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## CANON OR NOT CANON: THE CURIOUS CASE OF MICHAEL FIELD

*Abstract: Although they wrote more than thirty plays, nine volumes of poetry, around thirty volumes of diaries, and thousands of letters, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt-niece duo, incestuous lovers and poets, more famous under their joint male pseudonym Michael Field, were almost unknown to a wider literary audience until the 1970s, when these two 'minor' Victorian women poets were rediscovered mostly by feminist critics. What first drew critics' attention to this poetic pair was their dual authorial persona and the nature of their relationship, culminating in Lilian Faderman's groundbreaking book *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981). In the 1990s, critics such as Isobel Armstrong, Virginia Blain, Joseph Bristow, Holly Laird, Angela Leighton, Yopie Prins, Martha Vicinus, and Chris White shifted focus to their work, first to poetry and then to dramas and diaries. Finally, the first two decades of the twenty-first century confirmed the resurgence of interest in Michael Field, with critics such as Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo exploring this poetic duo within the wider context of fin-de-siècle literature.*

*This paper will delve into various possible reasons why Bradley and Cooper, in spite of early positive reviews and the recognition of some literary greats of their age, were never granted a place among canonical British writers. Some of the avenues that will be explored are their fluid, queer identity and their refusal to define their gender; their tendency to write outdated literary genres such as verse historical dramas; the fact that they were female aesthetes, whose poetry was caught between paganism and Catholicism, homosexual and heterosexual love, femininity and masculinity, Victorian age and Modernism, tradition and modernity; their unwillingness to compromise their vision for popularity or commercial success; as well as their determination to create*

*beautiful, well-designed books, published exclusively in rare and limited editions, which made them famous only among a small circle of connoisseurs.*

Key words: *canon, women poets, queer, gender roles, Aestheticism, Decadence, Catholicism.*

## 1. Introduction: Problems with Canon Formation

In its recent use, the word *canon* refers to ‘those authors who, by a cumulative consensus of critics, scholars, and teachers, have come to be widely recognised as “major”, and to have written works often hailed as literary *classics*’ (Abrams, 1999:p.29). Similarly, Mikics (2007) defines it as ‘the institutionally favoured or approved text, taught in schools and proclaimed as essential reading’ (p.49). Furthermore, for Bloom (1994), a canonical book is the one that ‘demands rereading’ (p.30) and, in addition, it has to be strange, original, exert literary influence, possess aesthetic dignity, stay permanently engraved in our memory, and become immortal. In addition, according to Kermode (2004), a canonical work needs to bring pleasure, especially of the aesthetic kind, as well as change constantly and always be new and fresh (pp.19–20). Besides, when it comes to its purpose, Bloom (1994) believes that a literary canon provides the answer to the question what we are supposed to read (p.15). For him, the problem lies in the fact that people do not live forever, so it is essential to know what is worth reading during our limited existence because ‘stuffing that interval with bad writing, in the name of whatever social justice, does not seem ... to be the responsibility of the literary critic’ (p.32).

However, although canon formation is necessary, the criteria used and the authorities responsible for choosing canonical books and authors are rather problematic. A literary canon seems to be ‘the product of a wavering and unofficial consensus; it is tacit rather than explicit, loose in its boundaries, and always subject to changes in its inclusions’ (Abrams, 1999:p.29). Even the supporters of the existing canon admit that fashion<sup>2</sup> and chance play a significant role in canon formation. First, some works or authors become outdated with time. They are excluded from the canon because readers, critics, and teachers lose interest in them, and they cease to be an important subject of conversation. On the other hand, new books and authors are eventually accepted in the canon because at a certain point of time they are approved by contemporary critics and teachers, admired by readers, and

<sup>2</sup>Literary genres are especially subject to changes in fashion, which means that authors who continue to write old-fashioned genres are likely to lose their canonical status. According to Bloom (1994), Gore Vidal was not awarded the canonical status not because of his sexual orientation but because he wrote historical novels long after they had become unfashionable (p.21).

thus brought into the public eye. Second, some works are saved by chance, some disregarded by chance and, once retrieved, they are kept alive first by conversation and then by serious scholarship (Kermode, 2004:p.34).

However, the most controversial issue regarding canon formation concerns the people who make decisions about what literary works are worthy of the canon. This became a matter of a heated debate in the 1970s, since literary critics and professors could not agree upon what books to assign to students, especially in the so-called core courses in humanities. The main accusation levelled against the standard canon is that it 'has been formed in accordance with the *ideology*, political interests, and values of an élite class that was white, male, and European' (Abrams, 1999:p.30). As a result of this, Abrams continues, some believe that:

'the canon consists mainly of works that convey and sustain racism, *patriarchy*, and imperialism, and serves to marginalise or exclude the interests and accomplishments of blacks, Hispanics, and other ethnic minorities, and also the achievements of women, the working class, popular culture, homosexuals, and non-European civilisations.' (Ibid)

On the other hand, the so-called traditionalists do not believe that the canon notion is 'a wicked myth, designed to justify the oppression of minorities [or] a political propaganda weapon now at last revealed as such' (Kermode, 2004:p.15). Actually, their opinion is that canon formation should be a matter of aesthetics rather than an instrument of everyday politics and ideology, which means that no social group ought to influence or affect the way literature is interpreted (Bloom, 1994:p.23). Most of them agree that literature has become unnecessarily politicised in the last few decades and that, instead of analysing literary value, which is based on the beauty of literary language and the pleasure it provides, modern criticism is generally prone to interpreting the meaning of literary works almost exclusively in the context of current social or political issues such as gender, racism, colonialism, homophobia and others.

