

Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo, eds. *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*. Ohio UP, 2019. Pp. 300. \$80. ISBN: 9780821424018.



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*Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (2019) constitutes an indispensable book for those interested in approaching the figure of Michael Field, the identity Katharine Bradley and her niece and life partner Edith Cooper constructed as social dissidents in late Victorian England. They were scholars, poets and dramatists who composed separate works but who, significantly, wrote in close collaboration. They remained life-long partners until Cooper's death in 1913, and very soon afterwards, Bradley died, in 1914. As the editors state in their extremely informative and insightful introduction, the reception of Michael Field's works was mixed and ambivalent during their lifetime. And then, for most of the twentieth century, their writing production remained in obscurity. Only in the 1970s did Michael Field begin to draw the attention of scholars, and the 1990s saw the emergence of new critical perspectives and methodologies to study Michael Field and their production. Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo's volume adds to the number of significant publications on Michael Field in the twenty-first century, but in a very distinctive way. If "[t]hese publications have effectively consolidated studies on Michael Field, confirming Bradley and Cooper's own belief that their work would not be appreciated until sometime in the distant future" (Parker and Parejo Vadillo 15), the volume's felicitous title gives credit to this notion of Michael Field looking forward to the future, rather than back to the past. The collection's ambiguous re-orientation towards the past, as well as to our modern future, places the essays at the forefront of studies on Michael Field. Therefore, this volume illustrates what Sara Ahmed has conceptualised as "queer orientations": "in looking back we also look a different way . . . [t]his glance also means an openness to the future" (178).

The essays in the collection partly stem from the Michael Field Centenary Conference, held on 11–12 July 2014, and they represent a wide range of approaches and perspectives on Michael Field and on their work which were truly multidisciplinary and boundary-crossing. Borders become diffuse between human and non-human, between genres, and between normative and non-normative desires, thus promoting a performative notion of authorship and sexual identity in Michael Field's works and biography. Following Parker and Parejo Vadillo's in-depth introduction are eleven

chapters which explore Field's production from various critical perspectives. The first chapter is Kate Thomas's contribution, where she deploys Field's queer ecology, thus deconstructing the constructed boundary between the human and the vegetal worlds through the "bramble-bough," understood as an emblem. "Becoming" and a "sensual vegetal world" are entangled in Field's poetry, and in so doing, "Michael Field tropes plant life in such a way as to work from inside the becomingness of the plant, experiencing libidinal seasonality and paying botanical attention to the polymorphous desires of plant forms" (37).

Chapter two, by Margaret D. Stetz, discusses Michael Field's male muses as sources of inspiration, including Robert Browning and Havelock Ellis (although he proved to be a disappointment). Bradley and Cooper rewrote the Dryope myth against Thomas Ashe's own version, and perhaps, Stetz argues, they wanted to demonstrate why they "deserved an entire article in the *Westminster Review* devoted to their work, rather than merely a single favourable mention" (63). Chapter three receives the title of "Sculpture, Poetics, Marble Books: Casting Michael Field." In it, Ana Parejo Vadillo pays attention to Michael Field's collaborative poetic practice in close connection with art (particularly, sculpture). Much has been written on Field's ekphrastic practices in their 1892 *Sight and Song*. However, as Parejo Vadillo rightly suggests, the relationship between their poetry and sculpture remains unexplored. She goes on to argue that in the so-called "marble period" (1878–1890), Michael Field uses the art of sculpture as creation: which is "the origin of form, the unity of life and work, and the casting of their modern poetry" (69). In addition, her chapter delves into Field's poetics as based on the "fragment," as well as into a consideration of the book "as a sculptural object, as a statute" (69), and this is illustrated with a plate of *Long Ago* (1889), a piece of artwork in itself.

Sarah Parker pens "Sister Arts: Michael Field and Mary Costelloe," which is devoted to the relationship between Michael Field, the art critic Bernard Berenson and his partner, Mary Costelloe, whose relationship with Field lasted twenty-three years, as Parker notes. Her chapter is structured in two parts: the first part is concerned with the creative influence that a tour of German art galleries, as well as a trip to Paris, they undertook with Berenson and Costelloe had upon Michael Field. The second section is taken up with the figure of Costelloe as a source of inspiration for Field's poems, which turns Costelloe into the subject/object of their gaze. Parker's take on Costelloe reveals the powerful influence of the art critic on Field's poems like "I Have Found Her Power," which "has enigmatic connections to Costelloe" (110).

Interestingly, Parker opens up the possibility of further research into Bradley and Cooper's relationships with other women such as Vernon Lee or Maud Cruttwell to offer a more complete picture of those female networks.

