CHAPTER 1

Becoming 'Michael Field'

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By the logic of the authorial persona they created, Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper did not write the books of lyric poetry and verse drama they published between 1884 and 1914. Bradley and Cooper considered Michael Field the author and called 'him' the works' creator. Their commitment to the joint persona is instructive: it reveals that Michael Field is not just a pseudonym but also an imaginative construct that enabled Bradley and Cooper's poetic output. It is useful to consider the persona as itself a creative genre, one with specific formal properties and communicative modes. In creating Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper show that they consider identity and authorship akin to the poetic genres with which they work: adaptable and malleable conventions available for reimagining. Bradley and Cooper revised inherited literary forms in their verse dramas, their sonnets, their masque, and their Elizabethan-style songs. Similarly, Bradley and Cooper remake inherited identity categories and reform subjectivity. Playing with form is one way for Bradley and Cooper to express what they think and feel, as well as who they are. This chapter will address why Bradley and Cooper created an alternate artistic identity, how their pseudonyms evolved to become Michael Field, and the ways in which understanding Bradley and Cooper's carefully constructed poetic persona can help scholars and readers understand their ideas about gender, sex, art, identity, and autonomy.

It is clear that Bradley and Cooper understood the gendered terrain of the late-Victorian publishing environment. To be a 'poetess', or even a 'lady poet', is to be subject to gendered norms dictating what modes of expression are appropriate for a woman, what topics are seemly for her to address. Early in their career as Michael Field, Bradley explained in a letter to Robert Browning why she and Cooper deemed it necessary to be known as a man. Public knowledge that two women authored the 1884 dramas *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*, Bradley averred, 'would indeed be utter ruin to us' because 'we have many things to say the world will not

tolerate from a woman's lips'.[1] If they were known as women writers, they would 'be stifled in drawing-room conventionalities'.[2] Throughout their career, Bradley and Cooper insisted that reviewers refer to Michael Field as singular and masculine. 'Michael Field is always one', writes Bradley to John Gray, explaining that when reviewing their poetry, Gray should use 'this writer & he when a pronoun must come in'.[3] To be justly evaluated as poets, Bradley and Cooper recognised the need to be masculine and singular.

Bradley and Cooper gain authority from their identity as Michael Field, who, when presumed to be a young male writer, is regarded as 'a poet of notable endowments and distinguished powers'.[4] In his review of *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*, William Watson argues that Michael Field's dialogue follows an emotional logic that defies the dictates of continuity. What might seem a fault, he writes, is in fact a virtue, 'one which he shares with Shakespeare'.[5] This kind of comparison occurs regularly when reviewers assume that Michael Field is a man. For instance, a speech from *Canute the Great* (1887) inspires this critic's comment: 'No one can ignore the masculine power in that passage, – a passage which we should think grand if it occurred in Shakespeare.'[6] How vital the masculine persona was to the critics' laudatory reception of Michael Field appears in the tone and tenor of those reviews that appeared after the secret of Michael Field's identity became known. In later reviews, critics are explicitly dismayed at the unladylike subject matter and unseemly tenor of historical events represented in Michael Field's plays. Of *Stephania* (1893), the *Spectator* writes: 'We cannot but feel great regret to find the poetical power so firmly connected with the composite name of "Michael Field" directed to a subject much better left alone.'[7] The reviewer suggests that his opinions of Michael Field's work would change if only the subjects were more appropriately feminine; he ends by noting 'we shall not be sorry if we should help in any way to tempt back Michael Field's dramatic pen into spheres of more legitimate action, where unhealthy suggestiveness is not, and where truer human sympathy leaves little to offend.'[8] It is not only the subject matter that reviewers considered problematic. The reviewer of *Attila, my Attila!* (1896) also questions whether 'the most harmless and well-behaved of ladies' are up to the task of writing dramatic tragedy.[9] Approving of the 'picture-poems' in their volume of lyric poetry *Sight and Song* (1892), this reviewer suggests that Michael Field return to a poetic genre more appropriate to women's abilities: 'If Michael Field will but write us gentle, gracious, intimate things, such as some we have under that name already, the pseudonym may achieve a place among the poets

of the time. But the man – or woman – who would write tragedies must sing to a mightier music.'[10]