## 2. To Be Canon

Although Michael Field have never reached the canonical status, a lot of authors, reviewers, and publishers thought that they should have been included among the greatest poets. One of their earliest supporters was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an American author and co-editor of the first two collections of Emily Dickinson's poems, who was so enamoured with their first play, *Callirhoë* (1894), that he suggested giving them the title of poet laureate just on the strength of that

work (Parker & Vadillo, 2019:p.6). He was the first one who compared them to Shakespeare and especially praised seven of their verse dramas (p.364). Similarly, Thomas Mosher, another American publisher, included their poetry collection *Underneath the Bough* (1893) in his Old World Series, which was dedicated to 'acknowledged masters of literature' such as Shakespeare, George Meredith, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and the Brownings (Richardson, 2021:p.127). Furthermore, Mary Costelloe, their friend and art critic, saw them among poets like Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso (Parker & Vadillo, 2019:p.3). In addition, their admirers were also poets such as Robert Browning, George Meredith, Walter Pater, J. A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Augusta Webster, Alice Meynell, and W. B. Yeats, to name a few.

Apart from the support and recognition of their fellow poets and artists, there are plenty of reasons why Michael Field should have been appointed a place among the 'Greats'. First, their oeuvre is quite extensive – it includes nine volumes of poetry, around thirty dramas, twenty-nine large volumes of diaries, and thousands of letters (Thain & Vadillo, 2012:p.73, 76). Second, they were rather unique, especially since they were classically educated, well-read, and highly cultured women within a large group of male aesthetes, creating under a single male *nom de plume*. Third, being grounded in Aestheticism, they were primarily concerned with the beauty of their work, which certainly brought aesthetic pleasure to their audience. Fourth, they were financially independent and were able to travel to Europe and visit most notable galleries in search of true artistic genius, which they later incorporated in their poetry. Fifth, they belonged to a community of intellectuals and artists and were well aware of the current literary and cultural trends. Still, they were well versed in literary tradition and often used it to express their opinion about current social issues such as women's rights. Besides, they were technically skilful poets and employed a variety of genres in their work, from verse dramas, through sonnets, to devotional poems.

More importantly, they were fearless, free, authentic, and ready to sacrifice almost everything to the altar of art. Realising that they would not gain fame in their lifetime, they were reaching for timelessness, a quality often associated with canonical authors and recognised in their work by many of their admirers. Among those was George Meredith, who reassured them in 1899 that their 'noble stand for pure poetic literature will have its reward, but evidently [they] will have to wait' (as cited in Parker & Vadillo, 2019:p.12). Similarly, their friend Charles Ricketts predicted that 'Michael Field [would] be remembered when the Thompsons, Addington Symonds etc [were] forgotten' (as cited in Thomas, 2007:p.329). Besides, it looks as if Bradley and Cooper agreed with their friends'

prophecies and never lost hope that one day they would be awarded the well-deserved and long-overdue place among the ‘Greats’. This can be seen both from Bradley’s statement written in 1900, saying that ‘Michael will be discovered in the twentieth century’ (as cited in Thomas, 2007:p.329), as well as from a letter that Mary Costelloe wrote to her mother, claiming that Michael Field ‘think they are a Great Poet – unappreciated at present, but certain to be famous and adored in the next generation’ (as cited in Vicinus, 2005:p.346). Moreover, according to Thomas (2007), ‘Michael Field theorised a queer futurity: they lived their afterlives as simultaneous to their lives; they saw themselves as coming after themselves’ (pp.330–331). So, Thomas concludes, in their poetics ‘singing out of time is not only a mark of greatness but generates greatness, too’ (Ibid, p.333).

The best example of their claim on immortality can be found in their most anthologised poem, ‘Prologue’, from the collection titled *Underneath the Bough*. This poem can serve both as the manifest of their art and as their life motto since it shows their dedication to poetry, love, and paganism. Aware of the fact that their world will never accept them, they decide to disregard its opinion and choose April, the month when their fellow poet Shakespeare was born, to vow to each other that they will continue their fight both as lovers and poets. In addition, they express their preference for the pagan world by making references to Greek mythology and by rejecting the Christian world:

‘To laugh and dream on Lethe’s shore,  
To sing to Charon in his boat,  
Heartening the timid souls afloat;  
Of judgment 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.’ (Field, 2009:pp.128–129)

### 3. Or Not to Be Canon

Still, in spite of all the qualities that could guarantee a spot among the ‘immortals’ for Michael Field, they are still to this day not considered canonical authors. As a matter of fact, their best features could also be regarded as the greatest hindrance to their entering the canon. First, because of the strictly defined gender roles, the

knowledge of philosophy and classics, although useful for an ambitious male poet, was at their time perceived as inappropriate for women. Similarly, bravery, passion and audacity, seen as desirable traits for male poets, were judged as impertinent and shameful when possessed by a female author (Tica, 2018:pp.44–47). On the other hand, their prodigious literary output is often deemed overwhelming, daunting, and disheartening for a potential researcher and reader and, because of this, many of their dramas are still unexplored. Furthermore, their love of tradition and past can seem quaint and stuffy to contemporary readers, whereas their mixture of old forms and new topics can sound weird and too hard to comprehend. To conclude, the reasons for their exclusion from the canon can be connected both with their unconventional life and experimental poetry.

