

## MICHAEL FIELD IN CONTEXT

Few authors attract as much fascination as ‘Michael Field’, the collaborative pseudonym of Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), an aunt and niece living and working together in devoted fellowship. As Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper published over thirty volumes of poetry and verse drama across a career lasting from the 1880s to the 1910s. Here, chapters by thirty-six experts introduce the historical and cultural contexts crucial to understanding Field’s work, including the late-Victorian aesthetic and decadent movements, fin-de-siècle poetry, and debates around gender and sexuality. Michael Field’s connections with other authors, including Wilde, Pater, and New Women writers are also explored. Experimental in lyric poetry, ekphrasis, verse drama, and the prose poem, and fascinated by the ancient worlds of Greece, Rome and Egypt, the Renaissance, and the Romantic era, Michael Field’s work remains profoundly relevant to current debates, including ecology, race, empire, and gender non-conformity.

SARAH PARKER is Professor of Literature, Sexuality and Visual Culture at Loughborough University, UK. She is the author of *Form and Modernity in Women’s Poetry, 1895–1922* (2024) and *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889–1930* (2013). She is co-editor of *Michael Field, For That Moment Only and Other Prose Works* (with Alex Murray, 2022) and *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (with Ana Parejo Vadillo, 2019).

# MICHAEL FIELD IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY  
SARAH PARKER  
*Loughborough University*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-1-009-38262-5 — Michael Field in Context  
 Edited by Sarah Parker  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of  
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
 Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009382625](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009382625)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009382670

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions  
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take  
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009382670

First published 2025

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Parker, Sarah, 1985– editor

TITLE: Michael Field in context / edited by Sarah Parker.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2025. |

Series: Literature in context | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2025004817 | ISBN 9781009382625 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781009382670 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Field, Michael – Criticism and interpretation. | Bradley, Katharine Harris,  
 1846–1914 – Criticism and interpretation. | Cooper, Edith Emma, 1862–1913 – Criticism and  
 interpretation. | English literature – Women authors – History and criticism. | English  
 literature – 19th century – History and criticism | Authorship – Collaboration – History –  
 19th century. | Lesbian authors – Great Britain – Biography.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC PR4699.F5 Z755 2025 | DDC 821/.8–dc23/eng/20250527

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025004817>

ISBN 978-1-009-38262-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence  
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

For EU product safety concerns, contact us at Calle de José Abascal,  
 56, 1<sup>o</sup>, 28003 Madrid, Spain, or email [eugpsr@cambridge.org](mailto:eugpsr@cambridge.org).

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxii
<i>Note on the Text</i>	xxiii
<i>Chronology</i>	xxiv

PART I WORKS AND DAYS: BIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXTS

1	Becoming ‘Michael Field’ <i>LeeAnne M. Richardson</i>	3
2	Michael Field’s Diary: <i>Works and Days</i> <i>Carolyn Dever</i>	12
3	Michael Field’s Letters <i>Sharon A. Bickle</i>	20
4	Collaborative Authorship <i>Heather Bozant Witcher</i>	30
5	Queering the House Beautiful: Michael Field’s Aesthetic Interiors <i>Ana Parejo Vadillo</i>	39
6	Michael Field’s Catholicism <i>Lewis H. Whitaker</i>	48

PART II FORMS AND GENRES

7	Michael Field and Lyric <i>Emily Harrington</i>	59
8	Michael Field and Verse Drama <i>Annmarie Steffes</i>	68

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
9	Michael Field’s Short Prose <i>Isobel Sigley</i>	77
10	Ekphrasis in <i>Sight and Song</i> <i>Dominique Gracia</i>	86
11	Michael Field’s Love Lyrics <i>Sarah E. Kersh</i>	94
12	Sonnets <i>Catherine Maxwell</i>	105
13	Devotional Poetry <i>J. D. Stone</i>	114
14	<i>Whym Chow: Flame of Love</i> and Animal Poetry <i>Caroline Baylis-Green</i>	123
PART III IN THE NAME OF TIME: MICHAEL FIELD AND HISTORY		
15	<i>Long Ago: Ancient Greece and Sapphic Poetics</i> <i>Isobel Hurst</i>	135
16	Ancient Egypt <i>Eleanor Dobson</i>	144
17	Roman Decadence <i>Tara Thomas</i>	154
18	The Renaissance <i>Hilary Fraser</i>	163
19	Romanticism and the Sublime <i>Andrea Gazzaniga</i>	172
PART IV ‘BE CONTEMPORANEOUS’: MICHAEL FIELD IN THEIR OWN TIME		
20	Michael Field, Walter Pater, and Queer Aestheticism <i>Dustin Friedman</i>	183
21	The New Woman and Late-Victorian Feminism <i>Margaret D. Stetz</i>	192
22	Michael Field and Oscar Wilde <i>Joseph Bristow</i>	201