Nonetheless, 'Michael Field' functions as more than just a screen to hide their female bodies, a fact demonstrated when Bradley and Cooper continue to publish under this name well after the facts of their identity were generally known. Michael Field is, conceptually, the artist brought into being through the collaboration of Bradley and Cooper. Writing to Browning, Bradley insists on 'this philosophic truth': 'Edith and I make a veritable Michael'.[11] 'Veritable' in this context is noteworthy: Bradley emphasises the genuineness and reality of Michael Field. To be sure, the truth of Michael Field is purely conceptual, but by choosing to qualify it as 'philosophic', Bradley indicates the concept's relation to knowledge, reality, and being. More than a necessary fiction, Michael Field is an imaginative fact that enables a relationship among Bradley, Cooper, and their poetic persona to freely engage ideas, create art, and produce new forms of knowledge. Starting from a clear-eyed understanding of gender politics but drawing on the wider cultural debates of the late nineteenth century concerning aestheticism, decadence, historiography, religion, and sexuality, Bradley and Cooper intentionally craft this poetic persona, in turn reimagining authorship and identity, in order to create a form of selfhood that served their aesthetic and professional goals.

It took Bradley and Cooper some experimentation before finding a lasting way of rendering their poetic partnership. Bradley published her first book *The New Minnesinger and Other Poems* (1875) under the pseudonym Arran Leigh, and when she joined forces with Cooper to write *Bellerophôn* (1881), they chose to publish as 'Arran and Isla Leigh'. These names suggest a legacy of women writers to whom they are indebted. Bradley and Cooper begin by adopting ambiguously gendered forenames like those used by the Brontë sisters when they chose to write as Ellis, Action, and Currer Bell. Bradley and Cooper add the surname of Aurora Leigh, the heroine of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic novel-poem tracing the woman poet's development. These pen names did not last, however, perhaps because they were too autobiographically suggestive. They reveal Bradley and Cooper's duality and do not fully hide their gender. More importantly, when they add 'Isla' to the already-existing author 'Arran Leigh', they suggest that an older, more experienced writer has been joined by a younger one. Not only is this a biographically accurate rendering of the relationship, it also implies a hierarchal relationship between the writers rather than a partnership of equals. Finally, reviews of *Bellerophôn* would not have encouraged Bradley

and Cooper to preserve Arran and Isla Leigh. The book received an unkind reception, with the *Athenaeum*'s summative comment a particularly savage but otherwise unexceptional example: 'We have read volumes more worthless, but hardly more tedious.'[12]

In 1882, Bradley and Cooper toyed with using 'John Cooley' to represent their authorial self. Manuscript versions of *Callirrhoë* held in the Bodleian Libraries show both Bradley and Cooper signing 'J. Cooley' or 'John Cooley' in fair copies of partial drafts.[13] This name, which suggests that the pen name comprises equal parts of **Coo**per and Brad**ley**, eliminates the implicit hierarchy of 'Arran and Isla Leigh' and embraces the masculine identity they will eventually adopt. But 'John Cooley' never reached print, suggesting that Bradley and Cooper were looking for more than just equality and masculinity. The evidence suggests that they were seeking an alternate identity to inhabit, a way of being that was entirely separate from their pre-existing selves. Michael Field is not part Cooper and part Bradley (as 'Cooley' suggests) but an entirely new poetic subjectivity that results from the artistic collaboration of Bradley and Cooper. Unlike 'Arran and Isla Leigh' or 'John Cooley', 'Michael Field' does not suggest two individuals who collaborate to create art but an individual mind at work: Michael Field himself is the artist. Michael Field, the artist, is usefully considered Bradley and Cooper's first great creative endeavour, an intentionally crafted form that does specific social and communicative work for the co-authors.