### **3.1. Michael Field: A Life Less Ordinary**

Katherine Bradley (1846–1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862–1913) were born during the Victorian era, which still imposed strict rules of behaviour on women, especially those from the middle class, who were expected to perform domestic duties such as getting married, obeying their husbands, nurturing their children, taking care of their home and preserving their family's respectability. However, Bradley and Cooper, mostly due to their substantial inheritance, were free to choose a different life for themselves. First, neither of them was forced to marry or have children. When Bradley's sister and Cooper's mother, Emma, became an invalid after giving birth to her second daughter, Bradley became the legal guardian of her niece. They especially bonded over their love of literature, and when they finally freed themselves of their family's pressure and scrutiny, they started living, writing, and travelling together. In addition, as unmarried women they were legally allowed 'to have a socially recognised spouse and to keep the economic autonomy that legally married wives relinquished under the doctrine of coverture' (Marcus, 2007:p.194). Second, their money enabled them to venture into the public sphere of education and business. Both of them went to university despite the fact that women were still mostly barred from such institutions – Bradley was first educated at the Collège de France and then at Newnham College, Cambridge, and in 1879, both of them enrolled in University College, Bristol. Besides, they both studied the Classics and Bradley even taught herself Greek, which was considered unnecessary and even dangerous for honest Christian women because Greeks as pagans were often associated with ancient erotica, naked statues, and deviant sexual behaviour such

as homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, as ‘decorators, *salonieres*, and museum goers’ (Lysack, 2005:p.938), they dared to invade another masculine sphere – the connoisseurship of beautiful objects, and were also able to travel across Europe and write whatever they wanted, without making any compromises.

Besides being privileged, unmarried, and childless women who frequently inhabited the so-called male sphere, Bradley and Cooper defied traditions in other numerous ways, most of them connected with their unconventional love life and gender fluidity. Although some lesbian historians claim that their union was most likely an example of innocent Victorian romantic friendship (Faderman, 1981:p.210), their letters and diaries provide sufficient proof that their relationship was indeed sexual, which made them incestuous lovers with a 16-year age gap. In addition, both of them had feelings for men, especially Cooper, who was physically more attractive than her aunt. When Bradley was a student in Paris, she fell in love with Alfred Gérente, an artist in stained glass, who was twenty-five years her senior. Since he died suddenly, weeks after their first meeting, she never told him of her love and returned to England ‘brokenhearted, with the conviction that she would be a spinster for life’ (Thain & Vadillo 2009:p.25). Furthermore, their diaries suggest that Bradley was emotionally attached to Charles Ricketts, to whom she sent many of her poems, especially love sonnets (Richardson, 2021:pp.38–39). When it comes to Cooper, her obsession with Bernard Berenson, their aesthete friend, art connoisseur, and critic, seriously endangered everything that the name Michael Field represented. Although she knew that her love for him was only a platonic union of souls, for a long time she was extremely jealous of Mary Smith Costelloe, Berenson’s married mistress. Finally, in 1895, Cooper professed that her fascination was finally over:

‘I have touched moments with him that made the universe gold – I have gone through woe that put me to death for weeks. Let me set it down: *I love him* inexorably by fate – as I give him up by *choice*.’ (as cited in Vicinus, 2005:p.348)

Michael Field also challenged the notion of gender identity by using plenty of nicknames for each other, most of which were male. According to Vicinus (2005), at different times Bradley was nicknamed ‘Michael, Mike, Sim, Simurg, Fowl, and Horsey’, whereas Cooper was called ‘Field, Henry, Hennie, Boy, and several soft animal names’ (p.330). Additionally, in an attempt to model their relationship after

<sup>3</sup>In addition, women’s knowledge of the classics was always disputed. J. A. Symonds, who praised Michael Field’s play *Bellerophon*, still compared them to Keats, who was famous for his lack of classical learning. In this way Symonds provided ‘a contemptuous picture of Bradley and Cooper as autodidacts and, as it were, Cockney classicists’ (Evangelista, 2009:p.98).

the same-sex male couple Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, their artist friends, the two poets ‘called each other “boy” and “he”, as well as “wife” and “she”, and thus played with gender identities that were slippery and unstable’ (Robins, 2019:p.153). Moreover, they never used their real names when creating their poetry and plays. In 1875 Bradley published her first collection of poems, *The New Minnesinger*, under the name of Arran Leigh,<sup>4</sup> whereas Cooper adopted the name Isla Leigh for the publication of their first joint work, *Bellerophon* (1881). For a while they toyed with the sobriquet John Cooley, an amalgam of Cooper and Bradley (Bristow, 2010:p.162), but they are most famous under their single male alias, Michael Field, which was first revealed to the world upon the publication of their plays *Callirrhoe* and *Fair Rosamund* in 1884. Thereafter, they were referred among their friends as the Fields, the Michaels or the Michael Fields.<sup>5</sup> Considering the fact that Victorian society was still unwilling to talk openly about female sexuality, let alone about same-sex desire among women, and that incest was certainly still one of the most shocking taboos,<sup>6</sup> Bradley and Cooper, like other women in similar situations, had to be very secretive and use code names. This means that the main purpose of their alias, at least in their personal life, was to protect them from judgement, scandal, and public disgrace. They were also concerned that the public exposure of their relationship would additionally weaken the reception of their work.

