



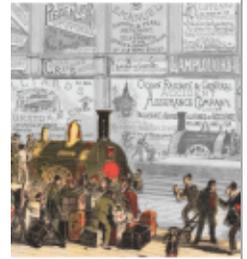
PROJECT MUSE®

Michael Field: Decadent Moderns ed. by Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo (review)

Veronica Alfano

Victorian Studies, Volume 64, Number 1, Autumn 2021, pp. 165-167 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/856471>

My main critique of a book that purports to address “Exquisite Materials” is that, while it deftly and subtly addresses the theoretical aspects of material culture and thing theory, it skims the surface, so to speak, of an actual archival material culture analysis of the objects themselves. The close readings remain largely textual (particularly in the final chapter on Wilde’s letters) and to a certain extent visual, but aside from the archival discovery of the Furneaux case, these are familiar actors in the historical playbook, though their episodic juxtaposition and theorization is novel. *Exquisite Materials* productively opens the door for further scholarly investigations on what the actual materiality of these often lavishly and lovingly described objects can tell us in dialogue with other kinds of sources, including the brightly hued silks and velvets that survive in abundance in multiple museum collections. How could readings of these materials contribute to our understanding of queer style seen through texts and images about objects? Overall, Joseph’s book is thought-provoking and lays a strong foundation for reconsidering what queer style might be during the later Victorian period.

ALISON MATTHEWS DAVID

X University

10.2979/victorianstudies.64.1.27

Michael Field: Decadent Moderns, edited by Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo; pp. ix + 289. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019, \$80.00.

As Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo point out in the introduction to their impressive and timely collection *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*, to study Michael Field (that is, Katharine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper) is to encounter a series of “contradictions, paradoxes, and complexities” (3). Here are two women who publish under a man’s name, a lesbian couple who convert to Catholicism and who blend Christian with pagan images, a pair of poets heavily influenced by the ancient past who nonetheless embrace modernity. True to its apparently paradoxical name, this book links Field to late-Victorian, twentieth-century, and contemporary cultures, thus “challenging traditional boundaries between fin-de-siècle and modernist studies” (21). The interdisciplinarity of these excellent essays, which touch on topics ranging from disability studies to book art to environmental humanities, serves both to transcend and to enrich the more familiar conceptual frameworks of Decadence and aestheticism. I will respond to the editors’ call to “seek out thematic and formal connections” in *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* by discussing the chapters in an order of my own choosing (16).

In chapter 1, Kate Thomas explores Field’s fascination with plant life, positioning them not against but within nature. Readings of poems and diary entries—along with a wonderfully detailed analysis of Bradley and Cooper’s insignia, the bramble-bough, as a symbol of intergenerational love—link Field to queer ecology and queer temporality, evoking “a lush and present world, a riot of intertwinings . . . a cyclical, fleshy foreverness” (32). Thomas complicates this picture, confirming the volume’s commitment to interdisciplinarity, by showing how Field describes the botanical realm via the language of both gender and race.

Like Thomas's investigation of racist imagery, Kristin Mahoney's assessment in chapter 10 of the relationship between Field and the sculptor Eric Gill reminds us that Decadent dissidence and its modernist afterlives "did not always result in just or liberatory practices" (235). Of course, Mahoney does not condone Gill's sexual abuse of his daughters. But she does astutely observe that for Gill and Field alike, a queer and highly eroticized version of Catholicism generates "radical questioning of kinship structures" (244). Perhaps this chapter will inspire more critical responses to the incestuous nature of Cooper and Bradley's relationship, which has rarely been addressed.

Vadillo's chapter echoes Mahoney's interest in sculpture and establishes a useful blueprint for reading Field through material history. She makes a convincing case that a "sculptural aesthetic" underlies the themes and forms of Field's early poetry, inspires the beautiful white bindings of what she calls their "marble books," and informs "the very concept of their fragmented authorship" (68). In writing the verse drama *Bellerophon* (1881), for instance, Field not only draws on observations of broken statues at the British Museum but also employs sculptural methods as metaphors for joint composition.

To date, criticism of Field has tended to concentrate on their lyrics. But Joseph Bristow joins Vadillo in turning instead to their verse dramas—in particular, *A Question of Memory* (1893) and *Attila, My Attila!* (1895), both of which received extremely negative reviews. Evaluating Bradley and Cooper's responses to the criticism they received from strangers and friends alike, Bristow's engaging essay ties some of these critiques to the way in which Field's "antiquated and avant-garde" dramas seem to hover "both behind and ahead of a modern theatrical world" (145). *Attila, My Attila!*, for instance, transforms a Roman princess into a sexually liberated New Woman.