Bradley and Cooper formed Michael Field in response to the specific publishing pressures of the late century as well as the social and cultural exigencies of their milieu. One such pressure is what Virginia Jackson has termed 'lyricization': the process by which the many types of lyric poem (song, sonnet, elegy, ballad, hymn, and ode) become undifferentiated from each other and disconnected from their historical uses. Instead, they are understood primarily in terms of the broader concept of lyric.[14] Thus, all of these short poem forms are interpreted the way lyric poems are now generally understood: as spontaneous personal expressions and intimate revelations of selfhood (the dramatic monologue – a poem in the form of a speech by an imagined character – developed in part to exclude the possibility of lyric reading: the poet's voice cannot be conflated with that of the poem's speaker). The lyricisation of poetry and the mode of interpretation it facilitates is especially perilous for women writers, whose artless personal feelings are assumed in every phrase, given the cultural biases that deem women 'naturally' emotional and expressive. A male poet, by this cultural logic, is artistic and deliberate when expressing emotion, because men are 'naturally' self-disciplined and stoic.

Creating Michael Field allowed Bradley and Cooper to sidestep questions of authorial distance that marked the increasing lyricisation of nineteenth-century poetry. When Bradley and Cooper become Michael Field, they create what Michel Foucault calls 'the author-function', a constructed social position – but not an individual – that is responsible for a text.[15] Because of Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper could be both an authoritative masculine voice and two women; both accountable for a text and distant from it; and both the subject that speaks and the object spoken to. Conceiving Michael Field was not an esoteric exercise in literary theory; conceiving Michael Field offered Bradley and Cooper freedom to fully inhabit their literary imaginations and liberated them from readers' too-close identification of author and work. Michael Field's dual role as mask and author-function was apparent from the beginning of 'his' existence: writing to Robert Browning in 1882, Cooper claims that 'This happy union of two in work & aspiration is sheltered & expressed by "Michael Field".'[16] In other words, the poetic persona is both a shelter from the storms of misogynist assumptions and an expression of their joint aesthetic.

The collaboration among Bradley, Cooper, and Michael Field results in a poetic voice that is always constructed and never unitary. Although all of Michael Field's poetry is written as though it is intensely personal, the persona means that their verse can never be read as an expression of Bradley or Cooper's individual subjectivity. Moreover, Michael Field gravitates towards verse forms that complicate the relation of speaker to text. Drama, most obviously, is never expected to represent the 'true' voice of its author but rather to present characters with various subject positions. Similarly, in expanding Sapphic fragments in the collection of lyric poems *Long Ago* (1889), Michael Field puts the subjectivity of Sappho – and not of Bradley and Cooper – into the foreground. The songs that appear in *Underneath the Bough* (1893) – a volume modelled on the Elizabethan songbook – take on the voice of 'the singer', who may or may not be the song's writer. A reimagined voice of lyric verse, freed from communicating intense subjectivity, is another result of Bradley and Cooper's joint poetic persona.

Michael Field's conceptual underpinning demonstrates Bradley and Cooper's immersion in modern modes of thought, including modernity's dismantling of the stable subject. Bradley and Cooper engaged in continual study of literature, philosophy, sexology, and history, and their wide-ranging reading influenced their challenges to notions of the fixed, divinely ordered self. Understanding that individual selves were constructed, they were also free to construct a separate authorial self. Scholars can see Bradley figuring out how to represent Michael Field in

her letters to Scottish art critic (and frequent contributor to the *Academy*) John Miller Gray. In October 1886, for example, Bradley refers to Michael Field in the third person, separating her identity from that of the poet: 'On reflection Michael thinks he would rather The Gift of Fate did not go to The Academy.'[17] But she immediately equivocates her relation to Michael Field, demonstrating the complexities of identity that she and Cooper are negotiating: 'He – I – or we – send 3 other poems we sh[oul]d like printed.'[18] Later letters, however, have Bradley writing consistently about Michael Field using a third-person singular pronoun while signing herself 'Michael'.