Furthermore, the popularity of the Fields among their fellow writers might have been diminished by their rejection to fully commit to any artistic group or movement. Even though they were university-educated women who refused to be fit into traditional gender roles and moulds of behaviour, they did not count themselves among the New Women. In their personal appearance, they kept a high dose of femininity. On the one hand, this meant avoiding ‘the “shirt-fronty”, practical appearance of New Women writers’; and, on the other, ‘preferring elaborate dresses, feathers, and hats that accentuated the distinction between their appearance

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ivor C. Treby (1998) as cited by Bristow (2010), ‘the name may “derive from Leigh woods” or a “visit to Arran”, as well as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s feminist epic, *Aurora Leigh*’ (p.162).

<sup>5</sup> There are two different theories regarding the origin of this pseudonym. According to Sturgeon (1922) as cited by Blain (1996), its choice was rather arbitrary. They chose “Michael’ because they liked the name and its associations, “Field” because it went well with Michael’ (p.245). The other theory is based on Bradley’s explanation that “‘Michael’ connoted the fiery archangel, while “Field” came from pastures of the blessed’ (Ibid).

<sup>6</sup> However, since Matrimonial Causes Act from 1857 had no provisions against incest, it was not punishable by law between 1857 and 1908. In addition, it was usually assumed that incest took place in lower-class, illegal heterosexual unions so few people would suspect the aunt-niece duo of having incestuous relations (Richardson, 2021:p.42).



and their pseudonym' (Vicinus, 2005:p.331). Similarly, despite being aesthetes, they were too prudish to allow themselves to be recognised as Decadents. They even withdrew their poem 'Rhythm' from *Yellow Book*, a journal often connected with Aestheticism and Decadence, because they were appalled by 'the negative, sordid and brash aspects of the publication' (Thain, 2007:p.15). They considered Decadents too extreme both in their content and style, and did not want their work to be judged on the basis of their association with the adherents of this notorious movement. Upon seeing the first volume of *Yellow Book* displayed in a window shop, they wrote in their diary that:

'[t]he best one can say of any tale or of any illustration is that it is clever – the worst one can say is that it is damnable. ... Faugh! One must go to one's Wordsworth & Shelley to be fumigated.' (Field, 2009:pp.261–262)

Finally, Bradley and Cooper, like other intellectuals of their age, experienced a religious crisis. Some of them, like Matthew Arnold, became agnostics after their faith had been weakened by various modern scientific and philosophical theories (Tica, 2023:p.86). Some converted to Catholicism either because they were drawn to it by the aesthetic appeal of Catholic churches and rituals or because they wanted to return to 'the old faith'. Bradley and Cooper, in spite of the fact that their work was mostly inspired by Hellenic paganism, joined the 'Catholic camp' in 1907, but their reasons were more personal. The first one was the death of their beloved dog Whym Chow, who served 'as both pagan god that bound them together and, after his death, as Christlike sacrifice that catalysed their conversion to Catholicism' (Richardson, 2021:p.36). The second, more convincing, was the guilt caused by their lesbian and incestuous relationship.<sup>7</sup> It culminated with the death of Cooper's father, who, according to Blain (1996), 'was of immense symbolic importance for both of them, because they taught themselves to believe that it was his genetic input into Edith that saved their relationship from incest' (p.251). Cooper was the first one to convert and Bradley followed mostly because she did not want to be separated from her beloved in any aspect of their life. In addition, their religious conversion can be attributed to the fact that Catholics offered the hope of an afterlife, and Bradley and Cooper loved each other so deeply that they needed to believe they would be reunited after death. Still, although becoming a Roman

<sup>7</sup> An additional proof of Cooper's guilty conscience is that after the conversion she stopped having sexual relationship with her aunt. Similarly, when she was diagnosed with cancer in 1911, she saw it as a form of punishment for her earlier inappropriate sexual relations (Blain, 1996:p.251).

Catholic seemed a rather fashionable thing among aesthetes and decadents,<sup>8</sup> by converting to Roman Catholicism, which was still deemed subversive and anti-British, Bradley and Cooper lost the support of many of their close non-Catholic friends such as Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon. More importantly, their new 'Catholic' poetry received less favourable reviews.