	<i>Contents</i>	vii
23	French Decadence <i>Jessica Gossling</i>	211
24	Michael Field among the Women Poets <i>Linda K. Hughes</i>	220
25	Late-Victorian Theatre and the New Drama <i>Catherine Quirk</i>	230
26	Aesthetic Book Design <i>Nicholas Frankel</i>	239
PART V AFTERLIVES AND FUTURE FIELDS		
27	Michael Field and Post-Victorian Decadence <i>Kristin Mahoney</i>	259
28	Michael Field and Modernism <i>Sarah Parker</i>	268
29	Queer Studies <i>Kate Thomas</i>	279
30	Ecology <i>Dennis Denisoff</i>	288
31	Illness, Disability, and Crip Studies <i>Jill R. Ehnenn</i>	297
32	Transgender and Non-Binary Identities <i>Frankie Dytor</i>	306
33	Race and Empire <i>Alex Murray</i>	315
34	Michael Field in the Digital Age <i>Peter Melville Logan</i>	324
35	Performing Michael Field: Interview with Sophie Goldrick and Tom Floyd, Shadow Opera <i>Sarah Parker</i>	333
	<i>Further Reading</i>	340
	<i>Index</i>	349

Figures

26.1 Selwyn Image, cover design for Michael Field, <i>The Tragic Mary</i>	page 241
26.2 Selwyn Image, title page for Michael Field, <i>Stephania: A Trialogue</i>	243
26.3 ‘Bramble bough’ device by James Cooper (Edith Cooper’s father)	244
26.4 Selwyn Image, cover design for Michael Field, <i>Underneath the Bough</i>	246
26.5 Charles Ricketts, opening of Act II of Michael Field, <i>Fair Rosamund</i>	248
26.6 Charles Ricketts, opening of Michael Field, <i>The World at Auction</i>	250
26.7 Charles Ricketts, cover design for Michael Field, <i>Poems of Adoration</i>	251
26.8 Charles Ricketts, cover design for Michael Field, <i>Dedicated</i>	253

## Contributors

CAROLINE BAYLIS-GREEN is an independent scholar and visiting lecturer at the University of Sussex, UK. Published articles and chapters include 'Sentimental Coatings and the Subversive Pet Closet: Michael Field's *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*' (2018) and 'Self-Conscious Closeting and Paradoxical Writing in Anne Lister's Diaries' (2023).

SHARON A. BICKLE is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She is the author of *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876–1909* (2008). She is currently working collaboratively with Jill Ehnenn on a biography of Michael Field.

JOSEPH BRISTOW is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA. His most recent book is *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment* (2022).

DENNIS DENISOFF is McFarlin Chair of English and Film at the University of Tulsa, USA. Recent publications include *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910* (2022) and editorial projects *Arthur Machen: Decadent and Occult Works* (2019) and special issues of *Victorian Literature and Culture* and *Feminist Modernist Studies* on 'Scales of Decadence' and 'Global Decadence', respectively.

CAROLYN DEVER is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College, USA. Most recently, she is the author of *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field* (2022), and the editor of *One Soul We Divided: A Critical Edition of the Diary of Michael Field* (2023).

ELEANOR DOBSON is Associate Professor in Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of Birmingham, UK. She is the author of *Writing the Sphinx: Literature, Culture and Egyptology* (2020) and *Victorian Alchemy: Science, Magic and Ancient Egypt* (2022).



