

Finding Love in the Archives: Editing the “Lost” Love Letters of “Michael Field”

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We attain the very essence and underlying reality of rubbish in a packet of yellow love-letters. Whether we read them or not matters little. They are the sacred writings, the civilizing scriptures of mankind.

Michael Field
“A Lumber-Room”

ON a cold morning in early 1999, I suffered my own personal experience of what has come to be known as Archive Fever.¹ I was in New York to read the Pierpont Morgan Library’s small collection of letters exchanged between Katharine Harris Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Emma Cooper (1862–1913): aunt and niece, lifelong lovers, and the collaborative writers known as “Michael Field.” In the best tradition of postgraduate research, I slept poorly on a floor with a cat determined to avenge my exploitation of a tenuous acquaintance with its owners. At the library, a polite librarian told me they held no such letters. I had, I assured her, photocopies at hand; but she would only take my contact number and promise to investigate. I walked away in despair. I had only four days left in the United

States. The next day, the librarian rang to say she had found some uncatalogued letters she thought would interest me: I do not know which of us sounded more surprised.

The Pierpont Morgan Library's eight letters with their mysterious provenance² form only a small part of a "lost" correspondence between Bradley and Cooper. These brief notes inscribed with passion, devotion, concern and Bradley's own quirky humor³ were genuinely lost until Virginia Blain discovered them in the 1990s. There is, however, a far larger body of "lost" Bradley–Cooper correspondence. "Lost" not because the letters sat uncatalogued in archival storage like those at the Pierpont Morgan Library, but rather, "lost" like Poe's *Purloined Letter*, "beneath the nose of the whole world" (1978, 990). These letters, it seems, were lost not because of their location but in spite of it. Since 1974⁴ they have rested, duly foliated and catalogued, in one of the world's busiest public repositories: the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford.

I first became aware of the existence of the Bodleian letters when I heard Virginia Blain speak on Michael Field at an Australasian Victorian Studies Conference. Like many, I had never heard of them. I was intrigued by the notion of an aunt–niece collaboration, and captivated by the now familiar image of "A Prologue":

My love and I took hands and swore,
Against the world, to be
Poets and lovers evermore (Field 1898, 50)

Field's poetry has recently become the subject of several major studies, and they have reemerged as important nineteenth-century women writers. Their work is central to literary debates on women in Decadence, Sapphic rewritings, and women's collaborative writing.⁵ Blain's paper—a version of her article, "'Michael Field, the Two-headed Nightingale': Lesbian Text as Palimpsest" (1995)—noted that a significant body of personal letters were held by the Bodleian Library, but these letters remained inexplicably neglected. One prominent scholar had even decried the lack of a Bradley–Cooper correspondence (Blain 1995, 246; White 1990, 198). I approached Blain and, following her paper trail, began work on my edition of *The Fowl and The Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876–1909* (2008). This edition publishes for the first time the Bodleian letters alongside those from the Pierpont Morgan, as well as a small number of letters held by the British Library in London. As I researched, I too noted the continued neglect of the Bradley–Cooper

letters in writings on Michael Field.⁶ Yet, in direct contrast to my later difficulties accessing the Pierpont Morgan letters, the Bodleian letters were quickly identified using the *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters* (1988, 307). Was it as Dupin suggests, “the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident?” (Poe 1987, 990).

While it might seem that I claim for myself alone the wisdom of Dupin, with all the solipsism of the graduate student, let me hasten to add that I believe this loss is neither simple nor self-evident. One of the basic principles of archival research is that things disappear. Sacred writings or old rubbish—either way, boxes of paper get lost or damaged as they sit in the “lumber-room” of family home or even public institution—read only by those with will and determination (or whose plight is so pathetic that it stirs even the hearts of over-tasked librarians). This fragility is further complicated by the politics of the archive, and particularly the gendered processes that complicate research into “minor” women writers. The gendered archive and the difficulties associated with locating and accessing women’s life-writing are increasingly areas of interest to archival scholars. They are the subject of a collection of essays by Marlene Kadar and Helen Buss, *Working in Women’s Archives* (2001). In this article, I similarly argue that when the history of the Bodleian letters is traced, the role of gender in determining the time and place of deposition of Field’s letters becomes apparent. This case was further complicated by the difficulties of reading a woman-centered correspondence that privileges pet names and familial humor over clear dates and identities. The significance of gender in shaping our reception of Michael Field’s lifewriting, and these letters in particular, has gone largely unrecognized by researchers. By focusing on three letters from this collection, I demonstrate how the decision not to include the letters in the best-known Michael Field collection has influenced narratives of lesbian sexuality surrounding the poets.

