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Michael Field, 1884-1895
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Heroines, Anti-Heroines and New Women:
The Early Drama of Michael Field, 1884-
1895

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Abstract

This thesis represents an analysis of five dramatic works by Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913) who wrote under the collaborative literary pseudonym “Michael Field” for nearly forty years from the late 1800s to their deaths. These are: *Callirhoë* (1884), *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Tragic Mary* (1890), *Stephania* (1892), and *Attila, My Attila!* (1895). Although more recently Michael Field’s poetry has become the subject of more academic attention, here is currently little critical work on the Fields’ twenty-seven tragic dramas, and, as yet, no sustained analysis of individual plays. Over the course of five chapters, this thesis takes a new approach to these little known dramas and their eponymous heroines, carefully locating each one within both the context of the Fields’ lives, and the wider socio-cultural and political contexts which surround each play. It is the contention of this thesis, that through their dramatic writing, the Fields were engaging with a wide range of challenging issues, debates and concerns concerning the positioning and construction of middle-class female identity, role and sexuality. Through these analyses then, this study will consider the development of the Fields’ dramatic writing and identity as female dramatists within the wider social, cultural, literary, economic and political landscape.

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I declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

*To my mother and father
For making this all possible*

Introduction

“Michael Field” – Dramatist(s)

Edith Emma Cooper (1862-1913) died on 13 December 1913, and was followed, only nine months later on 26 September 1914 by Katharine Harris Bradley (1846-1914), her aunt, lover and lifelong literary collaborator.¹ Katharine Bradley was born in Birmingham on 26 October 1846. Her father was a tobacco manufacturer, who died when she was only two, and she grew up with her mother and sister Emma Bradley, eleven years her senior. Emma married James Robert Cooper in 1860 and had two daughters, Edith, (born 12 January 1862), and Amy, (born 5 March 1865). An invalid after the birth of Amy, Katherine Bradley went to live with her sister in July 1867, and at the age of eighteen, became her niece Edith Cooper’s guardian. Bradley attended both the Collège du France in Paris and Newnham College, Cambridge, and as Cooper reached her late teens, they attended University College Bristol together studying classics and philosophy. Financially comfortable and highly educated, the women shared powerful literary aspirations and ambitions. After their time at Bristol, the women began to write collaboratively and in 1884 published their first two verse dramas, *Callirrhöë*, *Fair Rosamund*, under their pseudonym “Michael Field”. For the next four decades the women shared a passionate intellectual and literary partnership, living, working and travelling together across Britain and Europe. In 1899, after the death of Edith Cooper’s father and Amy’s marriage, they settled at 1, Paragon in

¹ I have kept the biographical background here fairly limited, as there are a number of excellent and extensive reference works on their lives. See, for example, Emma Donoghue, *We are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1998).

Richmond, what Katharine Bradley called “our married home”, where they were to live together until their deaths.

Bradley and Cooper’s literary output totals some eight books of verse including *Long Ago* (1889), *Sight and Song* (1892) and *Underneath the Bough* (1893); twenty-seven dramas (publishing sometimes as many as three a year); as well as thirty volumes of their collaborative diary, “Works and Days” available in the British Library archive. The Fields’ productivity and output across their forty years of collaborative writing is extraordinary. Apart from these published works (and their extensive diaries) there is a wealth of unpublished and unfinished materials, some of which were published posthumously. Although they are now remembered principally as poets, their insistence on working in multiple genres throughout their lives meant that poetry was but one of many aspects of their output and ‘identity’ as “Michael Field” and as women writers. The legacy of their prolific life-writing and correspondence, for example, represents a vast resource of information on their insights and interactions with key cultural, philosophical and artistic contemporaries, such as John Ruskin, Arthur Symons, George Meredith and Oscar Wilde. Bradley and Cooper also engaged with a number of other kinds of political and critical writing too. Bradley’s activism for political causes such as that for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, for example, saw her not only write political treatises, but even participate in public debates, and Cooper had a number of articles on literary criticism published, one of which initiated their close relationship with Robert Browning.² The vast spectrum of