FRANKIE DYTOR is a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow in English at the University of Exeter, UK. They received their PhD in History of Art from the University of Cambridge in 2023. Their work on Michael Field has appeared in *Journal of Victorian Culture* and *En couple. Historiennes et historiens de l'art au travail* (2024).

JILL R. EHNNEN is Professor and Chair of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta, Canada. She is the author of *Michael Field's Revisionary Poetics* (2023) and of *Women's Literary Collaboration, Queerness and Late-Victorian Culture* (2008). With Sharon A. Bickle, she is working on *Audacious Lives: A Biography of 'Michael Field'*.

TOM FLOYD is a composer, conductor, and music educator from Devon, UK. He has received commissions from the Royal Opera House Youth Company, Opera Story, and English Heritage Lottery. Tom is the artistic director of Shadow Opera.

NICHOLAS FRANKEL teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University, USA. He is the author of *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (2000), *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017), and *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* (2020). He has edited the writings of Charles Ricketts, as well as many works by Wilde including *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated Uncensored Edition* (2011) and *The Annotated Prison Writings* (2018).

HILARY FRASER, Emerita Tillotson Professor of Nineteenth-Century Studies at Birkbeck, University of London, UK, was the founding editor of the e-journal *19* ([www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk)) and President of BAVS (2015–18). The author of five monographs, including *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (1992) and *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (2014), she edited *The Renaissance* (2025) for OUP's *Collected Works of Walter Pater*.

DUSTIN FRIEDMAN is Professor in the Department of Literature at American University, USA. He is the author of *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (2019) and co-editor, with Kristin Mahoney, of *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* (2023). His writings have appeared in *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Modernism/modernity*, *ELH*, and elsewhere.

*List of Contributors*

xi

ANDREA GAZZANIGA is Professor of English at Northern Kentucky University, USA. She teaches courses in British Romanticism, Victorian Literature, and Cinema Studies. Her publications have appeared in *Victorian Poetry*, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, and the *Victorians Institute Journal*.

SOPHIE GOLDRICK, a British-Australian mezzo-soprano, has performed across the UK, Europe, and Australia. A member of English National Opera, she also produces new opera for Shadow Opera.

JESSICA GOSSLING is Co-Deputy Director of the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. She is co-editor of *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (2019), and her collection of symbolist and decadent animal stories, *The Decadent Bestiary* is forthcoming from Strange Attractor. Jessica is Deputy Editor of *Volupté* and Treasurer of the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADs).

DOMINIQUE GRACIA is School Manager at the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UK. Her research focuses on the relationship between different media, adaptation, and things that repeat again and again in poetry, short fiction and genre fiction. Recent publications include *The Meinir Davies Casebook* (2023), and the Re-Encounter special issue of *Victorian Poetry*, co-edited with Fergus McGhee (Summer 2023).

EMILY HARRINGTON is Associate Professor of English at the University of Colorado, Boulder, USA. She is the author of *Second Person Singular: Late Victorian Women Poets and the Bonds of Verse* (2014), and of articles in *SEL*, *Victorian Poetry*, *Victorian Studies*, and *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and chapters in *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition*, *Extraordinary Aesthetes*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry*.

LINDA K. HUGHES is Addie Levy Professor Emerita of Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, USA. She is the author of *Victorian Women Writers and the Other Germany* (2022) and *Graham R. Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters* (2005), as well as the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Poetry* (2019) and *New Woman Poets: An Anthology* (2001).

ISOBEL HURST is Lecturer in English at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. She is the author of *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer* (2006) and has published essays in the *Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (2013) and the *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* (2015, 2019).

SARAH E. KERSH is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, USA, where she teaches courses on Victorian literature and culture, queer studies, and digital humanities. She collaborated with Dickinson undergraduates to create an online, annotated version of Michael Field's *Sight and Song* ([michaelfield.dickinson.edu](http://michaelfield.dickinson.edu)).

PETER MELVILLE LOGAN is Visiting Professor at the Digital Futures Institute, King's College, London, and Emeritus Professor of English at Temple University, USA. He is the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Lead for the online *Diaries of Michael Field*, the author of *Victorian Fetishism* (2009) and *Nerves and Narratives* (1997), and the General Editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Novel* (2014).