### 3.2. Michael Field: Creating Outside the Canon

As already established, the most significant reason for writing under a male pen-name was Michael Field's fear that they would not be given the same treatment as their male colleagues, and that reviewers and critics, who were mostly men, would be prejudiced against them and simply dismiss their work as 'female literature'. When Browning mistakenly exposed their identity in 1884,<sup>9</sup> Bradley reprimanded him severely:

'The revelation of that would indeed be utter ruin to us; but the report of lady-authorship will dwarf & enfeeble our work at every turn. ... Besides, you are robbing us of real criticism – such as man gives man.' (Field, 2009:p.311)

In addition, they were painfully aware of the fact that there were still clear-cut rules regarding the style and topics female authors were supposed to employ. For example, whereas the short lyric was considered *feminine* because of its 'spontaneous emotional effulgence', long forms such as epics and verse dramas were deemed *masculine* since they required 'objectivity, intelligence, judgment, and stamina' (Richardson, 2021:p.67). Hence, in order to write their verse tragedies, Bradley and Cooper had to use their nom de plume as a cover. This is quite clear from Bradley's reaction to Browning's warning against their being too unladylike in their writing:

'[W]e have many things to say the world will not tolerate from a woman's lips. We must be free as dramatists to work out in the open air of nature – exposed to her vicissitudes, witnessing her terrors: we cannot be stifled in drawing-room conventionalities.' (Field, 2009:p.311)

<sup>8</sup> Some of these were Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Alfred Douglas, Lionel Johnson, Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), and Renee Vivien (Thain, 2007:p.69). Most of them were linked with homosexuality and paganism and badly needed some 'refreshing' after the trials of Oscar Wilde.

<sup>9</sup> Browning actually revealed only half of their secret identity. By encouraging *The Athenaeum* reviewers to use the feminine pronoun when writing about Michael Field, he discovered to the public that Michael Field was not a man, but the fact that the pseudonym referred to two women remained unknown for a while (Bristow, 2010:p.165).

Besides, upon realising who Michael Field was, a reviewer in *Daily Chronicle* advised them to be more feminine: 'If Michael Field will but write us gentle, gracious, intimate things ... the pseudonym may achieve a place among the poets of the time' (as cited in Richardson, 2021:pp.6–7).

However, although Bradley and Cooper believed that their shared male alias would provide them with impartial treatment, it seems that eventually it did more harm than good. To the late-Victorian reader, who still believed in the genius of a single author, Michael Field's collaboration was, according to Sturgeon (1922) as cited by Thain (2007), 'obscurely repellent' (p.43). In addition, dual authorship was often perceived as amateurish, especially if the co-authors were women:

'Indeed, in 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 recognised, they tended to be represented in ways guaranteed to ensure their marginalisation.' (London, 1999:p.9)

Besides, London insists, this kind of female collaboration has always suggested secrecy and has been perceived as apprenticeship for some more mature, individual work (Ibid).

Still, there is no doubt that the reviews of Michael Field's works became less flattering with the discovery of their true identity,<sup>10</sup> which can be followed through Blain's (1996) research of different reviews from *The Spectator* magazine. In 1884, when the public still believed that Michael Field was a male poet, an influential reviewer greeted 'his' first publication, *Callirrhoe*, a Greek closet drama, as a work of 'great promise', exhibiting 'the true poetic [and dramatic] fire' (as cited in Blain, 1996:p.247). By 1885 and the publication of *The Father's Tragedy*, the same reviewer found out that 'Michael Field' was a pseudonym, but still thinking it was a man, he described 'him' as:

'a new and well-marked genius' with 'a power ... careless, buoyant, and lavish in its ease, sometimes coarse, and often rude, as with strong hand it hews out its path through the material with which it has chosen to deal.' (Ibid)

However, by 1889 two things changed – their authorship was exposed and they published their first collection of poems, *Long Ago*, which was considered audacious and caused quite an outrage by 'celebrat[ing] Sappho, the ancient poetess of Lesbos,'

<sup>10</sup> Charles Ricketts also believed that the revelation of Michael Field's identity in the press changed the way their work was perceived among critics: '[I]t was at once the culminating point of their career and their first failure; that is, they first met with hostile criticism and poorer sales' (as cited in Richardson, 2021:p.6).

and 'proclaim[ing] the diversity of her sexuality' (O'Gorman, 2006:p.649). This resulted in a less complimentary review:

'Rightly or wrongly, the taste of mankind has always revolted from the unrestrained expression by a woman of the passion of love. ... [G]eneral expression of passion has been refused, by general consent, to woman.' (as cited in Blain, 1996: pp.247–248)

The reviewer further added that although 'the supremacy of [Sappho's] genius was allowed, she paid the penalty of her daring in the sinister associations which came to be connected with her name' (Ibid, p.248). By 1892, when their play *Stephania* appeared, having discovered that Michael Field were actually two women, *The Spectator* responded in the following manner: 'We cannot but feel great regret to find the poetical power so firmly connected to the composite name of "Michael Field" directed to a subject much better left alone' (Ibid).

Bradley and Cooper were profoundly affected by the public's hurtful change of heart and, hoping to recover the opportunity to receive impartial criticism, at one period they tried to publish their works anonymously. This started in 1905 with their play *Borgia*, which received fair reviews in journals like *The Academy* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. However, concludes Blain (1996), 'the experiment waned as it became evident that reviewers were not generally willing to venture much in their judgements of anonymous verse drama' (pp.248–249).