² Bradley gave a talk on ‘the ‘state regulation of vice’ in Den Haag in the mid-1880s. This political commitment is explored in Chapter One of this study. See Edith Cooper, “‘Jocoseria’ By Robert Browning,” *Modern Thought: An Independent Review of Politics, Religion, Science, Art and Literature* 5.7, no. 55 (1 July 1883): 297-300.

their writing bespeaks a strident determination on their part to fulfil their desire for self-expression, to “speak out”.³ They had “many things to say”, and employed a wide range of genres and textual spaces through which to make themselves heard.⁴

Katharine Bradley’s literary debut was as a poet, with her first publication *The New Minnesinger and Other Poems* (1875). Bradley and Cooper as Michael Field, published seven collections of poetry between 1889 and 1914: *Long Ago* (1889), *Sight and Song* (1892), *Underneath the Bough* (1893), *Wild Honey From Various Thyme* (1908), *Poems of Adoration* (1912), *Mystic Trees* (1913) and *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914). These collections display a startling array of subjects and explore wide ranging themes and ideas. In the Fields first poetic effort *Long Ago* they engage with the fragmentary works of the poet Sappho, expanding them into poems of their own, which, in turn, are narrated by Sappho. Marion Thain notes that particularly in this work, as Michael Field, Bradley and Cooper are “able to claim the masculine authority of classical scholarship and use it transgressively, for their own purposes”⁵ In *Long Ago*, the poems are “written by two women, writing as a man writing as Sappho?” what Yopie Prins, in her article “Michael Field:Sappho Doubled” identifies as allowing the Fields to perform the feminine by writing as a man writing as a woman, exposing femininity as a charade through the playing out of a poetic gender drama.⁶

The Fields also chose the poetic form to declare themselves “poets and lovers evermore”, in “It was deep April” from their collection *Underneath the Bough* (1893). *Sight and Song*’s concern with the double critical gaze of two women and the gendered

³ Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884,” reproduced in *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 6.

⁴ Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, *Works and Days*, 6.

⁵ Marion Thain, *Michael Field and Poetic Identity* (London: The Eighteen Nineties Society, 2000), 28.

⁶ Yopie Prins, “Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 165.

dynamic of the (male) artist/writer with the (often female) object/subject is explored through a series of poems written as responses to famous works of art. The Fields' research was characteristically meticulous and they made frequent excursions to the galleries of Europe to experience these paintings. H. Fraser in the 2006 article "A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze" suggests that their response to Bortolomeo Veneto's *A Portrait* "narrativises the woman's agency by representing her not merely as the passive model for the painter's art, but as the active subject, the artist indeed, of her own self-creation."⁷ The Fields were acutely aware of the dynamics of observing and being observed, of self-creation and self-fashioning. Their passion for clothes and for perfecting their aesthetic appearance was both an essential part of their creative identity and an extension of their art.⁸ It is in their dramas that the Fields narrate the struggle to negotiate the expression of subjectivity, to establish a legitimate literary or artistic identity and voice and address the charade of the heavily gendered artist/object dynamic.

"Michael Field's" literary identity was first and foremost as a dramatist. Before the publication of *Long Ago* in 1889, Bradley and Cooper had already published eight dramas under this pseudonym, emerging onto the literary scene with *Callirrhoë*, *Fair Rosamund* in 1884.⁹ Their publication *Bellerophôn* (1881) as "Arran and Isla Leigh"

⁷ H. Fraser, "A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 2 (2006): 565.

⁸ The Fields employ the poetic form to great effect in *The Tragic Mary* (1890). There are several incidents where the protagonist, Queen Mary explores alternative female identities such as the Shepherdess through verse. In this case, these lines originally appear in the Fields' collaborative diary "Works and Days", as a poem addressed to Cooper by Bradley upon seeing her dressed in a shepherdess costume. *This* is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

⁹ These are *Callirrhoë* (1884), *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), *William Rufus* (1885), *Loyalty Or Love?* (1885), *Brutus Ultor* (1886), *Canute the Great* (1887), *The Cup of Water* (1887).

is dominated by their first collaboratively written tragic drama *Bellerophôn*.¹⁰ Bradley and Cooper as “Michael Field” never published these two genres in the same collection as they did initially under “Arran and Isla Leigh.” From the very beginning of what was to become a life-long literary collaboration as “Michael Field” they were committed to their dramatic writing, with developing their art, and they continued to produce an average of one play a year until their deaths.

