

## Michael Field as an Aesthetic Poet

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### Abstract

Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Emma Cooper were a lesbian couple who published eight volumes of poetry and twenty-seven verse plays under the joint male pseudonym of ‘Michael Field’.<sup>1</sup> Michael Field reject the form of fictional narrative, which is characteristic of the majority of Victorian women’s writing. Instead, they adopt modes of verse drama and lyric poetry, employing poetic tone and lyrical complexity, emulating the dominant male poets of the nineteenth century. Many scholars have shown that the Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century is not an exclusively male concern; however, most of the women authors they study are novelists and essayists rather than poets. They ignore the importance of women aesthetes’ involvement with the aesthetic idea of poetry. I thus wish to emphasize the significance of poetry written by Bradley and Cooper, examine their contribution to an understanding of British Aestheticism under a male pseudonym, and their creation of a lyric voice which is both male and female. I want to deepen the awareness of Michael Field’s connection to Aestheticism by situating their stance toward some specific aesthetic issues—the love of art for art’s sake, and the passion for new sensation in poetry—its rightful context. Michael Field is important for two reasons. First, their work epitomized the leading ideas of Aestheticism, such as the gendering of poetry, the poetics of sensation, and the importance of ekphrasis, as practiced by Rossetti, Swinburne, and Pater. Yet their independent spirit led them to new ways of expressing and reflecting on these issues. In claiming a lyric identity inside authorized male discourses, Bradley and Cooper recomposed Aesthetic convention and created revisionary Aesthetic poetry, situating their innovative work in the space between tradition and subversion.

Keywords: Michael Field, aesthetic poetry, male pseudonym, lyric identity

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<sup>1</sup> Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, the most recent editors of Michael Field’s work, argue that the distinction between Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper needs to be made in a more nuanced way than has been the case in recent critical studies. Following the lead of Thain and Vadillo, whenever I discuss ‘Michael Field’, I use the third-person plural ‘they’; whenever I mention Bradley or Cooper, I use the third-person feminine pronoun.