Besides, Michael Field's failure to achieve canonical status can also be attributed to the fact that changes in the canon are sometimes a matter of fashion, which is especially true in regard to literary genres. This means that persisting in writing an antiquated genre could damage every chance for an author to be widely read and appreciated. When it comes to Michael Field, most of their plays were verse historical tragedies,<sup>11</sup> written as closet plays and mainly set in ancient Greece and Rome or in mediaeval Europe. This meant that they could not reach a wider audience since they were not intended for the stage but only for private performances or reading. Because of this, Logan Pearsall Smith defined them as 'that deadest ... of all dead forms of art' (as cited in Bristow, 2010:p.163), which suffered from outdated and melodramatic plots, including 'grandiose passions, dreadful deeds of lust and

<sup>11</sup> Although verse drama was written in England mostly in the Renaissance period, it became fashionable again during the Victorian era because authors such as Tennyson, Swinburne, John Davidson, the Brownings, George Eliot, and Augusta Webster created a lot of verse dramas. Still, since short lyric poems have come to be perceived as dominating Victorian poetry, these authors, especially Tennyson and Browning, gained their popularity more through their poems than through their dramatic works (Richardson, 2021:p.14).

horror, incest and assassination, hells of jealousy, and great empires tottering to their fall' (Ibid, p.164).

Naturally, the second problem was the use of archaic language and old-fashioned verse forms, not especially appealing and often incomprehensible to contemporary readers. William Archer from *Pall Mall Gazette* complained about Michael Field's emulation of the early Elizabethan 'heavy, strictly decasyllabic type verse' and scorned their 'unflagging adherence to the theory that poetical personages must speak a jargon as unlike as possible to ordinary human speech' (as cited in Bristow, 2010:p.170). Moreover, these plays were too long for contemporary readers, who, according to Gosse (1917) as cited by Vadillo (2013), 'are now almost as impatient of unactable "poetic dramas" as playgoers are' (p.136). In addition, their play *Noontide Branches* (1899), inspired by Milton's *Comus*, belonged to another old genre – the masque – which included songs, dances and fantastical creatures, and was revived in Victorian times as part of renewed interest in Renaissance literary forms.

Still, by obstinately clinging to these dramatic forms, Bradley and Cooper seemed to defy everybody, even their friends and colleagues, and wanted to prove them wrong. As early as 1892, they firmly rejected Berenson's advice that they should not write in Elizabethan verse because 'Christ who had a fine palate in wine tells us not to put new wine in old bottles' (as cited in Vadillo, 2013:p.122). They continued their revolt even after the catastrophic debut of *A Question of Memory* (1893),<sup>12</sup> their only play to be staged, nor did they quit writing tragedies when their play *Attila, my Attila!* (1896) received nothing but devastating reviews and the malicious laughter of their friends. The reason for this persistence, according to Vicinus (2005), might be the loss of their ability 'to write with one lyric voice' (p.347), because of which they could no longer create poetry. In addition, by staying loyal to this 'dead' genre, they seemed to follow in the tradition of several Victorian women poets such as Augusta Webster, 'who explored verse-drama to depict otherwise unspeakable desires that were banished from the nineteenth-century stage' (Bristow, 2010:p.164). Finally, as a result of such attitude, Bradley and Cooper, according to Leighton (1992), 'took refuge in a haughty sort of eccentricity which did not encourage friendship or recognition' (p.221).

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<sup>12</sup>Michael Field were deeply hurt by pernicious reviews of this play, which can be seen from one of their diary entries: 'It seems more natural to be dead than alive. We wake to the surprise of finding every morning paper against us. ... Not a flower had any one sent us yesterday, not a flower was given to us. No word, no letter, no visit, only the execrations of the Press! ... The Evening papers are worse than the morning – they are like a lot of unchained tigers. We are hated as Shelley was hated by our countrymen blindly, ravenously' (Field, 2009:p.260).

When it comes to their poetry, it is equally burdened with features that badly affected its popularity. First, Michael Field utilised old poetic genres to explore modern topics. Their first joint collection of poems, *Long Ago*, was described in the preface as 'the extension of Sappho's fragments into lyrics' (as cited in Richardson, 2021:p.7). The poems in their second collection titled *Sight and Song* (1982) are predominantly based on famous paintings by Renaissance masters. Their third collection *Underneath the Bough* is a modern version of the Elizabethan songbook, whereas their fourth book of poetry named *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908) mostly contains sonnets, which were re-popularised during the Victorian period. In all of these collections, as well as in their life, Michael Field, the 'knights of the Modern', as they referred to themselves in their diary (as cited in Richardson, 2021:p.4), used convention more as a starting point than a goal. They re-appropriated traditionally male genres and used them to tackle the topics they were mostly interested in, such as gender identity, art, freedom and love – the practice mostly frowned upon by those who 'defended' tradition and were not open to the idea of change.