Joseph Bristow's "Michael Field's 'Unwomanly Audacities': *Attila, My Attila!*, Sexual Modernity, and the London Stage" provides a thorough analysis of the blank-verse drama, *Attila, My Attila!* published by Michael Field. They did not believe in the kind of modern drama led by writers such as Oscar Wilde. As happened previously with one of their dramatic productions, *A Question of Memory* (1893), which was performed only once, *Attila, My Attila!* received scathing reviews because of the play's sexual politics. Field continued writing plays, but "these later plays, from *Borgia* (1905) onward, appeared without the name of Michael Field on the title page" (145). Despite their failures and the harsh criticism on their verse dramas, their verse plays were "both behind and ahead of a modern theatrical world that in the long run would never embrace them" (145). Chapter six deepens in Michael Field's exploration of non-normative desire and sensoriality through perfume, scents and scented plants as expression of their love and of their poetic creativity. In turn, Alex Murray's chapter, entitled "'Profane Travelers': Michael Field, Cornwall, and Modern Tourism," addresses Field's verse drama alongside prose fiction and their own personal experience of travelling as both "a form of Bacchic and spiritual travel" (167). Particular attention is given to their visit to Cornwall which signified a landmark in Bradley's conversion to Catholicism.

Chapter eight, penned by Jill R. Ehnenn, follows up the topic of Michael Field's turn to the Roman Catholic faith, and focuses on their Catholic poems, which have remained largely neglected. In agreement with other critics such as Hilary Fraser and Marion Thain, Ehnenn convincingly argues that collections of Catholic poems such as *Poems of Adoration* (1912) do not represent a radical departure from the poetry Bradley and Cooper had written in the late Victorian period, filled with sensorial images, non-normative desire, and witty language, but rather "a shift" (189). Furthermore, she distinguishes those poems written before Cooper was diagnosed with cancer in 1911 from those written after. Michael Field became devotional poets in their use of metre, subject matter, and other formal characteristics, in a sustained dialogue with their former engagement with aestheticism, poetic creativity, and homoeroticism. Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach to embodiment and corporeality provides an apt framework for Ehnenn to discuss Cooper's infirmed body, their re-orientation towards God, and their own relationship with disability. Ehnenn mentions the poem "Holy Cross,"

published in *Poems of Adoration*, where Cooper feels herself closer to God in suffering and in a context of homoeroticism: “O Tree, my arms are strong and sore / To clasp Thee, as when we adore / The body of our dearest in our arms!” (Field 16). This chapter is very nicely tied in with Leire Barrera-Medrano’s fine contribution to the volume through Spanish mysticism. Displaying a wide knowledge of Spanish mystic poetry, especially of the two main figures, St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, Barrera-Medrano reconstructs their presence in Michael Field’s later work. To this end, she turns to their correspondence and their joint diary in the period 1907–1914. Granted that scholars have acknowledged the allusions to mystic poets in some works such as *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914), dedicated to their beloved dog, Whym Chow, yet, in general terms, the presence of mystic poetry has remained unnoticed. Therefore, Barrera-Medrano aims at showing that their poetry should be placed alongside other modernist writers like Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, who also used the Spanish mystics.

A link with a modernist figure, the controversial artist Eric Gill, is the subject matter of Kristin Mahoney’s chapter. She explores the queer Catholicism of the 1890s and its ties with late-Victorian aestheticism in connection with Michael Field. Gill and Field throw light onto the queer Catholic networks of the late-Victorian period, where religion was understood as dissidence against normative kinship and sexual identity. Gill’s sexual experimentation and radical challenge to taboos against bestiality and incest are also questioned by Mahoney, who makes us wonder whether subversion is ethically acceptable if it results in “abuse and the disregard of involved subjects’ capacity to consent . . . . These norms might delimit and discipline [but] they can at times provide forms of protection for disempowered or silenced subjects” (243). The last chapter, entitled “‘Betwixt Us Two’: Whym Chow, Metonymy, and the Amatory Sonnet Tradition,” by Sarah E. Kersh, deals with the special connection the couple felt towards the chow dog named Whym, that lived with them for eight years until his death in 1906. *Whym Chow* is a collection of elegiac poems, and it addresses and challenges the two-person bond through the device of metonymy. In so doing, love sonnets deconstruct the notion of the couple to re-define the nature of intimacy. As Kersh poses, “‘Whym Chow’ becomes a site of queer desire only when the rhetoric of marriage as a metaphor of two is acknowledged as an insistence of heterosexuality” (263).

As Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo state in their joint introduction, *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* provides “a mosaic,” the metaphor Bradley and Cooper used to refer to their collaborative work, and this

collection of essays is “an exercise in mosaic composition,” since scholars approach Michael Field from various perspectives and disciplines (15). Arguably, then, this collection is also an assemblage of feelings, desires, knowledge, temporalities, literature, art, and culture of the past, which testifies to the complexity of Michael Field as a writer and cultural icon beyond the fin-de-siècle and decadence. Undoubtedly, Parker and Parejo Vadillo’s edited collection is an extremely valuable contribution to the existing scholarship on Michael Field as it encompasses interdisciplinary perspectives on their writings, which demonstrates not only Field’s broad conceptualisation of their world, but also how they anticipated concerns of our contemporary culture.

## REFERENCES

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