As “Michael Field,” Bradley and Cooper were the authors of nine volumes of lyric poetry and twenty-five historical verse dramas. In the Britain of the 1880s, the emergence of Michael Field as an exciting new poet was lauded by the literary journals of the period: *The Spectator*, *The Academy*, and *The Athenaeum*.⁷ Robert Browning declared their first volume of plays, *Callirrhoe; Fair Rosamund* (1884), demonstrated an “indubitable poetic genius” (Field 1933, 2; Browning’s emphasis), and Elizabeth Sturge, a friend at Bristol University College, later recalled:

The book caused a great stir in the literary world [...] and it almost seemed as if a new star had appeared in the firmament. The authorship was kept a profound secret, and of course “Michael Field” was supposed to be a man. There is something very delightful in the possession of a literary secret, and we all walked about feeling tremendously important when people made wild guesses in our hearing as to who this unknown man could be. (1928, 37)

Michael Field’s literary career began to falter in the 1890s, and was in serious decline by the 1900s although they continued to publish well-regarded lyric poetry throughout this decade and beyond. After their deaths from cancer mere months apart in 1913 and 1914, the decadent artist and publisher, Charles Ricketts, wrote, “When we all come into our own, ‘Michael Field’ will be remembered” (qtd. in Delaney 1990, 276).

From the 1890s, Bradley and Cooper also moved within a London literary circle that included the elderly poet, Robert Browning, and members of the Decadent Movement: not only Ricketts and his partner Charles Shannon, but Oscar Wilde, John Gray, and the talented young poet Thomas Sturge Moore. In their letters and journals, Bradley and Cooper kept a personal and often frank commentary on many of the literary lions of the late Victorian period. Michael Field’s presence within this literary circle plays an important role in considering the afterlife of their lifewriting because throughout the long period of their obscurity, when their poetry was neither read nor anthologized, Michael Field nevertheless retained a role as observers and recorders of literary London.

In this discussion, I will be dealing with the two major collections of Michael Field’s lifewriting held by the British and the Bodleian Libraries. The British Library’s collection contains a huge amount of material: eight volumes of correspondence and thirty volumes of joint journals. The journals, *Works and Days*, contain not only the poets’ commentary on literary figures, but also a record of their daily lives from 1888 to 1913: their thoughts and feelings, the books they read, the plays they saw. In the correspondence, letters from prominent friends and acquaintances are arranged into several letterbooks (Add. MSS 45851–45856). The Bodleian Library’s collection is also impressive and includes 380 folios of love letters⁸ exchanged by Bradley and Cooper, as well as family letters, and drafts of Michael Field’s dramatic works and poetry.

The journals of Bradley and Cooper have proved a treasure trove of material for biographers and scholars of prominent late Victorian male writers and literary critics. For example, in their biography of Robert Browning, William Irvine and Park Honan comment that it was whilst looking through *Works and Days* that Professor Donald Smalley discovered a diary note that led to the identification of a previously unknown Browning article (1974, 127). However, while *Works and Days* provided intimate portraits of literary men such as Robert Browning, George Meredith, and Oscar Wilde, the biographers of these literary figures often adopted a condescending attitude to their source. Siegfried Sassoon (1948) devoted nearly eight pages of his biography of Meredith to Michael Field's descriptions of the elderly novelist (217–24), quoting extensively from Edith Cooper's journal descriptions:

Nobody has said the truth: that bodily he is a ruin, that deafness shuts him from the *nuances* of repartee, of allusiveness in others, and that his own wise, witty discourse, emblazoned with metaphor, crystallizes into formal sentences that take the warmth out of speech. (221)

Sassoon acknowledged Cooper's writing as "refreshingly 'drawn from life' " (221) but dismissed Michael Field's poetry as "permeated by the lifelessness which makes such productions unreadable" (218). Meredith, he opines, "was profoundly bored by 'Michael Field' " (222). David Williams's *George Meredith* (1977) makes Bradley and Cooper figures of fun, writing that Meredith "finds himself having to do not with a single marriageable woman but with a couple of literary lesbians who stalk him for his celebrity value" (183). Robert Browning's biographers are frequently more generous, as Browning himself was more generous in his estimation of Michael Field's works. Nevertheless, Pamela Neville-Sington's recent biography, *Robert Browning: A Life after Death* (2004) describes the Fields as "two gushing women" (268). Richard Ellmann also drew upon the recollections of Michael Field for *Oscar Wilde* (1987), but Bradley and Cooper appear quite perfunctorily in the text as the two women who "halved the pen name of 'Michael Field' " (4).