KRISTIN MAHONEY is Professor in the Department of English at Michigan State University, USA. She is the author of *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015) and *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (2022) and editor, with Dustin Friedman, of *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1890s* (2023). Along with Kate Hext and Alex Murray, she edits the journal *Cusp: Late 19th-/Early 20th-Century Cultures*.

CATHERINE MAXWELL is Professor of Victorian Literature at Queen Mary University of London, UK, and the author of *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (2001), *Swinburne* (2006), *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (2008), and *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (2017), awarded the 2018 European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) prize for Literatures in English.

ALEX MURRAY is Professor of Modern Literature at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, and founding co-editor of *Cusp: Late 19th-/Early 20th-Century Cultures*. His most recent books include *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (2023) and, with Kate Hext, *The Oxford Handbook of Oscar Wilde* (2025).

*List of Contributors*

xiii

SARAH PARKER is Professor of Literature, Sexuality and Visual Culture at Loughborough University, UK. She is the author of *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895–1922* (2024) and *The Lesbian Muse and Poetic Identity, 1889–1930* (2013). She is co-editor of *Michael Field, For That Moment Only and Other Prose Works* (with Alex Murray, 2022) and *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (with Ana Parejo Vadillo, 2019).

CATHERINE QUIRK is Senior Lecturer in Drama at Edge Hill University, UK. Her research focuses on women's performance practices since the nineteenth century and their incorporation into narrative, particularly memoir and the novel. She is co-editor of *Pandemic Play: Community in Performance, Gaming, and the Arts* (2024) and has essays published in *Comparative Drama*, *Theatre Notebook*, and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, amongst others.

LEEANNE M. RICHARDSON is Associate Professor of English at Georgia State University, USA. She is the author of *The Forms of Michael Field* (2021) and *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre, Empire* (2006), in addition to articles on turn-of-the-century women writers including Dollie Radford and Olive Schreiner and the 'little magazines' of the late-Victorian era.

ISOBEL SIGLEY is an independent researcher, having graduated with her PhD from Loughborough University, UK, in 2023. She is co-editor of *George Egerton: Terra Incognita* (2024) and has published journal articles on tactility in fiction by George Egerton (*Victorian Popular Fictions*, 2021) and self-care in fiction by Alice Dunbar-Nelson (*Journal of Medical Humanities*, 2024).

ANNMARIE STEFFES is the Associate Director of the University Writing Center at the University of Louisville in Kentucky, USA. Her scholarly work on verse dramas has appeared in *Victorian Poetry* and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*.

MARGARET D. STETZ is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women's Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware, USA. As well as being the author of several books and of more than 130 published scholarly articles on a variety of topics, she was co-organiser in 2004 of the first conference on 'Michael Field' and co-editor of the first volume of essays on them, *Michael Field and Their World* (2007).

J. D. STONE is currently an English PhD student and Teaching Assistant in the Women and Gender Studies Department at the University of Delaware, USA. His dissertation examines representations of children and the environment in Victorian literature.

KATE THOMAS is the K. Laurence Stapleton Professor of Literatures in English at Bryn Mawr College, USA. The author of *Postal Pleasures: Sex, Scandal and Victorian Letters* (2012) and *Vernon Lee: A Sibyl at Il Palmerino* (2024), she was a recipient of a 2019 American Academy in Rome Prize.

TARA THOMAS is Lecturer in Literature and Oakes College at UC Santa Cruz, USA, where they teach classics, Victorian literature, and critical race and ethnic studies. Their writing appears in *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism* and *Amerarcana*. At the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, Tara leads development and community engagement in the public environmental humanities.

ANA PAREJO VADILLO is Reader in Victorian Literature and Culture at Birkbeck, University of London, UK. She is the 2024 Amy P. Goldman Fellow in Pre-Raphaelite Studies. Her books include *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (2005), *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Unpublished Materials* (co-edited with Marion Thain, 2009), and *Michael Field, Decadent Moderns* (co-edited with Sarah Parker, 2019).

LEWIS H. WHITAKER teaches English at the University of Connecticut in Stamford, USA. His work focuses primarily on poet and priest John Gray and the intersections of aesthetics, Catholicism, and sexuality during the fin de siècle.