Ironically, although Bradley and Cooper resisted a persona made up of pieces of themselves (as suggested by the name 'Cooley'), they came to inhabit elements of the Michael Field persona in their everyday life. Bradley became known as 'Michael' and Cooper as either 'Field' or 'Henry'. Unlike 'John Cooley', which posits a persona comprised equally of Bradley and Cooper, 'Michael Field' precedes their self-identification as Michael and Field. Bradley and Cooper come to inhabit the poetic persona, but it is not *a priori* made up of the two. Indeed, by becoming Michael and Field in their lived lives, Bradley and Cooper reveal that their own identities are self-created, just like Michael Field's. And as Michael and Henry (rather than Katharine and Edith), Bradley and Cooper are able to reimagine their roles as late-Victorian women and to spur others to similarly re-conceptualise categories of gender, sex, and number. For those with whom they are intimate, Bradley is consistently known as 'Michael' and Cooper as 'Henry' or 'Field'. Their pronoun of choice is 'he'; the two together are 'Michael Field'. Even letters from Father John Gray, who initiated Bradley into the Catholic Church when she converted in 1907 (and who himself was a fin-de-siècle decadent poet before his own conversion), were addressed to 'Michael' and referred to Cooper as 'Henry', demonstrating that church doctrine did not stand in the way of Michael Field's preferred markers of selfhood.

Imagining their poetic self as 'Michael Field' (as opposed to 'John Cooley') also frees Bradley and Cooper from full equal collaboration. In theory, Michael Field jointly authors all of Bradley and Cooper's published works.[19] In practice, the level of collaboration between Bradley and Cooper varies widely and has no effect on whether a work bears Michael Field's name on the title page. Their two volumes of devotional poetry, *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913), are the best-known examples of Bradley and Cooper writing separately while publishing under their joint persona. But even before these publications appeared, certain

works were almost entirely composed by Bradley or Cooper; the contribution of the other was primarily – as is true of the devotional volumes – in editing, copying, and arranging. For example, on 31 May 1894, Cooper writes about the unpublished play *Equal Love*, calling it 'a great little thing in our most individual style'.[20] In other words, she deems it both great and entirely characteristic of Michael Field. And yet, Cooper continues: 'I wish I had had a more intimate part in it than that of licking it into shape, staging it & writing it out – but the leaves & flowers of the wreath belong to my Love, and a twist or two of stem to me. But it is a joy to me for her to be glorified.'[21] Because Michael Field is the true author, Bradley and Cooper are comfortable writing separately within that identity. Michael Field had never been half-Bradley and half-Cooper but rather the persona that either one or both of them inhabited as artists. Indeed, from the time of their first published work, Bradley and Cooper acknowledge their different authorial roles. Writing to Browning of *Callirrhoë*, Cooper assures him that 'The Faun scene is mine … Emathion also is almost wholly mine.'[22] In a first edition copy of *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund* held in the Bodleian Library, Bradley remembers their divided writing duties so well that she underlines in red the parts written by Cooper.[23]

In creating new names and social identities, Bradley and Cooper could make conscious decisions about elements of personality and character generally accepted as given. Bradley and Cooper could not alter their biological sex, but they could redefine and reform their gender expression. While they always attired themselves in fashionable women's dress, they disdained many traditional markers of female life: heterosexual marriage, children, attention to domestic duties. Such freedom allowed them to pursue many privileges of male life: membership in a club, a literary career, homeownership, foreign travel, smoking, and university education. Most importantly, these choices gained for them independence of thought and action, unrestricted by assumptions of what is proper for women. At the same time, their conscious self-creation allowed them to blur conventional gendered boundaries so as to preserve those elements of traditional femininity – their attire, their pursuit of male mentorship, and their sentimental attachment to pets – that accorded with their sense of self.