Bristow charts Field's fraught relationships with friends who did not consistently admire their work; Parker takes up this concern in chapter 4 via art historian Mary Costelloe, whom Cooper and Bradley met in 1891 and who would later criticize *Attila, My Attila!*. Deftly juxtaposing Costelloe's writing with Field's ekphrastic poetic volume *Sight and Song* (1892), Parker associates the three women with "a shared project of art historical investigation" that privileged "tactile values, female spectatorship, and collaboration" (101–2). Costelloe's influence on Field, which Parker also detects in *Underneath the Bough* (1893), has hitherto been eclipsed by critics' interest in the influence of her romantic partner, the art critic Bernard Berenson. Yet these figures form "a mutually inspiring quartet" (102).

Another quartet emerges in Leire Barrera-Medrano's thought-provoking chapter, which like Parker's brings to light a crucial but largely overlooked influence on Field. Barrera-Medrano argues that Cooper and Bradley's Catholic verse, particularly *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913), draws on Spanish mysticism via the paired figures of St. John of the Cross and his mentor St. Teresa of Ávila. While St. John allows Field to "purge their past sins" and resituate their Catholicism within a "decadent frame," St. Teresa provides the two women with a subtly homoerotic "language of female ecstasy" (219).

Jill R. Ehnenn also focuses on Field's relatively neglected post-conversion poetry in chapter 8. She demonstrates that *Poems of Adoration* and *Mystic Trees* combine devotional and queer elements, emphasizing their continuity with Field's earlier work. Additionally, she uses the lens of disability studies to relate these two volumes to Cooper's physical

suffering after her cancer diagnosis. The acts of “being, seeing, and desiring an embodied (female) subject in pain” allow Field to “articulate spiritual and homoerotic love and desire” (189). Ehnenn’s readings of metrical nuance in Field are especially sensitive and persuasive.

The intertwining of sacred and profane, which Ehnenn and several others address, is central to Alex Murray’s chapter as well. Murray scrutinizes Field’s shifting attitudes toward tourism, insightfully proposing that the verse drama *Noontide Branches* (1899) is marked by their conception of their own travel as both “spiritual pilgrimage and Bacchic revelry” (167). In striking this balance, he adds, they are negotiating the influences of Berenson and of their devoutly Catholic friend Alice Trusted. Here is another reminder that Field’s male muses and mentors should not overshadow the women who inspired them.

Fittingly, Margaret D. Stetz turns to the gendered nature of inspiration itself in chapter 2. She ingeniously reconstructs two origin stories for a poem from Field’s collection *Long Ago* (1889). In the first story, their work becomes “a kind of sacralized vessel containing the presence of the godlike Robert Browning” (54), with whom they imagine a relationship at once sensual and distant; in the second story, Havelock Ellis is a less satisfying muse who spurs the two women to portray “a female figure who accesses her own sense of power” (63). The intellectual and erotic bonds between Bradley and Cooper, Stetz concludes, allow them to draw immense inspiration from each other.

Fragrance, the focus of a delightfully original chapter by Catherine Maxwell, illustrates Stetz’s closing point about Field’s penchant for grounding poetic creation in sensual pleasure and in love. Poems and diary entries from the 1890s show that Cooper and Bradley employed the language of perfume to express their desire for one another, their identity as artists, and their concept of the imagination. In “The Grand Mogul” (1894), a rose’s scent—which mixes feminine sweetness with notes of masculine tobacco, leather, and brass—produces what Maxwell names “essence of Michael Field” (163).

A volume that begins with flora ends with fauna. As a “beloved poetic image pushed to crisis,” posits Maxwell, a dying rose in “The Grand Mogul” reveals the roots of lyric expression (160–1); likewise, Sarah E. Kersh interrogates the nature of the lyric “I” in Field’s poems of mourning for their dog Whym Chow. The traditional dichotomy between a singular speaking lover and a singular silent beloved cannot be sustained when a poet is two people who have incorporated their cherished pet into a kind of Trinity. Kersh skillfully uses the device of metonymy to link *Whym Chow, Flame of Love* (1914) to the elegiac and the amatory poetic traditions, asking how these poems shape Field’s “formulation of authorship, devotion, and queer family” (264).

Michael Field: Decadent Moderns is a joy to read, due not only to the strength of each individual essay but also to the remarkable variety of their themes and approaches—a variety that will provide fertile ground for future work. With a crop of books on this once-neglected poet expected in 2022, including several written by these contributors, it is an exciting time indeed for Field scholarship.

VERONICA ALFANO
Macquarie University

10.2979/victorianstudies.64.1.28