HEATHER BOZANT WITCHER is Assistant Professor at Auburn University at Montgomery, Alabama, USA. She is the author of *Collaborative Writing in the Long Nineteenth Century: Sympathetic Partnerships and Artistic Creation* (2022) and co-editor of *Defining Pre-Raphaelite Poetics* (2020).

## *Preface*

Questions of historical context, including to what extent one belongs to one's own historical moment and how far one can break free of time, are at the very heart of Michael Field's work. Although Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913) lived and wrote together as Michael Field in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, they frequently expressed a sense of being out of time, of not quite fitting into their own cultural moment. Instead, they looked to the past – writing verse dramas set in Ancient Greece and Rome, for instance, or penning lyrics modelled after Elizabethan songs – while also projecting themselves far into the future, towards a time where (they hoped) their genius would finally be appreciated. They were encouraged in this belief by their mentor Robert Browning, who reassured them in 1888: 'We must remember we are Michael Field. Again he said: Wait fifty years.'<sup>1</sup> As Carolyn Dever observes in Chapter 2, they had to wait much longer than fifty years for their work to find its audience and to attract sustained critical attention. The twenty-first century has seen ever-increasing interest in these fascinating writers, demonstrated and further fuelled by a succession of monographs and other scholarship, suggesting that Michael Field's moment has finally arrived.

When considering the topic of Michael Field in context, one might then ask: *which* context? For it is true that Bradley and Cooper existed in a dizzying array of historical contexts – at least in the realms of their imaginations. As mentioned earlier, Bradley and Cooper were obsessed with past historical epochs, including Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Renaissance Italy, among other periods. As their joint diary *Works and Days* shows, much of their daily life was spent researching these past ages, through reading, study and even their own brand of idiosyncratic historical tourism, retracing the steps of the bygone figures with whom they were fascinated. As readers will discover in Chapters 15–19 included

in Part III, Michael Field repeatedly expressed an affinity with the past, engaging in imaginative recreations of diverse historical periods in their plays and poetry. In doing so, they also forged their own mythic versions of these epochs, reinventing history in ways that reflected their own lives at the turn of the century.

In their fixation with the past, Michael Field were of course very much characteristic of their present. Many writers of the late nineteenth century, especially queer writers, used the past to reflect on contemporary culture and to forge an enabling sense of identity and community. As Chapters 20–26 in Part IV reveal, Bradley and Cooper were immersed in a number of fin-de-siècle literary and artistic networks; they rubbed shoulders with the likes of Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Vernon Lee, William Archer, Lionel Johnson, and George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright); they were close friends with the artists Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, and the Georgian playwright Thomas Sturge Moore (later their executor), among other important figures, such as John Ruskin and Browning himself. As these connections suggest, Michael Field were influenced by the late-Victorian movements of aestheticism, decadence and the New Woman, however reluctantly and ambivalently they reacted to these phenomena (they shunned Egerton's experimental fiction, for instance, and withdrew their contribution to *The Yellow Book*). Although they were well connected and active participants in the cultural ferment of the 1890s, Bradley and Cooper frequently felt isolated and unappreciated, especially due to the negative reviews that they received. This led them to repudiate their own era; consider, for example, Bradley's diary entry of 1892, written in response to the death of Alfred, Lord Tennyson:

And so closes the Victorian epoch. – It is an epoch already yesterday: it is for us, England's living, & yet unspent poets to make all things new. We are for the morning – the nineteenth century thinks it has no poets – nothing to lose – verily it has nothing; for we are not of it – we shake the dust of our feet from it, and pass on into the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

As this passage suggests, Michael Field saw hope in the dawning of a new century, although they approached modernity with the same degree of ambivalence with which they approached practically everything else. As Cooper reflected in 1893, after seeing a play by Henrik Ibsen: 'I still do not yet realise where modernity is taking me ... But I do not get frightened – I maintain a resolute patience.'<sup>3</sup> As Chapter 28 shows, Michael Field's attitude to modernity was paradoxical – yet Bradley and Cooper were never ones to join any movement or group without quibble or complaint.



