 53.

She fills, I watch her tresses swerve
 And drip, then pause to see her wring
 Her hair, and back the bright drops fling.³⁵

As in 'A Girl', this excerpt again shows the speaker (Sappho) in the role of voyeur. She 'gaze[s] glad[ly]' at Mnasicida's body, at her 'curve[s]' and 'drip[ping] tresses'. This time however, she is a woman (yet, positioned as she is '[a] great while since, a long, long time ago'³⁶, far removed from the actual women holding the pen). The gaze is female and pointedly scopophilic: the viewer experiences obvious erotic pleasure from her observation of Mnasicida. Again, nature, eroticized, plays a part in this scene, as it is the spring (and its dripping water) that takes a central role in bringing about Mnasicida's arousing actions.

The Aura of Amateurism

When Michael Field entered the literary scene in 1884 (with the publication of the double verse dramas *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*), reactions were initially favourable. Their work was received well by the critics: *The Spectator* announced 'the ring of a new voice which is likely to be heard far among the English-speaking peoples'³⁷. Several of the great minds of the age wrote to praise the women, including of course Browning (marking the beginning of their enduring friendship), but also George Meredith and Oscar Wilde. The women took pride in the attention they received, saving all the clippings and including the critics' praise in the paratext of their next collection of plays. However, the couple's initial literary success did not last. Attention for their work dwindled, and Michael Field was increasingly neglected. The premiere of *A Question of Memory* in 1893, the only one of their plays ever to be staged, was a decided flop. Against the women's own expectations, their poetry was received more favourably than their drama. Still, their poetry collections had limited, often expensive print runs, and were thus read primarily by their own circle of intimates and fellow Aesthetes³⁸. Shortly

³⁵ Field, *Long Ago*, 44-45.

³⁶ Epigraph to *Long Ago*.

³⁷ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 27.

³⁸ For example, only a hundred copies were printed of *Long Ago*, although the edition was high quality, sporting a vellum cover embellished with an ancient image of Sappho and embossed with gold lettering. *Underneath the Bough* too, is 'limited to 150 copies', as the volume explicitly states in its cover pages. Yet, again the material aspect of the book is remarkable: the title, as well as the Fields' symbol, which merges Christian and pagan icons, are stamped in gold lettering on the cover. The icon consists of two intertwined rings (reminiscent once more of their female marriage) which are crossed with a thyrsus, a staff that was

after their deaths in 1913 and 1914, *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, in its 1916 instalment on the nineteenth century, placed Michael Field under the section titled 'Lesser Poets of the Middle and Later Nineteenth Century', reflecting the poets' feeble reputation at the time. Moreover, the volume, which devoted no more than three sentences to Michael Field, explicitly stated that the early acclaim that Bradley and Cooper received from the critics was a case of 'o]ver-estimation', justified by the fact that '[o]thers have failed to discover much in the joint work which goes beyond the standard'. Ultimately, the women's collaboration is dismissed as little more than a 'curious fancy'³⁹.

Bradley and Cooper themselves held an ambiguous stance towards fame. On the one hand, the co-authors did not appear to be bent on literary success. Their adherence to aesthetic doctrine, famously coined in Walter Pater's phrase, 'art for art's sake', may account for the fact that the Fields continued to publish their texts, despite critical neglect. With the exception of *A Question of Memory*, all their plays were closet plays. Thus, they were not written to be performed on stage, but rather to exist as works of art per se, without a direct commercial function. Their work was circulated and admired among a coterie of friends and family, who responded to it in letters that showed their appreciation, while enjoying the game of playing around with their pseudonym⁴⁰. Moreover, the Fields' apparent indifference to literary fame transpires in their poem 'It was deep April, and the morn':

It was deep April, and the morn
 Shakspeare was born;
 The world was on us, pressing sore;
 My love and I took hands and swore,
 Against the world, to be
 Poets and lovers evermore,
 To laugh and dream on Lethe's shore,
 To sing to Charon in his boat,

traditionally carried by Bacchic maenads and which symbolized fertility and hedonism, pointing to the fruit of the Fields' Aesthetic labour. The symbol was used again later, for the cover of the posthumous edition of *Works and Days* in 1933). Moreover, the volume is lined on the inside with rich green silk, and the poems are printed on thick paper of a heavy quality.