The Fields’ early (and later) dramas are predominantly centred around historical figures and often violent situations of some significance (albeit rather obscure). The range of historical situations, crises and protagonists Bradley and Cooper explore is extraordinarily diverse, as are the subjects and ideas with which they engage. Their early dramas include: *The Father’s Tragedy* (1885), *William Rufus* (1885), *Loyalty or Love?* (1885), *Brutus Ultor* (1886), *Canute the Great* (1887), *The Cup of Water* (1887). Many of these early dramas have classical (*Canute*, *Brutus Ultor*) or medieval settings and figures (*The Father’s Tragedy*, *William Rufus*). The latter are both strikingly effective and meticulously researched historical tragedies, which approach issues of duty and patriarchal power structures as debilitating, madness-inducing demands imposed on male characters subject to their position within this (historical and contemporary) hierarchy. Later works, such as their ambitious Roman Trilogy - *The World at Auction*, *The Race of Leaves*, and *Julia Domna* - trace the decline of the Roman Empire between 182-212 by dramatizing the final days in power of a succession of emperors as a comment on the decline of the deeply patriarchal Victorian empire.¹¹ What stands out in the dramas listed above is that through the Fields’ employment and dramatisations of specific historical

¹⁰ Arran and Isla Leigh, *Bellerophôn* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881).

¹¹ See Ana Parejo Vadillo, “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 195-220.

situations and protagonists, these plays all call into question dominant models of masculinity and patriarchal systems of power and control typical of the *fin-de-siècle* period, particularly in the challenges to compulsory heterosexuality and cultural authority which critics such as Elaine Showalter have identified.¹² The Fields' dramatic writing then, can be understood as part of a wider intervention and engagement on their part with specific and highly politicised contemporary issues and debates. The use of historical distancing furthermore, allows them to challenge and explore potentially inflammatory or subversive ideas and figures which they could not address directly. The Fields were, in their early dramas and beyond, experimental with form and subject matter, engaged enthusiastically with new theatrical ideas, and were highly responsive to the shifting socio-cultural environment.

The time that the Fields were working in was one of great change and of seismic social, cultural and political shifts. The decades between 1880 and 1914 saw political campaigns by mainly middle-class women which demanded (and won) greater freedoms, opportunities and rights, as well as dramatic reassessments of and challenges to the very foundations and values of the Victorian empire, such as the gendered doctrine of separate spheres and rigid class delineations. Educational expansions and opportunities for professional work became a reality for more and more unmarried middle-class women, and, certainly during the *fin de siècle* period, an increasing concern with re-negotiations of sexual identities and the role of women gave women writers such as the Fields the chance to engage in re-constructing and redefining their own position in society and literary culture.

¹² See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1992), 11.

The literary landscape into which “Michael Field” emerged was also shifting dramatically. The early years of the Fields’ career witnessed a sharp increase in the number of women poets and their visibility. To be a ‘poet’ women writers had to negotiate the implicit male bias of English poetic tradition, which locates the “voice as a masculine property” that assimilates the ‘other’, the male poet defining himself in his opposition to female nature.¹³ In this model of “men speaking to men” there is no space for women to be poets, positioned as ‘other’ to the poet figure, their subjectivity is dominated by the male voice.¹⁴ As Dorothy Mermin states: “woman is not the seer but the object seen...not the poet who desires but the object of his desire.”¹⁵ Through writing poetry at this time, some middle-class women were negotiating a space to legitimate their subjectivity, define new identities outside that of object, within a society where female identity was in flux. Talia Schaffer suggests that women participating in a high art traditions such as poetry and drama, did so to “precisely question the value and limits of [the] expansion of female identity.”¹⁶ Aesthetic female poets similarly employed a language, imagery and metaphor, appealing to the educated elite, as a means to step outside reality and realism to a ‘daydream’: “phantasmatic language enabled writers to create alternative versions of women’s lives.”¹⁷ Desires are therefore situated in an unreal space or dream, a space where some women writers like the Fields were free to present a wide range of behaviours and identities, and explore them at an appropriate distance.