Second, the majority of Michael Field's poetry dealt with female beauty, sexuality, and same-sex love, and employed erotic imagery and language which could be perceived as 'obscene', especially when it was discovered that they were actually women. Even though the poems from their first collection mainly explore Sappho's feelings for a young boatman named Phaon, some of these can be perceived as an expression of lesbian love in general or the love between Bradley and Cooper since in most of them Sappho, an older woman, expresses her feelings of love to young maids:

'Maids, not to you my mind doth change;  
Men I defy, allure, estrange,  
Prostrate, make bond or free:  
Soft as the stream beneath the plane  
To you I sing my love's refrain;  
Between us is no thought of pain,  
Peril, satiety. ...  
When injuries my spirit bruise,  
Allaying virtue ye infuse  
With unobtrusive skill:  
And if care frets ye come to me  
As fresh as nymph from stream or tree,  
And with your soft vitality  
My weary bosom fill.' (Field, 2009, pp.68–69)

Furthermore, their poem 'Sleeping Venus' from the collection *Sight and Song* is often considered as one of the most explicit representations of female masturbation:

'Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,  
Falling inward. Not even sleep  
Dare invalidate the deep,  
Universal pleasure sex  
Must unto itself annex –  
Even the stillest sleep; at peace,  
More profound with rest's increase,  
She enjoys the good  
Of delicious womanhood.' (Ibid, pp.105–106)

Similarly, their collection *Underneath the Bough* contains a myriad of love poems, such as 'Constancy', which could be interpreted as a powerful depiction of their steadfast love:

'I love her with the seasons, with the winds,  
As the stars worship, as anemones  
Shudder in secret for the sun, as bees  
Buzz round an open flower: in all kinds  
My love is perfect, and in each she finds  
Herself the goal.' (Ibid, p.156)

Third, their unwavering devotion to beauty and aesthetic principles ironically also hindered their chances of becoming widely read. Namely, they wanted their books to be aesthetically pleasing and, according to Sturgeon (1922) as cited by Lysack (2005), 'great was their care for colour, texture, quality, arrangement of letterpress, appearance of title-page, design of cover' (p.940). Their most exquisite collections of poetry are *Sight and Song*, whose copies 'boasted an olive green cover and a Selwyn Image floral frontispiece' (Lysack, 2005:p.941); *Wilde Honey from Various Thyme*, which 'features Rickett's exquisite design of bees and honeycombs on the binding' (Bristow, 2010:p.174); and *Whym Chow* (1914), published by Lucien Pissarro's Eragny Press 'in a limited colour-printed edition of fifteen copies' (Ibid, p.167). When it comes to their plays, as Cooper remembers, Oscar Wilde, who famously insisted on the beauty of his own books, said that their 'Tragic Mary ... & Rossetti's Poems were the two beautiful books (in appearance) of the century' (Field, 2009:p.246). In addition, *Tragic Mary* was displayed in the 1890 Arts and Crafts Exhibition (Vadillo, 2013:p.135). However, this meant that their lovely books were often expensive, published in limited editions and, as a result of this,

they reached only a smaller audience and disappeared quickly from circulation. For example, *Long Ago* was limited to 100 copies, *Sight and Song* to 400, and *Underneath the Bough* to 150 (Leighton, 1992:p.211).

Finally, one of the reasons why Michael Field, together with many other late Victorian poets, especially women, were quickly forgotten after their death and, consequently, failed to reach the canonical status is Modernists' prejudice against everything that did not fit their idea of modernity. In order to be *modern*, they needed to reject the period of Decadence as their most recent past, and reconfigure it 'as an epoch of enervation and degeneration' (Parker & Vaddillo, 2019:p.12). Moreover, for them Decadent poetry and drama were archaic, tedious, quaint, dusky, and too ornate. As Leighton (1992) notices, there was some interest in Michael Field's work in the early decades of the twentieth century (p.204). Mary Sturgeon published the first full-length biography of Michael Field in 1922. Pearsall Smith, who wrote an essay on them in 1924, was bewildered by the neglect of their work and hoped that they might receive due recognition in the future. Sturge More published a selection of their poetry in 1923 and some extracts from their journal *Works and Days* in 1933. Their acquaintances Arthur Symons and Yeats<sup>13</sup> included some of their poems in their anthologies – ten poems were incorporated in Symons's *Anthology of 'Nineties' Verse* (1928) and nine in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. However, after this 'brief flurry of revival', Leighton concludes, 'the poetry of these two extraordinary, determined, eccentric women disappeared from view for much of the rest of the twentieth century' (Ibid).

#### 4. Conclusion: Entering the Canon

Even though Michael Field will never be included among the literary elite such as Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Browning, Tennyson, and Wilde, still there are many things that can be done in order to make them more popular. Some of the most important ways for an author to become canonical are to reach a wide audience, be recognised and referred to by numerous literary figures and, consequently, be included in college curricula. This type of work is usually performed by canon critics,<sup>14</sup> whose primary goal is to 'open' the canon, make it multicultural instead of

<sup>13</sup> Even poets who supported Michael Field were ambiguous about some of their works. For example, Joyce did not understand *Sight and Song* and rejected one of their plays for the Irish National Theatre saying that 'frankly I do not like it as well as your other work' (as cited in Leighton, 1992:p.219).

<sup>14</sup> Bloom (1994) refers to these critics as 'the School of Resentment' (p.7), 'the anticanonizers' (p.23) or 'the openers-up of the Canon' (p.24), whose members are 'Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors' (p.20).



Eurocentric, and then to strip it of its élitism and hierarchism (Abrams, 1999:p.30). A result of this has been a significant effort to revise the reading lists in literary courses especially at American and British universities, which now incorporate 'works by Asian, African, and Latin American writers as well as by women writers' (Quinn, 2006:p.64).