A formalist conception of gender and sexuality foregrounds the ways in which Michael Field, Bradley, and Cooper intervene in their culture's codes of identity. Often acting as shorthand for consolidated social assumptions, gender is a transhistorical category whose expression can nonetheless change in response to historical conditions. We might think of Michael Field as the identity equivalent of a form like the dramatic

monologue: it is not just another type of lyric but a form developed as a specific response to the way lyric was being expressed in the mid nineteenth century. This form challenged existing conventions inherited from Romantic verse to enable alternate expressions of poetic subjectivity. Michael Field, for Bradley and Cooper, serves the same function. Michael Field is a new form that allows two women to challenge gendered ideas of authorship, conventional notions of lyric subjectivity, and social dictates on appropriately feminine activities.

'Michael Field' authorises freedom from inherited roles and freedom to create art. Bradley and Cooper's philosophical orientation accords with modern ideas of language and their influence on identity, historiography, knowledge in general. Their own theories of tragedy anticipate the work of Friedrich Nietzsche on the subject: they synthesised philosophical, historical, and aesthetic ideas and integrated them into both art and life. Because Michael Field's works so often engage in historical representations and stem from research into previous eras, a modern idea of historiography is implicit in much of their work: that historical truth hinges on representation. In building selves outside of inherited forms, in creating a dual self that challenged Enlightenment individualism, in re-imagining forms of morality, and in courting absolute artistic freedom, Michael Field embraced modernity.

Notes

1. Letter from Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, British Library, London, Michael Field Correspondence Vol. VII, Add MS 46866, fol. 17r.
2. Bradley to Browning, 23 November 1884, fol. 17v.
3. Letter from Bradley to John Gray [c. 1911/1912], quoted in *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, eds. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2009), 347.
4. 'Some Minor Poets' [Review of *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*], *Saturday Review* 58 (9 August 1884): 193.
5. [William Watson], 'A New Poet' [Review of *Callirrhoë* and *Fair Rosamund*], *Liverpool Mercury* (29 October 1884): 7.
6. 'Michael Field's New Plays' [Review of *Canute the Great* and *The Cup of Water*], *Spectator* 60 (1887): 1536.
7. 'Stephania', *Spectator* 70 (1893): 163.
8. 'Stephania', 163.
9. 'The New Woman – And the Old' [Review of *Attila, My Attila!*], *Daily Chronicle* (20 November 1895): 5.
10. 'The New Woman', 5.

11. Letter from Bradley to Browning, 23 November 1884, fol. 16r.
12. Review of *Bellerôphon*, by Arran and Isla Leigh, *Athenaeum*, no. 2806 (1881): 173.
13. Partial drafts of *Callirrhoë*, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, MS. Eng. Poet.d.74 and MS. Eng. Poet.d.75.
14. Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.
15. Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley, *The Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 211.
16. Cooper to Browning, 30 May 1882, BL, Michael Field Correspondence, Vol. VII, Add MS 46866, fol. 10r.
17. Bradley to John Miller Gray, October 1886, BL, Michael Field Correspondence, Vol. III, Add MS 45853, fol. 126.
18. Bradley to Gray, 14 October 1886, fol. 126.
19. The only exceptions are the dramas published anonymously in an attempt to bypass the critics' bias against the two women behind the Michael Field pseudonym: the anonymous *Borgia* (1905) and the three volumes of verse drama published by 'the author of *Borgia*': *Queen Mariamne* (1908), *The Tragedy of Pardon* and *Diane* (1911), and *The Accuser, Tristan de Léonois*, and *A Messiah* (1911).
20. Edith Cooper [EC], *Works and Days* (31 May 1894), BL Add MS 46782, fol. 50v.
21. EC, *Works and Days* (31 May 1894), BL Add MS 46782, fol. 50v.
22. Cooper to Browning, 30 May 1882, fol. 10r.
23. Michael Field, *Callirrhoë*: *Fair Rosamund*, Bodleian Library, Oxford University, MS. Eng.poet.e.70.