Williams's depiction of the poets as literary stalkers seems cruel, but I suggest this construction of Bradley and Cooper arises directly from, and is given credence by, the arrangement of Michael Field's lifewriting within the two major archives. This arrangement broadly severed those writings useful as commentary (British Library) from

family letters and creative works (Bodleian Library). While the British Library's collection serviced the needs of male literary biographers throughout the twentieth century, the Bodleian Library's holdings were seldom cited. An examination of the provenance of the Michael Field letters and journals suggests that this division was made according to a gendered principle of selection determined by Michael Field's literary executor, Thomas Sturge Moore.

When Michael (Katharine Bradley) died in September 1914, less than a year after her beloved Henry (Edith Cooper),⁹ Michael Field's personal and professional writings passed to Sturge Moore. He seems to have been an extremely responsible executor. Carole Gerson has commented that, generally, the papers of childless women are particularly vulnerable (Kadar and Buss 2001, 12), which makes the large amount of Michael Field lifewriting that has survived all the more remarkable, and speaks of the conscientiousness of three generations of the Sturge Moore family. Just before his death in 1944, Sturge Moore divided his holdings of Michael Field journals, letters, and creative writings between the collections of the British and Bodleian Libraries.

The British Library's Michael Field letters are easily accessible, catalogued according to an organizational structure that unsurprisingly groups the letters to/from a correspondent together in a single volume; thus letters to/from Robert Browning are collected in a single letterbook and arranged chronologically (where possible). This is only to be expected, yet the Browning letterbook also contains a small number of personal letters from Bradley to Cooper describing visits to Browning. Indeed, letters in which prominent male figures appear are the only Bradley–Cooper correspondence in the British Library's collection.

What the British Library's letterbooks present to the reader are actually the carefully ordered originals of the published letters and journal excerpts that Sturge Moore and his son Daniel chose for their 1933 edited selection, *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*. Like the arrangement of the letterbooks, this volume included chapters on Robert Browning, George Meredith, Oscar Wilde, and John Ruskin and excluded most of the personal or familial letters that did not directly refer to male literary figures. Sturge Moore's methodology created a book that was not fundamentally a celebration of Michael Field's lives and works, but rather a series of reflections on prominent men of the Victorian period. The introductions to the volume by Sir William Rothenstein and Thomas Sturge Moore describe Bradley and Cooper as rare personalities, but it is

clear that they are valued as observers of life rather than producers of literature. On the task of selecting material from the journals, Rotherstein questioned rhetorically, “how to pass on to others their shining comments on people, on books and pictures, and on human experience [...]” (Field 1933, ix). In Sturge Moore’s introduction, the poets’ childlike simplicity reveals a dignity in “their own characters and minds and those to whom they introduce us” (Field 1933, xxi). That the expected audience for the volume was only incidentally interested in Michael Field is made clear at the beginning of chapter two by an apologia that justifies its exceptional nature: “The following extracts do not deal with their contacts with famous people, but reveal the amazing zest with which these ladies encountered experience” (Field 1933, 44).

The establishment of the British Library’s collection of Michael Field papers in 1942–44 reproduced the categories of worth set down in the Sturge Moore *Works and Days*. Michael Field were decentered within their own memorial text, their lives and works sublimated to perceptions of a canon of male literary figures—first in Sturge Moore’s *Works and Days* and subsequently in the British Library collection. In spite of the fact that the lifewriting in the collection was produced by two “minor” women writers, it nevertheless preserves a body of writings about “major” male writers/artists. In this way, the archival structure of the British Library’s Michael Field collection privileges a certain type of usage: (mostly male) biographers researching male literary figures. In this way, Sturge Moore’s decision to select social commentary on male literary figures in *Works and Days* led directly to a geographical distance that produced and reproduced among biographers value distinctions about Bradley and Cooper. This geographical distance mirrored the conceptual distance between published commentary and Michael Field’s out-of-print poetry, and served to justify a lack of academic interest. The celebrated “New Poet” of the 1880s, the authors whose first edition of the Sapphic *Long Ago* (1889) sold out in less than a month¹⁰, and the writers whose *Tragic Mary* (1891) was admired by Oscar Wilde¹¹ were effectively reduced to little more than celebrity groupies.

The Bodleian Library’s Michael Field collection preserves a significantly different body of writings. Like the British Library’s collection, the creative works and most of the letters were donated to the library by the Sturge Moores in 1942 (Clapinson and Rogers 1991, 684), but the letters included in the Bodleian Library are primarily family correspondence. The Bradley–Cooper love letters

were not included with this original transfer of material. In 1974, Daniel and Riette Sturge Moore began seeking a permanent home for the love letters in spite of their awareness that Michael Field manuscripts were of “little market value.”¹² They were visited by representatives from both the Bodleian and British Libraries,¹³ but finally wrote to the Bodleian Library with an offer.¹⁴ Family notes show that both libraries were interested in the remaining Michael Field papers owned by the Sturge Moore family (although frustratingly, they are not explicit as to which papers). While the process by which the family arrived at the decision to sell the letters to the Bodleian Library in 1974 is not explicable from the notes, it seems likely that the Sturge Moores selected the Bodleian by (consciously or unconsciously) following the principles already laid down by the earlier division.