¹³ Thain, *Michael Field and Poetic Identity*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ Dorothy Mermin, *Godiva’s Ride: Women of Letters in England, 1830-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 61.

¹⁶ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

Female experience, the limitations and possibilities of differing feminine identities, and the hotly contested contemporary positioning of middle-class women, are played out through the Fields' dramas. The performative nature of gender is also continually foregrounded and explored utilising a multiplicity of voices, the tragic heroine often presented as the site of conflicting and intersecting perspectives and constructions of gender identity. The Fields also utilise this technique in their dramas which focus on kingship, reflecting on the experience of male figures as subject to the debilitating and impossible expectations and duties demanded and imposed by patriarchal ideology and systems of power.

The prioritisation of character psychology as opposed to the objective vision in late-century critical thought on drama, and the recognition of the potential of unperformed drama as creating a theatre of the mind where introspection and subjective experience could interact with the 'real' world or in response to an objective exteriority represent two examples of the significant alterations to and reconfigurations of the dramatic form at this time.¹⁸ Many writers, including the Fields, were reassessing ideas of performance and representation as well as re-negotiating existing forms in response to a rapidly changing dramatic landscape.

The theatre of the late nineteenth century was one of plush comfortable interiors, where realistic sets, costumes and performances were illuminated by newly installed 'limelight'.¹⁹ The popularity of theatre-going among the middle-class had dramatically

¹⁸ See Shou-Ren Wang, introduction to *Theatre of the Mind: A Study of Unacted Drama in Nineteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), ix-xxv. See *Ibid.*, xvii for an assessment of the relationship between lyric, epic and dramatic poetry.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive overview of the developments in nineteenth century theatre see Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland, "Introduction: The Performing Society," in *The Performing Century, Nineteenth-Century Theatre's History* ed. Tracy C. Davis and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1-10.

increased over the century and, in 1885 Hamilton Aïdé wrote: “The number of our theatres has more than doubled in the last five-and-twenty years; consequently it is clear that the taste for dramatic performances in this country is on the increase. Great and good men recognise more and more that the theatre may be fully as potent a factor for morality as the pulpit”²⁰ Marked by “strong moral idealism and domestic sentimentality” the wider growth of theatre’s social prominence, its perceived respectability and as representing social ideals and morality, made it a space where the mores of middle-class audiences were reinforced.²¹ As Eliza Lynn Linton puts it, the playwright “has it in his power to elevate the theatre into the grandest and purest of all the pulpits” exhorting the audience to embody the high moral values displayed by the characters and reinforcing established socio-cultural ideals.²² The respectability and cultural centrality of the drama(tist) meant that his performers came to function as symbols of idealism and hope in the face of wider social and sexual upheavals. According to Gail Marshall, the female actress for example could be deployed to “advertise the persistence of desirable femininity in the midst of fears about women’s masculinities through professionalisation, and could thus be enrolled as a conservative social force”.²³ It was, however, the figure of the (in the 1880s still overwhelmingly male) playwright who ultimately controlled the stage, and the public appearance of female figures; who remain carefully contained within a realist ‘frame’ and a carefully constructed mid-Victorian iconography. The dramatic space at this time, under circumstances such as these, became a space where ‘reality’ was both emulated and

²⁰ Hamilton Aïdé, “The Actor’s Calling,” *Nineteenth Century* 17 (1885): 522.

²¹ Michael Booth, foreword to *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, ed. Michael Booth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980?), xii.

²² Eliza Lynn Linton, “The Stage as a Profession for Women,” *National Review* 5, (1885):8-19, 13.

