



MICHAEL FIELD **(Katharine Bradley, 1846-1914; and Edith Cooper, 1862-1913)**



Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), *Carte de Visite*. Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press.

Michael Field is the shared pen name of two women: Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913). Bradley and Cooper were aunt and niece but also life-long companions and lovers. They celebrated their poetic/sexual union in several of their poems and plays, and they even boasted of being “*closer married*” than the more famous Victorian couple – Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning – because, unlike the Brownings, they wrote under one name (*Works and Days*, 16). In fact, the two women wrote their poems separately; their individual voices mingled, however, in the process of revision and eventually became one in the printed text, where they would always use a joint signature.

Bradley and Cooper came from a well-off Birmingham family. After reading classics at University College in Bristol, they lived together, first in Reigate, Surrey and finally in Richmond, on the outskirts of London. Bradley was the older but also the more glamorous, expansive, and, according to several critics, more poetically gifted of the two. Cooper, more retiring and fragile, tended to follow in her aunt’s lead. In the late 1880s and the 1890s, the two women adopted an increasingly eccentric and highly performative lifestyle. This included a love of fashion and design,

an interest in neo-paganism, and a peculiar veneration for their dog, Whym Chow, whom they believed to be endowed with Bacchic powers and to whom they dedicated several poems.

Michael Field's literary works bear the unmistakable imprint of Aestheticism. This is visible in their preoccupation with arts and aesthetics, their fascination with the Greek and Elizabethan pasts, their readiness to challenge traditional notions of gender and sexual propriety, and their cultivation of deliberate esotericism. Much of what they wrote did not achieve wide circulation (most of their volumes were issued in very small runs) but Bradley and Cooper became quite well-known within the Aesthetic and Decadent milieus where their admirers included Walter Pater and W.B. Yeats.

Michael Field made their debut in 1884, with a double volume of verse drama entitled *Callirrhoe / Fair Rosamund*. This early work, which attracted the attention of high-profile literati including Robert Browning, already highlights the poets' interests in classical antiquity and historical drama, which dominate much of their published output. Many of their lyrics display their knowledge of classical literature, mythology, and art – notably the collection *Long Ago* (1889), which is based on Sappho's poetic fragments. The slightly later *Sight and Song* (1892) consists of a series of ekphrastic poems that build on the inter-artistic experiments pioneered in the previous decades by the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetic movement. Other noteworthy collections of verse include *Underneath the Bough* (1893) and *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908). Their vast dramatic output, which consists entirely of verse plays that are not meant or at least not suited for performance, has tended to attract less critical attention, both during Bradley and Cooper's life and in the recent revival of scholarly interest in their work.

Bradley and Cooper also left a vast joint diary, which they entitled *Works and Days*. Parts of it were published in the 1930s by their executor Thomas Sturge Moore. *Works and Days* is a remarkable record of the literary culture of the *fin de siècle*, full of amusing anecdotes and humorous nonsense fuelled by an entertaining private mythology. The authors clearly had a talent for dramatizing their daily lives and for finding nicknames for everyone, including themselves: Bradley was Michael, the Simiorg, or All-Wise-Fowl, while Cooper was Field, Henry, or the Persian Puss.

During the 1890s, Bradley and Cooper moved in the fashionable artistic and literary circles of the time. John Lane and Elkin Mathews published *Sight and Song*, as well as the dramas *Stephania: A Trialogue* (1892) and *A Question of Memory* (1893). After the split with Lane, they followed Mathews, who published their drama *Attila, My Attila!* (1896). They looked on Decadence with suspicion and did not like *The Yellow Book*, writing in their diary, with characteristic emphasis, that its cover emanated “the glare of hell” (Thornton, 16).

Other connections in their extensive network included Richard Le Gallienne, John Gray, John Miller Gray, Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, William Rothenstein, Arthur Symons, and Oscar Wilde. Despite the two women’s constant devotion to each other, Cooper was prone to heterosexual infatuations, and for a period she developed a crush on their friend Bernhard Berenson. Bradley and Cooper enjoyed a particularly close friendship with the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, who lived in a same-sex partnership near to them in Richmond. Ricketts contributed the designs for some of their most exquisitely crafted volumes and his Vale Press published several of their dramas.

In the early twentieth century Bradley and Cooper became increasingly withdrawn and their works attracted less and less attention. In 1907, after the death of Whym Chow, they converted to Catholicism, following the spiritual trajectory of other 1890s poets such as Marc-André Raffalovich and John Gray. The latter became one of their spiritual advisers. Most of their late poetry is devotional, although it retains prominent elements of the earlier pagan phase. They were as close in death as they had been in life. Cooper died of cancer in 1913, and Bradley survived her by less than one year.

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Selected Publications by Michael Field

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Wild Honey from Various Thyme. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1908.

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