In contrast to the neatly organized letterbooks at the British Library, the family letters held in the Bodleian Library’s collection, including the love letters donated in 1974, are almost entirely undated and often confusing. As Mary Sturgeon (1975) noted as early as 1922, the family “indulged freely in pet names” (27). These included not only “Michael” and “Henry,” but “Sim” or “Simiorg” for Bradley and a bewildering array of feline names (“Persian Puss,” “Puss,” “Kittie Puss,” and “Little Puss”) that refer to Cooper or her younger sister Amy. This ambiguity means that determinations regarding recipients are sometimes speculative. Well into the process of editing the love letters, I found myself still trying to sift the cats from the kittens. In addition, Sturge Moore family notes show that the Bradley–Cooper letters (Bodleian shelfmarks MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 and 419), while “classified (year and subject) by Edith between 1910 and her death [...] have unfortunately been somewhat muddled up since.”¹⁵ The speculative nature of the original organizing process can be seen in Cooper’s own queries and notes. On Cooper’s side of the correspondence, there are notations in Bradley’s hand that provide information and tentative dates for certain events. Family notes indicate that Henri Locard re-sorted the “muddle” of letters prior to their purchase by the Bodleian Library in 1974.¹⁶

This letter “muddle,” a term that applies very effectively not only to the love letters but to all the Bodleian Library letters, maps the interactions of a predominantly female network composed of Cooper’s parents (James and Emma), her sister (Amy), her aunts (Fanny and Nellie), and their respective families. The informal modes of address and the lack of dates are part of an intimate female domestic space that resists the easy interpretation made possible by the more distant, less personal correspondence with their prominent male

friends and acquaintances. After all, a relationship carried out almost entirely by letters must explain happenings far more fully than one that draws from shared experience.

Within the context of a female-centered correspondence, it is possible to understand why the Bodleian Library's collection of familial letters, and particularly the love letters of Michael Field, was "lost." These love letters are often set within domestic situations arising from visits to extended family, and they frequently report on family events and happenings. In a letter from summer 1880, for instance, Bradley lamented to her "pretty persian puss" (Cooper) that "the baby daughters have been receiving their reading lessons, and it is enough to destroy all classical remembrances, but I will strive to stuff my ears with cotton wool, and tell you all that happened to me yesterday."¹⁷ If, however, the context is domestic, the content is not. The letters are concerned with education, social reforms such as the antivivisection campaigns, or in the case of the letter above, research for their collaborative writings. Most of the Bodleian Library's letters can be dated to the 1880s, the period in which Michael Field was emerging as an exciting new writer, but before they became involved with London literary circles. While the letters are of great significance in terms of the lives and writings of Bradley and Cooper, ironically, it is probably for this reason that they were excluded from the British Library collection of significant Michael Field lifewriting. With the exception of a few letters dating from late in the 1880s that describe visits to Robert Browning (and were therefore selected for the British Library letterbooks), the letters are important only in that they celebrate the lives and works of a pair of "minor" late Victorian women poets.

If these gendered archival processes explain how Thomas Sturge Moore and the British Library created a male-dominated archive that influenced perceptions throughout the twentieth century of Bradley and Cooper as little better than celebrity stalkers, it does not explain why the love letters have remained neglected by lesbian-feminist critics. In the 1980s, the first lesbian-feminist writings on Michael Field were concerned with the sexuality of Bradley and Cooper rather than their literary works. Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) interpreted the relationship between Bradley and Cooper as a nonsexual "romantic friendship" (209–13). In reaction to this, Christine White (1990) argued that what the joint journals revealed was a narrative of lesbian sexuality that included intimate, "fleshly" desire (197–212). It is now almost commonplace to accept

that Bradley and Cooper were lesbian lovers, but the relationship illuminated by the love letters remains substantially unexplored.

Part of the reason that the Bodleian love letters remained “lost” was that the British Library’s joint journals are themselves a remarkable source of information on the personal lives of Michael Field. As Rothenstein commented in his introduction to *Works and Days*, Thomas Sturge Moore was “not likely to show [...] criminal callousness” with regard to their preservation (Field 1933, xiii). Indeed, in applying the principles of selection outlined above, Sturge Moore deposited in the British Library far more than those parts of the joint journals that appear in *Works and Days*, but rather, all thirty volumes. The unexpurgated journals have proved of primary importance in the recovery of Michael Field, and no doubt will continue to be central to the critical understanding of Bradley and Cooper, but the journals’ detailed minutiae of the poets’ lives between 1888 and 1914 actually represents an excess or overflow outside the material around which the collection was created. The rich nature of this excess, and its utility to recent lesbian-feminist critics, has itself tended to obscure the gendered nature of the collection and to conceal its exclusions.