³⁹ *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, 181.

⁴⁰ For instance, Katherine's cousin, Francis Brooks, addressed them as the 'Dear Sacred Ones' and signed himself 'Michaelian', 'as if Katherine and Edith were the twin deities of a cult he had joined' (Donaghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 45).

Heartening the timid souls afloat;
 Of judgement never to take heed,
 But to those fast-locked souls to speed,
 Who never from Apollo fled,
 Who spent no hour among the dead;
 Continually
 With them to dwell,
 Indifferent to heaven and hell.⁴¹

The speaker and her beloved here 'swear' (a term that again recalls the solemnity of a wedding vow) to be 'poets and lovers' '[a]gainst the world' (which is 'pressing sore'), claiming that what matters is their union in life as well as in poetry, not society's opinion of them. The thought returns further on in the poem, when the poets vow '[o]f judgement never to take heed', which may conveniently be interpreted as a reference to the Fields being slighted by the critics. 'It was deep April, and the morn' was included in *Underneath the Bough*, published in 1893, by which time the neglect by the literary market had certainly become obvious to the poets. With their invocation of Shakespeare (born in 'deep' (23rd) April of the year 1564), the women inscribe themselves in the tradition of the amatory sonnet. Shakespeare is thus appealed to as a kind of witness to the legitimacy of both their poetry and their love. A striking difference to classic love poetry is the assertion that '[m]y love and I' are both 'poets *and* lovers', a claim which upends the roles (traditionally assigned in the amatory sonnet) of speaker-lover and addressee-beloved, or as Angela Leighton observes: 'this is a love poem not split into a subject within and an object observed without'⁴². Since both women are the poet-lovers, both are also the object of affection, standing on an equal footing (which reinforces the idea of female marriage as being more evenly balanced than its heterosexual counterpart). Several factors also point to the poets' belief in immortality through poetry, a notion which again serves as a way to minimize critical neglect. The invocation of Shakespeare of course strengthens this view, alluding to his Sonnet 18 ('So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this and this gives life to thee'). Moreover, the word 'evermore' certainly defies the temporality of literary success during the poets' lifetime. The poet-lovers also swear to 'laugh and dream on Lethe's

⁴¹ Field, *Underneath the Bough*, 79.

⁴² Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 209.

shore, / To sing to Charon in his boat', denying any fear of death by mocking the underworld and its iconic boatsman. This is reiterated in the final verse, where Michael Field claims to be '[i]ndifferent to heaven and hell', showing that Christian notions of death inspire as little fear as those of classical mythology.

Nevertheless, there are other indications that Bradley and Cooper's lack of acclaim did preoccupy them. When the critics' neglect became obvious, Katherine wrote to Havelock Ellis, somewhat in despair: 'Want of due recognition is beginning its embittering, disintegrating work, and we will have in the end a cynic such as only a disillusioned Bacchante can become'⁴³. Leo Braudy explains the need for appreciation felt by many authors: '[T]he urge for fame mingles one's acceptance of oneself with the desire for others ... to recognize that one is special. It is the most immediate effort individuals make to reach beyond themselves, their families, and their place in a traditional order to claim a more general approval of their behavior and nature'⁴⁴. However, it became apparent that Michael Field, initially hailed by the critics as a new literary talent, would find a wholly different response once it became known that 'he' was not a male, single author, but a double, female one. The Fields' authorship, it turned out, was doomed by a double aura of amateurism: both their gender and their co-authorship threatened their chance of a serious reception.

Central to the co-authors' perception of their own identity is, of course, their sobriquet. The fact that the two women chose to be known to the world only under the name of 'Michael Field' is equally telling of their awareness of the mechanics of the literary market, and of their concern about their reputation. The adoption of a masculine mask of course echoes that of nineteenth-century predecessors such as George Eliot, George Sand and the Brontë sisters. Virginia Woolf, in her seminal essay *A Room of One's Own*, interpreted this habit of concealment as the consequence of ingrained patriarchal values:

It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the

⁴³ Qtd. in Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 30.