In line with their habitually mixed feelings, although they renounced their own cultural moment, Bradley and Cooper also at times portrayed themselves as attached to, and part of, the Victorian age, for better or worse. They expressed this sense of belonging at the very moment when that age was waning. For example, Bradley responded to the death of Queen Victoria in 1901: 'She sweeps away with her in to the locked land my life, my youth, my breathing. I have no allegiance to any other. I love her. She is as simply my Queen as God is my God.'<sup>4</sup> But although Michael Field became more cynical about the twentieth century as it progressed, their work also displays many of the traits we associated with literary modernism, seeking, continually, to 'make all things new'.<sup>5</sup>

Michael Field's multifaceted relationship to time is not the only challenge that Bradley and Cooper present to those who wish to contextualise their work. Another thorny question arises: *whose* context are we tracing here; Bradley's, Cooper's, Michael Field's – all of the above? Bradley and Cooper's collaborative persona as Michael Field, not to mention their later forays as the anonymous 'author of *Borgia*', overturns ideas of a writer's traditional 'life and times', notions that implicitly hinge on assumptions about the singular (likely male), authorial genius. Does an imaginary authorial persona like Michael Field, an individual that did not exist in the 'real world', even *have* a historical context? Further, when we consider gender, we might ask: are we contextualising a male author, a female author, or authors; should we speak of his context, her context, or theirs?

Michael Field were initially viewed as male and in this sense, we should bear in mind contexts around Victorian masculinity and male-orientated literary traditions when approaching this work. When 'his' first works were published, Michael Field was heralded as a new Shakespeare for the nineteenth century; *The Spectator* detected in *Callirrhoe* (1884) 'the ring of a new voice which is likely to be heard far and wide among the English-speaking peoples', while *The Athenæum* praised the work's 'Shakespearean penetration'.<sup>6</sup> Writers such as Marc-André Raffalovich wrote enthusiastic letters to Michael Field, with an edge of flirtation, later hastily retracted (Raffalovich apologises: 'I thought I was writing to a boy, to a young man of my age').<sup>7</sup> Even once Michael Field's 'true' identity was revealed, Bradley and Cooper continued to associate primarily with decadent male circles. In contrast, their relations with other women, particularly women writers, were often tense – they condemned Egerton, were jealous of Olive Schreiner, disliked Vernon Lee and had a fractious friendship with the art historian Mary Costelloe (later Berenson).<sup>8</sup>



Michael Field radically challenge notions of gendered literary tradition, including some of the tenets of feminist literary theory. Bradley and Cooper saw themselves as geniuses, and the names they wished to be grouped among were those of men – Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning – with the exception of Sappho. That being said, once their pseudonym was unmasked, they were read and reviewed as women writers. As they feared, their works were treated differently when their ‘feminine authorship’ was revealed; a review of *Long Ago*, for example, turned away in disgust, declaring ‘the taste of mankind has always revolted from the unrestrained expression by a woman of the passion of love’ – an implied rejection of the *authors’* passion, as well as Sappho’s.<sup>9</sup> Their play *Stephania* (1892), concerning rape and revenge, was attacked by critics and deemed ‘unseemly’.<sup>10</sup> Later works were met with critical silence, a neglect that Michael Field felt even more keenly than critique. Though they grumbled about the behaviour of liberated women (Egerton and Schreiner, for instance), Bradley and Cooper were writing at a time when women (at least white, middle-class women) experienced greater degrees of freedom. They were beneficiaries of a college education and of an unchaperoned, financially independent existence. As Cooper wrote in their diary after completing the 1901 census: ‘I write myself as head of house, & ... entertain as guest or lodger the choicest of my sex – the Beloved One, Single & F. – even as I am.’<sup>11</sup> As LeeAnne M. Richardson affirms: ‘Bradley and Cooper lived New Woman lives: they defied congenial gender categories, asserting their right to education, to speaking their minds.’<sup>12</sup>