Another aspect of the long neglect of the Bodleian Library’s love letters may be that the Bradley–Cooper letters remained in private hands until 1974, which contributed to a lack of awareness of them. An extensive description of archival holdings of Michael Field papers only became available on the publication of Ivor Treby’s *Michael Field Catalogue* (1998), although much of this information, including the location of the love letters, was accessible through the *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters* (1988).

Researchers into “minor” women writers bring a set of expectations to archival research that affects what they expect, or do not expect, to find there. Carole Gerson (2001) notes that “literary critics tend to regard the archive as a neutral zone, untouched by the questions of selection, evaluation and subjectivity that they apply to their own more self-conscious interpretative activities” (7). Michael Field critics’ long privileging of the British Library’s holdings may indicate that established assumptions regarding worth were uncritically transferred; over time, researchers seem to have accepted the division of the Michael Field lifewriting according to perceived worth and, by and large, sought no further.

Yet, in many ways this is too simple a solution to such a pervasive neglect. Carolyn Steedman (2001) comments on the way

in which the institutionalized archive promotes an acceptance of absence:

In the Archive, you cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptinesses, at what *is not* catalogued, at what was it—so the returned call-slip tells you—“destroyed by enemy action during the second World War,” nor that it tells of the gentry and not of the poor stockinger. Its condition of being deflects outrage: in its quiet folders and bundles is the neatest demonstration of how state power has operated, through ledgers and lists and indictments, and through what is missing from them. (68)

For Steedman, the “quiet folders and bundles” normalize the biases of class and state through a process that selectively values the papers of the gentry over the stockinger. There is a slippage of meaning among the terms “exclusions,” “emptinesses,” and “not catalogued.” The seeming disinterest of the term “missing” covers all the alternatives, cloaking the gendered processes of archival decision-making by which male lifewriting is privileged over female lifewriting. I suggest that, in the case of the Bodleian love letters of Michael Field, these processes normalized for researchers the biases of gender, and as a result, there is no sense of shock surrounding the missing letters.

When Christine White wrote of her unfulfilled expectation of Bradley–Cooper letters, she expressed herself in terms of emptiness, rather than absence or exclusion: “There is, I must assume, no truly ‘private’ record” (1990, 198). Her desire for private letters arises from her recognition that the later journals in particular “became directed toward publication” (1990, 198). Yet, she assumes that there are no (surviving) letters, not that they are elsewhere. This widespread acceptance of an empty space in the British Library’s collection that the love letters otherwise might occupy suggests the effectiveness of the archival institution in conditioning scholars, or as Steedman puts it, deflecting their potential outrage.

The “loss” of the Bradley–Cooper love letters would be less disturbing were they less useful. Since the recovery of Michael Field and their work has been led by lesbian-feminist critics, the issue of lesbian sexuality has been a critical concern in Field studies, as discussed above. The love letters provide valuable insight into the nature of the relationship between the poets, particularly the sexuality of Katharine Bradley. I want now to examine closely three letters in which Bradley expresses her frankly voyeuristic and appreciatively erotic desire for the female form. These letters provide an excellent

example of how the decision not to include the letters in the best-known Michael Field collection has meant that important insights into the way Bradley and Cooper conceived of and characterized woman-centered sexuality have been overlooked.

In the summer of 1880, Jane Scott¹⁸ invited Bradley to accompany her on a visit to the art galleries of Italy. Bradley was thirty-four years old, parentless, and in possession of a modest income. Her niece, Cooper, was eighteen years old and, according to William Rothenstein, “wan and wistful, gentler in manner than Michael [Bradley] but equally eminent in the quick give and take of ideas” (Field 1933, ix). I have identified some eighteen letters from this trip. In a pattern repeated throughout the early correspondence, most were sent from Bradley to Cooper, although this may reflect only the more organized and meticulous nature of Edith Cooper. While there is no evidence to suggest that the physical love affair between the two women had begun at this early stage, these letters do indicate that a confidential relationship was already well established between the aunt and niece.

Of keenest interest to Bradley in her first trip to Italy were the culturally iconic statues (then as now) of classic Italian Art. She was particularly interested in representations of the goddess of love: the Venus de Milo, the Capitoline Venus, and the Medici Venus. Bradley wrote, “I think of writing 3 sonnets one to each Venus,”¹⁹ an idea that delighted her correspondent in Britain.²⁰ The letters to Cooper share with the younger woman her responses to works well known to both of them through the writings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, but Bradley’s letters do more than reproduce her readings. In her connoisseurship of the women depicted in art, Bradley articulates a direct appreciation of the female body.