²³ Gail Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 96.

defined, where identities and behaviours were celebrated or condemned, and where the conservative mid-century certainties of imperial authority or gender ideals were reinforced in response to seismic socio-cultural and political shifts.²⁴

There was also a perceived decline of the 'legitimate' literary or sophisticated drama in the 1870s, something which became the source of widespread concern: "the poetic drama was supposed to be dead".²⁵ The gulf between literary drama and popular theatre widened over the century. The predominance of realist prose dramas, sensational spectacle or sentimental melodrama and the focus on individuals or events which reflected middle-class experience led to the "neglect of the great models of stage drama".²⁶ This lack of interest in restrained literary modes such as the history drama or classical tragedy, was countered by an intense, if disparate effort to establish 'legitimate theatre', raising its intellectual status to that of high art within a commercial environment.²⁷

Despite the continued popularity of Shakespeare, tragic drama appeared to scorn the modern world and its demands for realism. Written with a concern "to produce literature...[tragic dramatists] loftily fixed their gaze on the bright stars of Shakespeare and the Elizabethan stage."²⁸ In looking back to classical and Elizabethan form and historical figures, tragedy appeared cut off from not only modern English life and thought, but from the modern theatre experience, and its modes of representation. Some mid-century writers, such as Robert Browning, began to re-

²⁴ See Chapter Three, "George Eliot, Daniel Deronda, and the Sculptural Aesthetic," in Gail Marshall, *Feminine Performance*, 64-90.

²⁵ Stephen Watt, "Historical Drama and the 'Legitimate Theatre': Tom Taylor and W.G. Wills in the 1880s," in *When They Weren't Doing Shakespeare: Essays on Nineteenth-Century British and American Theatre* ed. Judith L. Fisher and Stephen Watt (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 187-211, 188

²⁶ James Cooke writing in *The Stage* in 1840, repro in Michael Booth, *Prefaces*, 7.

²⁷ See, for example, Pearson, *Introduction*, 1-20.

²⁸ James Cooke writing in *The Stage* in 1840, repro in Michael Booth, *Prefaces*, 7.

construct tragedy out of the materials of modern life, deploying tragic drama as a way to address the contemporary environment and attempting to adapt new subject matter to antique methods and treatment.²⁹ Booth argues that in deploying “[h]istorical settings and themes of rebellion, conspiracy and love, dramatists turned their backs on their own century and tried to bring history and ancient subject matter to life.”³⁰ Such experiments were not to achieve any success however. It was not until the late 1870s, just as the Fields emerged as tragic dramatists, that “Legitimate Tragedy” and “Historical Verse Drama” started to become established – quite successfully – as literary/dramatic forms. These verse dramas are relatively few in number compared to the concurrent proliferation of prose dramas. The popularising of this form went some way to reinstating poetic language as central to drama and the legitimate stage, especially when associated, visually at least, with contemporary paintings of the great heroines of poetry and tragedy, and with realistic historical settings. Michael Booth argues, for example, that the success of these few verse dramas is directly associated with “the acting of Irving and his style of romantic-realist production.”³¹ Irving’s style certainly worked for Tennyson who “had notable success with Irving’s production of *The Cup* (1881) and, posthumously, with the tragedy *Beckett* (1893).³² Irving recognised the demands of the new commercialised theatrical marketplace and its audiences for reality and accuracy, for recognisable stylistic consistency, often achieved by precise renderings of paintings or imagery drawn from popular culture.

²⁹ Such as in his unsuccessful play, “A Blot in the Scutcheon” Written for Macready’s Drury Lane Management. See Booth, *Prefaces*, 16-17.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

³² *Ibid.*, 43. Although the version *Beckett* performed was ruthlessly rearranged and cut by Irving. Tennyson’s verse dramas and performance are discussed at length in chapter six “Cometh the hero? Alfred Lord Tennyson as the Nation’s Playwright” of Richard Pearson, *Victorian Writers and the Stage: The Plays of Dickens, Browning, Collins and Tennyson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The modern world, historical ‘reality’ and re-enactments of popular Victorian history paintings and other iconography were faithfully reproduced in minute detail on the late-century stage.³³ This was particularly the case with historical drama, accuracy becoming, according to Stephen Watt, “*the* concern in productions both of Shakespeare and historical drama on the...late-Victorian stage”.³⁴ As Booth notes, historical dramatists “with increasing care and painstaking research methods, attempted to give archaeological reality to plays with an historical setting.”³⁵ Drawing on the popularity of historical figures and accurately reproducing the imagery of Victorian historical iconography through the process of precise imitation, drama becomes visually aligned with the historical artist and his great works, establishing legitimate drama as an authentic artistic medium.³⁶ In 1880 at the Haymarket Theatre, the idea of the stage as a ‘picture’ was made literal by painting “a gold border in imitation of a picture frame around the proscenium...the exact front of the stage”.³⁷ The “intimate and meaningful” relationship between painting and the Victorian stage is explored extensively by Michael Booth and Martin Meisel, and its relation to ideas of (female) sculpted identity is discussed (in relation to George Eliot’s work) by Marcia Midler and Gail Marshall.³⁸