We should be wary, then, of viewing ‘Michael Field’ as a cloak that Bradley and Cooper hid behind, to shield them from the world. Instead, they saw their authorial persona as a way of immersing themselves further in the world, gaining experience and freeing themselves from ‘drawing room conventionalities’.<sup>13</sup> And free themselves they did, as their extensive diary *Works and Days* attests; travelling to Europe, attending exhibitions and salons in London, and eventually realising their long-held dream of living together as a ‘married’ couple at 1, The Paragon in Richmond, London. The diaries are the workshop where Bradley and Cooper’s experiences are distilled into art and infused into their writings as Michael Field. But these freedoms – to travel and to live independently of family – were, significantly, only possible after the death of Cooper’s mother and father. This fact should give us pause and remind us that, for all their assertions of oneness, Bradley and Cooper are two different people. Cooper’s context is somewhat different from Bradley’s, and vice versa. Sixteen years younger,

*Preface*

xix

Cooper does not, for example, mourn Queen Victoria's death in the same way Bradley does; she is (at times) less pessimistic about modernity, and she is the first to convert to Catholicism, with Bradley following reluctantly. As several contributors to this volume propose and demonstrate, examining Bradley and Cooper's diverse perspectives disrupts Michael Field's oft-repeated claims to unity, statements that have served to obscure their differences.

Finally, with these generational differences in mind, a source of concern to many readers is the incestual nature of Bradley and Cooper's relationship. While there are a growing number of scholarly reflections on this topic, Bradley and Cooper's lesbianism or queerness still tends to take centre stage, while the incestuous aspect of their relationship as aunt and niece is sidelined.<sup>14</sup> While there is no direct evidence that Cooper was unconsenting, or that Bradley was abusive, it is important to acknowledge the possibly coercive dynamic of this relationship. That being said, neither Bradley and Cooper, nor their family members, seemed to have had concerns about the incestual dimension of their intimacy – or if they did, these anxieties are encoded and couched very subtly in the letters and diaries (as Sharon A. Bickle's Chapter 3 shows). Faced with gaps, omissions and things we simply cannot know for certain, perhaps the best we can do is conclude that Michael Field are queer in ways that are exciting, appealing and that speak to our present moment – their lifelong dedication to one another, and their steadfast determination to shape life according to their own desires, for instance – but they are also queer in ways that are alienating, problematic and deeply disturbing. As Tom Floyd reflects, in an interview about staging Michael Field's biography as an opera: '[I]t is not for us to offer a judgment. What we wanted to do was to present their story ... and to let the audience interact with that story' (page 334). Similarly, to present Michael Field's work in context is to encourage readers to interact with both their lives and their writing and to form their own judgements.

As the reader will discover in the chapters that follow, ultimately Michael Field were ahead of their time, *of* their time, and completely out of time. Bradley and Cooper consistently gazed Janus-faced both forwards and backwards into the vistas of history that lay behind and before them. They were certainly correct that the true appreciation of Michael Field's writings may reside in a future moment – a future that is still unfolding. With *Works and Days* now online and in the process of digitisation, scholarship on Michael Field is set to grow and expand exponentially in a variety of potentially unpredictable directions. As their lives and work become more

widely known, Bradley and Cooper's writing and biography will provide rich material for creative response and reinterpretation – as recently seen in *Veritable Michael*, the opera and accompanying podcast that tells their story. Looking ahead, I see novels, plays, even films and television shows, inspired by Michael Field and their work on the horizon. With such speculations in mind, I conclude with a quotation from Michael Field's posthumously published play, *In the Name of Time* (1919): 'Time works such wonders / If we will give him time to work them in.'<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