From Paris, Bradley wrote to Cooper of seeing the Venus de Milo in the Louvre:

Yet that Venus! Oh, Persian [Cooper]. I never saw her till the other day—the perfect woman—perfect in and of hers[e]lf—with no thought of man, no entreaty for his love; yet with breasts so sweet one longs to drink from them, and all the lovely circles of the girl moon in Pan and Luna. A lovely creature, not Cupid’s Mother, not Adonis’ bride; “das ewig weibliche” the eternal womanlie act is what she expresses! I am so glad to have seen her, and to descend from her to the Venuses of the Pitti and the Capitol.²¹

Bradley's goddess of heterosexual love rises above the claims of wife and mother to be reified as moral guide. She is Goethe's "Woman Eternal" who draws Faust up to his salvation (Goethe 1976, 308). This notion of the perfect woman as moral guide can also be read in Michael Field's plays, particularly *Brutus Ultor* (1886), where Roman matrons reinforce that woman's most important role in relation to their spouses is to "Grow wise to be their counsellors" (Field 1886, 40; 3.4.189).

If Bradley's admiration elevates the Venus above the touch of man, it also resituates her as an object of female desire. In Bradley's metaphoric caress, lips rather than hands explore the Venus's breasts, and there is no sense of maternal nurture in her desire to drink. Bradley celebrates the breasts through Robert Browning's voyeuristic description of the moon as a naked girl recumbent on the clouds in *Pan and Luna*: "pure undraped/ Pout of the sister paps— [...] her consummate circle thus escaped/ With its innumerable circles, sank absorbed, /Safe in the cloud—O naked Moon full-orbed!" (Browning 1998, 161; 44–48). If Venus's erotic circles echo those of the Girl-moon, then Bradley herself displaces Browning and the rapine Pan as the one who gazes. Bradley's desire is unambiguous; it is not aroused by the beauty of humanity, but by the curves specific to woman.

Bradley found the Venus de Medici too self-conscious for her liking,²² but she was similarly struck with desire for the rounded, female curves of the Capitoline Venus:

The Venus of the Capitol is a perfect woman. Most happily her garments are beside her, not on her, and the lovely form from throat to foot is unmutilated and unshrouded, the dimpled back—the real beauty of the waist is only seen in the back—made me long again and again for the attendant Scott or Blythe to turn the statue for me; and all the circling beauty of the loins kept me in lingering adoration; but for the bosom heave Milo's Venus is to me unrivalled. The face is innocent and fair, not majestic.²³

In her description of this other perfect woman, Bradley is entirely devoted to her physical response to the statue as woman. In both letters, she specifically describes her reaction in terms of a yearning desire: longing to drink from the breasts, longing again and again to have the statue turned before her.

If Bradley's passion for the curves of the female body is limited to voyeuristic gaze and metaphoric touching in the major galleries, it

becomes a far more physical exploration in Lucca Cathedral. In August 1880, Bradley wrote to Cooper from Florence:

Firenze, Thursday.

I bear on my lips the marble of Ilaria's brow! I walked straight to the left transept, and saw her, and by and bye they all left me, and I kissed her on the calm forehead, the tremulously sweet lips, the sweet round chin. And I saw the breast "heaving like a low wave of the sea," the softly-folded hands; and it seemed as if I were again at Ivythorpe, looking above the Master's head. I will tell you all about Pisa in a big letter. You will see the pulpit in Val d'arno. The Custode said the Master used to write there "like St. Augustine"!! Many thanks for letters.²⁴

From the description provided by Bradley of Ilaria, one could be forgiven for assuming that the figure she is kissing is a classical statue of a nymph or goddess. However, Ilaria del Carretto was the wife of Paolo Guinigi, Lord of Lucca, who died in 1405, and the figure Bradley refers to rests on her tomb. Bradley is moved once again by the beauty of a woman's breasts, and her kiss is no mere chaste peck but passionate and repeated.

If kissing a burial monument seems an odd sort of subject to discuss with one's eighteen-year-old niece, some evidence suggests that this was not a spontaneous expression of passion; rather, the two women had discussed and planned this assault upon the figure. A week earlier, Cooper wrote a letter to Bradley in which the future tense clearly anticipates events in the Lucca Cathedral: "If you have bent before the "Eternal Womanhood" at the Louvre, this morning you will Kiss the perfect woman at Lucca."²⁵ Indeed, Cooper herself seems in no way discomfited by the manner in which Bradley demonstrates her appreciation of art. She wrote to Bradley later in the trip to reassure her: "do not think for that, that you are forgotten. Your portrait, like Ilaria's effigy, is being worn by Kisses pressed on it by two devoted mouths."²⁶ Cooper's re-enactment of the scene between Bradley and Ilaria does have significant differences. Rather than a passionate embrace, Cooper and her sister Amy pepper Bradley's portrait with kisses in an enthusiastically childish rather than an overtly sexual fashion. Indeed, Cooper's relationship to her aunt at this time most resembles adolescent hero-worship rather than adult sexuality.