The 1890s saw the popularisation and emergence of work by dramatists such as Oscar Wilde and Henrik Ibsen. Presenting their audiences with a reality on stage

³³ For a strong analysis of the status and cultural deployment of Victorian History Painting, see David Green and Peter Seddon, introduction to *History Painting Reassessed: The Representation of History in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

³⁴ Watt, *Historical Dramas*, 201

³⁵ Booth, *Prefaces*, x.

³⁶ For an analysis of the cultural centrality and function of history painting in this era see Green and Seddon, *History Painting*.

³⁷ Booth, *Prefaces*, 32.

³⁸ Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre, 1850-1910* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 8. See also Martin Meisel, *Realisations: Narrative, Pictorial and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Marcia S. Midler, “George Eliot’s Rebels: Portraits of the Artist as a Woman,” *Women’s Studies* 7, (1980): 97-108; Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian stage*, 64-90.

barely discernable from their lived existence, they held up a mirror to their society and reflected on its contemporary mores and conventions. Eschewing moral didacticism and dramatizing troubling or difficult subjects – without the distance of historical setting, or concern for pleasant sentiment – drama in the 1890s marked a radical shift in not only modes of dramatic representation (such as tragedy by Ibsen in *Ghosts*, 1881), but further reinstated the values of language and literary quality. Drama's new reconfiguration as a realist space to challenge and consider the now was not always popular, Clement Scott found the realistic representation of misery “distasteful” in his 1888 review of *Ariane*, a society play by Mrs Campbell Praed, and his attitude to this play foreshadowed his (and many people's) reaction to Ibsen: “The dramatist who trumpets forth the bad, and conceals the good, is unworthy of his calling...there is no pleasure in revelling in what is unwholesome and disagreeable...we must enforce the good, without showing the bad.”³⁹

The relationship of women to drama and theatrical performance also went through radical changes. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, there were a significant number of middle class women who were increasingly drawn to the apparent freedoms of the stage and range of newly respectable employment opportunities within the theatre. The well-educated “high principled” girl, according to Aïdé, who has an “aptitude for representation” put her modesty at no greater risk by acting than in any other “arena where prudence and vigilance are needed.”⁴⁰ Selecting sexualised but doomed tragic women, Ophelia, Juliet and La Dame aux Camellias, as her dramatic examples, Eliza Lynn Linton in 1885 questions whether acting should be more damaging to “the inherent modesties of a woman's nature” than

³⁹ Clement Scott, “Why Do We Go to the Play?,” *The Theatre* (March 1888), 123-4.

⁴⁰ Aïdé, “The Actor's Calling,” 522.

any other profession, such as that of the “lady-lecturers”.⁴¹ The emergence, in the early 1880s of women who campaigned and spoke out on political and social issues such as Annie Besant, and Bradley and Cooper, and women who entered higher education and professional roles in increasing numbers found that how they constructed or presented themselves defined their public identity. In contrast to this relatively empowered act of self-fashioning and, despite the re-characterisation of acting as an acceptable occupation for middle-class women, their public performances were often limited to the embodiment of iconic and idealised femininity. On the late Victorian stage the role of women and the ideals of femininity became defined, moulded and located by the (male) playwright, and imposed on the body of the actress. The ‘sculpted’ theatrical heroine as a fixed and silent statue came to the attention of contemporary and modern criticism.⁴² Yet increasingly, middle-class women were, by attending the theatre, writing and producing drama, re-defining the performative space, and as actresses, such as Ellen Terry, they became society figures, icons of multiple female identities and self-fashioning.⁴³ Thus drama became a literary and performative site where new feminine identities and roles could be explored and older idealised iconic representations of womanhood could be reinterpreted and challenged. Engaging with drama as a middle class woman, as dramatist, performer or audience, poses a direct challenge to the female subject as a static silent object of male desire. Resistance to female playwrights, and the persistence of old associations between female public display and prostitution complicated these endeavours.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Linton, “The Stage as a Profession for Women,” 12.