⁴⁴ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 585.

chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much-talked-of man) that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood.⁴⁵

However, the case of the Fields is even more complicated, since the male pseudonym in this instance concealed not only their gender, but also their co-authorship. As Bette London points out, this doubly veiled status enhanced the risk of the women and their work being pushed to the margins: [I]n the case of women, literary collaborators suffered from a double invisibility – the invisibility of collaboration and the invisibility of women’s writing. Even where such collaborations were openly recognized, they tended to be represented in ways guaranteed to ensure their marginalization⁴⁶.

The Fields’ secret soon got out, when a well-meaning Browning accidentally betrayed the female identity of ‘Michael Field’, believing the women only wanted to keep hidden the fact that the work was a result of collaboration. When *The Athenaeum*, in an 1884 review, referred to the playwright as ‘she’, the women knew that only Browning, in whom they had confided, could have let slip the secret. An agitated Katherine wrote a reproachful letter, stating that they needed the male disguise to be allowed to write freely: ‘the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn ... we have many things to say the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips’⁴⁷. The women, as she further explained, feared to be ‘stifled’ by the ‘drawing-room conventionalities’ that were usually reserved for female writers. Indeed, as Virginia Blain notes, ‘[t]ragedy, as a dramatic genre, was strongly coded “Male” in the nineteenth century’⁴⁸. The Fields’ brand of tragic drama was daringly passionate in tone and theme, and would be deemed intolerable by many if they knew it had flown from a woman’s pen. Moreover, as Bradley explained to Browning, he was ‘robbing [them] of real criticism, such as a man gives a man’⁴⁹. Like the other female authors writing under a male pseudonym that preceded them, Bradley and Cooper hoped that adopting a man’s name would guarantee them a man’s reception. The Fields’ frustration may have been motivated less by a longing for fame, than by a desire to be taken seriously despite their unconventional brand of authorship, or as Holly A. Laird puts it: a ‘struggle for authority amid a nagging sense of marginality’⁵⁰. The women had put on a man’s mask to have a

⁴⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 65.

⁴⁶ London, *Writing Double*, 9.

⁴⁷ Field, *Works and Days*, 6.

⁴⁸ Blain, “Michael Field, the Two-Headed Nightingale”, 246.

⁴⁹ Field, *Works and Days*, 7.

⁵⁰ Laird, *Women Coauthors*, 82.

fighting chance of making a place for themselves in serious literature. However, the truth about their authorship soon spread, and eventually became a kind of open secret among literati, despite the women's stubborn reluctance to admit to it. That they were right to fear exposure, became painfully clear at the premiere of their only play ever to be performed on stage. When *A Question of Memory* opened on 11 November 1893, according to the reviewer of *Winters Weekly Magazine*, 'the mixture of hisses and applause died away to pure applause when "two graceful young ladies" stood up, revealing themselves as Michael Field'⁵¹. The anecdote is a typical example of the hypocritical condescension towards female writers that the Fields had so hoped to avoid.

Their gender, of course, was not the only factor that complicated the reception of the Michael Fields. Perhaps an even harder factor for their readers and reviewers to come to grips with, was their double authorship. Mary Sturgeon, writing in 1922, claimed that their collaboration was 'obscurely repellent' to the late-Victorian reader⁵². In an age in which the image of the author as a singular genius (the sole creator of a literary work) reigned strongly, authors who deviated from the norm were rapidly pushed to the margins and awarded the label of amateurism. As Leighton puts it, the practice of double writing threatened 'some notional sanctity of authorship', persistently present in late-nineteenth-century culture⁵³. Walter Besant, though himself a collaborator⁵⁴, largely corroborated this view in his 1892 essay 'On Literary Collaboration', published in *The New Review*. He pointed to the audience's discomfort with any form of writing that did not at least resemble single authorship, concluding: 'We must hear – or think we hear – one voice'⁵⁵. *The Athenaeum*, though it printed a lengthy and appreciative review of *Underneath the Bough*, also mused on the 'strange poetic unison of two', labelling Michael Field's origins as 'peculiar'⁵⁶. According to Lorraine York, the Fields' case was problematic because of their 'occupation by two authorial presences of a conventionally unitary authorial space'⁵⁷. Consequently, critics, but also literary friends writing to the couple, tried to force their dual authorship back

⁵¹ York, "Crowding the Garret", 295.