1. Katharine Bradley [KB], *Works and Days* (May 1888), BL Add MS 46777, fol. 5r.
2. KB, *Works and Days* (12 October 1892), BL Add MS 46780, fol. 140r.
3. Edith Cooper [EC], *Works and Days* (31 December 1893), BL Add MS 46781, fols 104r.
4. KB, *Works and Days* (22 January 1901), BL Add MS 46790, 18v.
5. EC, *Works and Days* (January 1906), BL Add MS 46795, fol. 20v.
6. Reviews quoted in Mary C. Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1922), 27–28.
7. Marc-André Raffalovich to Michael Field, 16 November 1884, BL Add MS 45851, fols 72r–v.
8. For more on Michael Field's complex relationship with other women writers of their era, in addition to Chapters 21 and 24 by Margaret D. Stetz and Linda K. Hughes, respectively, see Alex Murray and Sarah Parker, 'Introduction' to *Michael Field, For That Moment Only and Other Prose Works* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2022), 32–43. For more on Bradley and Cooper's relationship with Costelloe, see Sarah Parker, 'Sister Arts: Michael Field and Mary Costelloe', in *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*, ed. Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2019), 146–79.
9. 'Michael Field's Long Ago' [review], *The Spectator* 63 (27 July 1889): 119.
10. 'Review of Stephanian by Michael Field', *The Spectator* 70 (4 February 1893): 163.
11. EC, *Works and Days* (31 March 1901), BL Add MS 467890, fol. 46v. See Kate Thomas's discussion of the census in Chapter 29 (pages 279–87).
12. LeeAnne M. Richardson, *The Forms of Michael Field* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 46.
13. Letter from KB to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, BL Add MS 46866, fol. 17v.
14. See Sharon Bickle, 'Edith Cooper's Sin: Mapping the Willful Bodies of Michael Field', in *The Routledge Handbook of Victorian Scandals in Literature and Culture*, ed. Brenda Ayres and Sarah E. Maier (New York: Routledge, 2022), 425–37; Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022),

*Preface*

xxi

- 186–216; Carolyn Tate, ‘Lesbian Incest as Queer Kinship: Michael Field and the Erotic Middle-Class Victorian Family’, *Victorian Review* 39, no. 2 (2013): 181–99; Kate Thomas, “‘What Time We Kiss’: Michael Field’s Queer Temporalities”, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, No. 2–3 (2007): 327–51.
15. Michael Field, *In the Name of Time: A Tragedy* (London: Poetry Bookshop, 1919), 50.

## *Acknowledgements*

Editing this volume represents an exhilarating opportunity to introduce Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) to new readers and to confirm Michael Field's status as an author whose work attracts rich and ever-growing interest. Compiling a volume of this magnitude as a solo project could have been stressful and time consuming, but it has in fact been an enjoyable and smooth process, thanks to the generosity and efficiency of the contributors. One of the reasons I keep coming back to Michael Field is that I have seldom found such a kind, welcoming and intellectually stimulating group of people as I have discovered in the community of Michael Field scholars. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with so many of them on this volume. Thank you to all of the authors for their patience and dedication in helping me complete this book. The resulting collection is as rich and variegated as Bradley and Cooper's work itself – the chapters are clusters of gems, each revealing a different facet of Michael Field.

My thanks are also due to Bethany Thomas of Cambridge University Press, for originally suggesting a volume on Michael Field for the 'In Context' series and for seeing me as the right person to edit it. Thank you to Bethany, George Paul Laver, and Ramya Selvaraj for their helpful assistance with the volume throughout each stage of the process.

Thank you to Mark Samuels Lasner for kindly granting permission to reproduce images from his world-renowned collections. Finally, my gratitude goes to Leonie Sturge-Moore for generously granting permission to reproduce quotations from Michael Field's work. Leonie and her sister Charmian O'Neil, the descendants of Bradley and Cooper's original executor Thomas Sturge Moore, have been consistent champions of scholarship on Michael Field for many years. Charmian sadly passed away in 2024, and I would like to respectfully dedicate this book to her memory.

## *Note on the Text*

The majority of archival materials relating to Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper) are housed in the British Library, London and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Endnote references to quotations from Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's collaborative diary *Works and Days* refer to the twenty-nine volumes held in the British Library Western Manuscripts collection, Add MS 46776–46804. Folio numbers refer to the handwritten folio numbers on the top right-hand corner of each page, recto to the right-hand numbered page, and verso to the reverse unnumbered left-hand page. Diary references also indicate whether the handwriting of the entry is Katharine Bradley's (KB) or Edith Cooper's (EC), with additional explanation where required (when Bradley is writing words dictated by Cooper, for instance). Quotations from the diaries in this volume generally do not indicate deletions found in the original diary text, unless these are significant to the critical interpretation. The diaries of Michael Field can be found in digital form at: <https://michaelfielddiary.dartmouth.edu/home>