⁴² See Mrs Jameson, *Shakespeare’s Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1879)

⁴³ See Marshall, *Victorian Stage*, 102-127.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 122-127.

In their own time, the Fields' dramatic work did initially receive a positive response. *Callirrhoe* (1884) their first drama received high praise from their friend (and now mentor) Browning, who was "thoroughly impressed" by what he saw as its "poetic genius", it was similarly popular with critics, a review in the *Spectator*, for example, rejoiced in the "ring of a new voice" which would be "heard far and wide".⁴⁵ This initial flurry of critical praise however, was never to be repeated. Their subsequent works, poetic and dramatic, received only the sporadic attention of literary critics and reviewers, and as time went on, particularly from the mid-1890s onwards, reviews became fewer and increasingly hostile. After it was revealed that they were not, as it was presumed, a single male writer, "Michael Field", but rather a collaboration between two educated middle-class women, their work slipped deeper into a kind of critical hinterland, and reviewers now concerned themselves with the gender and duality of "Michael Field" not with the work itself. Even their beloved mentor Robert Browning, in print at least, would not publicly associate himself with Michael Field or their work. During a visit by Bradley and Cooper in 1888 where he praised *Long Ago*, they record that "he refuses to write a preface, we must remember we are Michael Field. Again he said:- wait fifty years."⁴⁶ As it transpires, the Fields were to wait much longer than the half century Browning foresees; their poetry languished in obscurity for nearly eight decades, their dramas, even longer. Of the few scholarly resources available which concern the Fields dramas, most are less than ten years old.

From their deaths in 1914 until the 1990s there were but two studies written, only one of which was published: Mary Sturgeon's 1920 biography, *Michael Field*,

⁴⁵ Michael Field, *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 2. "A New Poet: *Callirrhoe – Fair Rosamund* By Michael Field," *The Spectator*, May 24, 1884, 681.

⁴⁶ Katharine Bradley, 9 May 1888, 'Works and Days', repro. In Ivor C. Treby, *Binary Star*, 109.

details their early life, the reception of their works and contains a section which briefly discusses some of the tragedies. Ursula Bridge's unfinished biography held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, concentrates on their lives and detailed background information, but remains difficult to access.

Mary Sturgeon notes that only two years after Bradley's death, the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, "dismissed Michael Field in six lines".⁴⁷ Plagued by indifference in life, in death they were reduced to a "curious fancy".⁴⁸ And here they remained, only resurfacing again in the late twentieth century.

Their 'rediscovery' for academic and literary study was the result of a number of efforts driven, in part, by the concern in the 1970s to recover women's writing in the novel, and an interest in the 1980s with Victorian female poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. Since the 1990s, however, critical attention has turned to the 'recovery' of the works of other 'forgotten' Victorian female writers. The key galvanising work in this field, Angela Leighton's *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992), drew attention to these critical and historical literary absences by tracing a history of women's poetry from Felicia Hemans to Charlotte Mew which is characterised by increasing resistance to the idea of an a-political woman's voice. A number of anthologies which followed, such as Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds' *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (1995) and Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow's *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets: An Anthology* (1996), served to establish previously overlooked works as legitimate subject matter for critical attention, including that of Michael Field. Yet these anthologies only contained very few of their poems, with the emphasis often being placed on seeking a

⁴⁷ Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co, 1922), 28.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Thain, *Poetic Identity*, 16.

‘female canon’, in opposition to an ‘established’ masculine one, rather than investigating the works themselves as individual creative objects. This work was obviously important in attempting to get women’s poetry seriously back on the critical map, but what it consequently emphasised was a tendency for women poets to speak to one another. Subsequent work has put them back into a series of frameworks where women’s poetry is read alongside that of men.