⁵² Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 29.

⁵³ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 203.

⁵⁴ Besant struck up a writing partnership with James Rice, which resulted in over a dozen co-written novels. The collaboration ended with Rice's early death in 1882.

⁵⁵ Besant, "On Literary Collaboration", 205.

⁵⁶ *Athenaeum*, 9 September 1893, 346.

⁵⁷ York, "Crowding the Garret", 288.

into 'a single-author model', a process that York calls 'parsing the collaboration'⁵⁸. Browning was one of the first to inquire after Michael Field's true authorship. Edith, perhaps impressed by his reputation, wrote him an honest answer in which she explained how she and her aunt worked together 'after the fashion of Beaumont and Fletcher'⁵⁹. In this earliest stage of their acquaintance, Browning wondered 'how much of the book ... [was] indeed [her] own part'⁶⁰. Others who discovered the truth of their co-authorship sent the Fields similar prying inquiries, bent on learning the exact share of each partner in the production of their work. George Moore wanted to know 'who [did] the love scenes'⁶¹, while George Meredith, even more specifically, was curious as to 'which of [them] "*d[id] the Males?*"'⁶². Bradley's letter to Havelock Ellis, cited above, was the co-author's exasperated answer to the umpteenth inquiry after the women's separate roles in the partnership: they would not be 'put asunder'.

Possibly, the women's refusal to allow their collaboration to be dissected into its constituent halves, was partly responsible for the increasing neglect by the critics. The aura of amateurism, in their case, was hard to shake off. As Laird remarks, by clinging obstinately to a brand of authorship that posed a 'threat ... to literary and social norms'⁶³, Bradley and Cooper 'risked becoming merely a mild joke in the literary world'⁶⁴. An optimistic Browning was convinced that the timing of the 'binary star' was simply wrong⁶⁵, telling his friends to 'wait fifty years' for fame to come⁶⁶. The sentiment was later repeated by Katherine, who confidently claimed in 1900: 'Michael will be discovered in the 20th Century'⁶⁷. Yet, despite efforts by their friends (Charles Ricketts even erected a monument for the Michaels), the poets soon sank into obscurity after their deaths in 1913 and 1914. It quickly appeared as though 'a tacit, mutual agreement had been made by the literary world to bury them'⁶⁸. The modernists, in their effort to 'make [everything] new', were not interested in their aesthetic sentiments and classic references, and to subsequent generations they were long forgotten. Ironically, when the

⁵⁸ Ibid. 292.

⁵⁹ Field, *Works and Days*, 3.

⁶⁰ Field, *Works and Days*, 2.

⁶¹ Field, *Works and Days*, 201.

⁶² Ibid. 82.

⁶³ Laird, *Women Coauthors*, 83.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 89.

⁶⁵ Field, *Binary Star*, 4.

⁶⁶ Field, *Works and Days*, 20.

⁶⁷ Field, *Binary Star*, 38.

⁶⁸ Laird, *Women Coauthors*, 83.

Fields were 'rediscovered' by feminist scholars in the 1970s, it was exactly their quirky, marginal position that raised critical curiosity among their novel audience. Still, like the poets' contemporary reviewers, many of these new readers were bent on dissecting the collaboration. Clinging to the ingrained notion of solitary authorship, until recently, puzzled academics still tried to find out who wrote what. And yet, as Foucault pointed out, in words that echo Samuel Beckett but could just as well have been uttered by the Fields themselves: '[w]hat difference does it make who is speaking?'⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ Foucault, "What is an Author?", 120.

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