If these early letters speak more to the woman-oriented passions of Katharine Bradley than a shared adult eroticism, then it is still

interesting that Bradley chose to share her passion with Cooper, and that Cooper was herself eager to participate in the fantasy. At very least, the physical nature of Bradley's female-centered sexuality suggests that she is a woman whose later lesbian relationship should be conceived of as sexual rather than romantic and companionate.

In 1888, when Bradley and Cooper lamented a bad review with their friend Robert Browning, his sanguine advice to them was "wait fifty years" (Field 1933, 20). His estimation of the time it would take for the world to develop an appreciation of the works of Michael Field was optimistic. It was closer to one hundred years before feminist and lesbian-feminist criticism began to recover their writings from the obscurity in which they had fallen. Rediscovering the love letters of Michael Field in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University has revealed significant new material on the lives of Bradley and Cooper, on the development of their personal relationship, and on the way in which they interacted with the cultural and literary debates of late Victorian England.

More than that, the process of recovering these letters has provided insights into how the archive itself structures our understanding of literary figures in ways that are not always apparent even to experienced academics. That these love letters took no part in a critical debate central to the emergence of two increasingly significant late Victorian women writers seems incredible, given their location in a prominent public repository. In mapping the provenance of the major collections of Michael Field's lifewriting, it has become clear to me that these archives are not neutral spaces, although it is unclear at this stage of my research exactly how complicit the institutions themselves may have been in determining the content of their collections. Nevertheless, the principles of deposition accepted by the institutions enabled the division of the Michael Field papers into one collection centered on their importance as witnesses to the character and activities of lionized male literary figures, and another containing their familial letters and creative writings. The British Library's collection is not, and was never intended to be, representative of the lives and works of Michael Field. That it continued to be the primary archive for later lesbian-feminist critics, however, can be attributed partly to difficulties inherent in the intimate, female-centered domestic space from which it arises: the difficulties of multiple pet names and the almost complete lack of dates. More than this, I believe, the "loss" of the Bodleian Library's love letters is directly attributable to gendered archival processes which positioned the letters outside the body of lifewriting accessed by Michael Field scholars, whilst at the

same time deflecting any outrage that such a process might have been expected to generate.

Ultimately, perhaps what is most remarkable about finding this cache of yellowed love letters is not that they were lost, but rather, that through their interactions with the archive, critics unwittingly contributed to a process of effacement that concealed the Bradley–Cooper letters from the scholarly gaze. Hopefully, the recovery and publication of these love letters will facilitate the process by which Michael Field is being brought back from the footnotes of other people’s biographies and restored to the center of their own story.

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Notes

1. My term consciously echoes Carolyn Steedman’s ironic misappropriation of Jacques Derrida’s *mal d’archive* (2001, 17–19).

2. To my knowledge, the Pierpont Morgan Library’s Michael Field letters remain uncatalogued and unfoliated. Little is known of their provenance beyond that they were acquired in 1960 from a British bookseller with the cost covered as a gift by H. Bradley Martin (Christine Nelson, email to the author, 27 Nov. 2002). The letters date from 1897 to 1899, making them slightly later than the Bodleian correspondence that dates from 1875 to 1893.

3. Bradley writes “Now will I sing to My Beloved a song of My Beloved touching his hats.” Letter from Katherine Bradley to Edith Cooper, 17 March 1897, MA2092, Pierpont Morgan Library, n.p.). The Pierpont Morgan letters are briefer than those at the Bodleian, and deal predominantly with Bradley’s trip to Hastings in February 1897 during which Cooper became ill. This brevity can be attributed to the fact that by 1897 Bradley and Cooper were spending less time apart than they had in the 1880s. The change in their relationship is reflected in the adoption of a joint journal as their primary mode of lifewriting from 1888 and the discontinuation of lengthy personal letters.

4. Thirty-four years may not seem like a very long time for these letters to have been publicly available, but it should be noted that the late-twentieth-century recovery of Michael Field only dates from Lillian Faderman’s 1981 volume, *Surpassing the Love of Man*.