In Michael Field's case, these 'canon openers' were feminist critics such as Holly Laird, Yopie Prins, Christine White, and Virginia Blain, whose real attempt to canonise the poetic duo began in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Michael Field were first considered as part of a group of women poets such as Alice Meynell, Amy Levy, and Rosamund Marriott Watson, and then they were associated with their fellow aesthetes including Walter Pater, John Gray, and Charles Ricketts (Thain, 2007:p.11). Early critics were mainly concerned with the mystery of their pseudonym and sexuality, but later they started exploring various topics regarding their work. In addition, although their pagan poetry was early critics' favourite, later critics also showed interest in their Catholic verses and closet plays. Since their rediscovery, some of their better-known poems appeared in every new anthology of Victorian poetry (Thain & Vadillo, 2012:p.70), which is a good way of making them more popular.

Still, in order to ensure Michael Field's place among established writers, continuous steps must be taken in that direction. Some of these are best described in Thain and Vadillo's 2012 article which explains how they edited their book titled *Michael Field, the Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*. The first step is to make Michael Field's work more accessible to scholars and students: 'It is clear that for any New Woman author to enter the canon, it is of paramount importance to have printed materials that can offer new avenues of research *and* support teaching needs' (p.71). The second step is to make sure that the new books written about Michael Field are edited critically or presented with some scholarly apparatus (Ibid). The third step includes the choice of a well-known publishing house that will reach an international audience and produce an affordable edition because 'a "handy", easy-to-use scholarly edition of their work would facilitate their transmission and encourage new scholars and students to work on this poet' (Ibid, pp.71-72). Moreover, since publishers always need to be convinced that the author is marketable and will sell, this means that these new books must be interesting and useful to a wide readership. Therefore, Michael Field's work has to

<sup>15</sup> After Mary Sturgeon's full-length study of Michael Field's life and work had appeared in 1922, there were almost no books published about them until the 1970s, when a revival of decadent literature led to the first contemporary critical accounts of their work. According to Thain and Vadillo (2009), the key figures of this revival were J. G. Paul Delaney, Henri Locard, Kenneth R. Ireland, and Jan McDonald, who 'laid the foundations for the larger-scale revival of interest after 1995' (p.44).

be explored within a wider context of turn-of-the-century poetry and, in addition, major reviews of their work have to be included (Ibid, p.73). Finally, realising 'that the new interest in *fin-de-siècle* women's poetry often rests on a small section of the oeuvre', Thain and Vadillo conclude that their final task as editors was to represent 'Michael Field as a poet in his/her/their own right and to present the breadth of their poetic work in a context that indicates something of the richness of their intellectual influences' (Ibid, p.75).

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## КАНОН ИЛИ НЕКАНОН: НЕОБИЧНИ СЛУЧАЈ МАЈКЛА ФИЛДА

*Резиме*

Иако су написале више од тридесет драма, девет збирки поезије, око тридесет збирки дневника и хиљаде писама, Кетрин Бредли и Идит Купер, тетка и нећака, родоскрвне љубавнице и пјесникиње, популарније под заједничким мушким псеудонимом Мајкл Филд, биле су готово непознате широј књижевној јавности све до седамдесетих година 20. вијека, када су феминистичке критичарке поново откриле ове двије ‘мање важне’ викторијанске пјесникиње. Оно што је прво привукло пажњу критичара када је у питању овај пар била је њихова двострука пјесничка персона и природа њиховог односа, што је кулминирало у револуционарној књизи Лилијан Фејдерман *Превазићи љубав мушкараца* (1981). Током деведесетих година критичари као што су Изобел Армстронг, Вирџинија Блејн, Џозеф Бристоу, Холи Лерд, Анџела Лејтон, Јопи Принс, Марта Висинис и Крис Вајт фокус су пребацили на њихово дјело, прво на поезију, а онда и на драме и дневнике. Коначно, прве двије деценије 20. вијека потврдиле су повећано занимање за Мајкла Филда, и критичарке попут Марион Тејн и Ане Парехо Вадињо почеле су да изучавају овај пјеснички дуо у ширем контексту књижевности са краја 19. вијека.

Овај рад детаљно ће испитати различите могуће разлоге из којих Бредли и Купер, упркос раним позитивним критикама и уважавању неких од великих књижевника њиховог доба, никада нису добиле мјесто међу британским канонским писцима. Неке од стаза које ће бити истражене јесу њихов флуидни квир идентитет и одбијање да дефинишу свој пол; њихова склоност писању застарјелих жанрова попут историјских драма у стиховима; чињеница да су биле жене естетке, чија се поезија нашла у расцјепу између паганства и католичанства, хомосексуалне и хетеросексуалне љубави, женствености и мужевности, викторијанског доба и модернизма, те традиције и модерности; затим њихова неспремност да компромитују своју визију зарад популарности и комерцијалног успјеха; као и њихова одлучност да стварају лијепо

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дизајниране књиге, штампане у ријетким и ограниченим издањима, због чега су биле познате само унутар уског круга познавалаца књижевности.

► **Кључне ријечи:** канон, жене пјесници, квир, родне улоге, естетизам, декаденција, католичанство.

Preuzeto: 25. 9. 2023.  
Prihvaćeno: 20. 10. 2023.