5. See Christine White (1990), “‘Poets and Lovers Evermore’: Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field,” *Textual Practice* 4.2: 197–212; Angela Leighton (1992), *Victorian Women Poets*:

Writing Against the Heart (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press); Holly Laird (1995), "Contradictory Legacies: Michael Field and Feminist Restoration," *Victorian Poetry* 33 (Spring): 111–28; and Yopie Prins (1999), *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press). For more recent examinations of Michael Field's lyric poetry, see Marion Thain (2007), *Michael Field: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press); Ana I. Parejo Vadillo (2005), "Sight and Song: Transparent Translations and a Manifesto for the Observer," *Victorian Poetry* 38.1: 15–34; Jill Ehnenn (2004), "Looking Strategically: Feminist and Queer Aesthetics in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*," *Victorian Poetry* 42.3 (Fall): 213–47; Julia Saville (2005), "The Poetic Imaging of Michael Field," in *The Fin de Siècle Poem*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press) 178–206; and Marion Thain (2005), "'Damnably Aestheticism' and the Turn to Rome: John Gray, Michael Field and a Politics of Conversion," in *The Fin de Siècle Poem*, ed. Joseph Bristow, 311–16 (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press). Since the Michael Field and their World Conference, University of Delaware, February 2004, at which I presented "The Case for the Bodleian Letters" (published in 2007 in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. Margaret Stetz and Cheryl Wilson [London: Rivendale Press], 39–47), some critics have begun including these letters in their work, such as Ana Parejo Vadillo (2005) *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan).

6. Emma Donoghue was clearly unaware of the letters when she commented in her short biography, *We Are Michael Field*, "they would never have dreamed of calling each other 'husband' or 'wife'" (1998, 31), as several letters are addressed in precisely this manner.

7. "A New Poet" (1884), Rev. of *Callirrhoe; Fair Rosamund*, by Michael Field, *The Spectator* 57: 680–82; Mary Robinson (1884), Rev. of *Callirrhoe; Fair Rosamund*, by Michael Field, *The Academy* 25 (Jan.–July): 395–96; P. B. Marston (1884), Rev. of *Callirrhoe; Fair Rosamund*, by Michael Field, *The Athenaeum* 77 (July–Dec.): 24–25.

8. I have characterized the correspondence between the poets as "love" letters not because they contain overt declarations of lesbian sexuality, but rather can be read provisionally according to Martha Vicinus's notion of the "possibilities of the 'not seen' and the 'not said' as conceptual tools" for interpreting lesbian sexuality (1996, 2).

9. For an explanation of the derivation of the name "Henry," see Sturgeon 1975, 27.

10. Katharine Bradley, letter to Robert Browning, 20 June [1889], Add. MS 46866, fol 188, British Library.

11. Wilde wrote, "Your Queen is a splendid creature, a live woman to her fingertips. . . ." Ursula Bridge, *The Diary of Michael Field: A Biographical Study of a Forgotten Poet*, MS. Eng. misc. d. 983 fol 251, Bodleian Library.

12. Daniel and Riette Sturge Moore, letter to Dr Richard Hunt, 30 June 1974, privately held.

13. Daniel and Riette Sturge Moore, "Michael Field," n.d., privately held.

14. Sturge Moore, letter to Richard Hunt.

15. Daniel and Riette Sturge Moore, "Michael Field, friends and family correspondence," privately held.

16. Daniel and Riette Sturge Moore, "Michael Field." Henry Locard wrote an early article on the journals of Michael Field that constructs a narrative in which Cooper, the more talented writer, is stifled and destroyed by Bradley. See Locard 1979, 1–9. He seems to have been a trusted advisor to the Sturge Moore family, although now he has disappeared and nobody seems to know what has become of him.

17. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [Summer 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fols 15^r–17^v, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

18. Jane Scott ran a "High Art shop" in Old Bond St. (letter to Frances Brooks, MS. Eng. lett. d. 405 fol 56^r BOD), as well as being a flamboyant member of Mary Paley Marshall's Women's Debating Society at Bristol University College (MS. Eng. lett. d. 405 fol 124^f, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford).

19. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [21 Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fols 22^r–25^v, Bodleian Library.

20. Edith Cooper, letter to Katharine Bradley, [24 Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 419 fols 8^r–9^v, Bodleian Library.

21. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [21 Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fols 22^r–25^v, Bodleian Library.

22. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [26 Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fols 28^r–29^v, Bodleian Library.

23. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [7 Sept. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fol 30^{r/v}, Bodleian Library.

24. Katharine Bradley, letter to Edith Cooper, [Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 418 fol 18^r, Bodleian Library.

25. Edith Cooper, letter to Katharine Bradley, [24 Aug. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 419 fols 8^r–9^v, Bodleian Library.

26. Edith Cooper, letter to Katharine Bradley, [12–14 Sept. 1880], MS. Eng. lett. c. 419 fols 6^r–7^v, Bodleian Library.

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