Since this initial wave of interest and publication of selected poetry in anthologies, a number of critics and academics have turned their attention specifically to the Fields’ work. Some of the more influential of these studies include Emma Donoghue’s *We Are Michael Field* (1998), Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson’s *Michael Field and Their World* (2007) – a collection of papers given at the first Michael Field conference in 2004 - and Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo’s *Michael Field, The Poet* (2009). The conference, “*Michael Field*” and *Their World*, took place at the University of Delaware in 2004. There is a startling variety of new approaches to the Fields’ work in the papers given. Only two, however, focus particularly on their dramatic works; Laird’s “Michael Field as ‘the Author of Borgia’”, and Vadillo’s “Outmoded Dramas: History and Modernity in Michael Field’s Aesthetic Plays”. However, the majority of studies so far focus almost exclusively on the Fields’ poetic writing. The dramas and the extensive collaborative diaries, *Works and Days*, are more often than not discussed only as supporting evidence of analyses for the poetry. Thain’s *‘Michael Field’: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Fin de Siècle* (2007) makes greater reference to their dramas than most, yet this is still only as a framework through which to study the poetry. There has also been some interest in the nature of their collaboration under an anonymous male pseudonym, such as Virginia Blain’s 1996

article, “‘Michael Field, the Two-Headed Nightingale’: Lesbian Text as Palimpsest” and Holly Laird’s “The Coauthored Pseudonym: Two Women Named Michael Field” (2003). These studies, however, similarly tend to focus on their identity as poets, and their sexuality. In contrast, Laird’s 2007 essay, “Michael Field as ‘the Author of Borgia’”, pays particular attention to the publication of their later dramas (post-1905 when *Borgia* was released) under this new, even more anonymous moniker, of “the author of Borgia”.

In the last few years, there have been a limited number of articles which focus on individual plays such as A. Eastham’s “Bacchic Transference and Ecstatic Faith: Michael Field’s *Callirrhoe* and the Origins of Drama” (2011); Sharon Bickle’s “Disability and Gender in the Visual Field: Seeing the Subterranean Lives of Michael Field’s *William Rufus*” (2012); Vadillo’s “Another Renaissance: The Decadent Poetic Drama of A.C. Swinburne and Michael Field” (2013) and “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama” (2015). To date, however, there has not been a sustained study of the dramas.

At the two-day international Michael Field Conference, Michael Field Centenary Conference: New Directions in Fin-de-Siècle Studies, in 2014, I was the only person to present a paper on their drama (a discussion of ideas of female imprisonment in *Fair Rosamund*), with the exception of Joseph Bristow’s keynote address which focussed wholly on *Attila, My Attila!*: “‘Unwomanly Audacities’: Michael Field, *Attila, My Attila!* and Sexual Modernity”. In his paper, Bristow discussed the Fields’ engagement with both historical sources and contemporary theatrical conventions to explore their representation of the protagonist in terms of the ‘New Woman’ as an emerging figure of autonomous female sexuality.

Increasing interest in the Fields has tended to prioritise their poetry over the drama and concentrated on queer rather than political issues in their work. The recent digitisation projects of both the Fields' diaries (through the Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium) and volumes such as *Sight and Song* by Ana Parejo Vadillo will hopefully go some way to increasing understandings of the Fields in political and cultural contexts, and not just those of gender or sexuality. More than a century after their deaths, there is still much work yet to be done.

A comprehensive study of the full gamut of Michael Field's dramas is certainly overdue, and would make for a fascinating, if rather broad and weighty study, at a later date. The Fields' dramatic works remain un-investigated, frequently engaged with only as reference points for their poetic output. Focussing my analysis specifically on the Fields early dramas recognises the intersections and interactions between these two aspects of their writing, and means that this study will make a timely contribution to the critical field. The Fields' dramas represent a vast body of work, which has suffered from decades of critical generalisations, brief overviews and woefully inaccurate synopses. Furthermore, there is little attention in existing scholarship given to the Fields-as-dramatists. Marion Thain identifies that the intimate nature of their poetic writing, "by being so personal, transcends both time and place" whereas their dramatic work, by virtue of its more political nature, was more of its time, more engaged with "overtly feminist themes," and wider contemporary issues.⁴⁹ This study is concerned with analysing Bradley and Cooper's negotiation of established dramatic forms as a means to engage with a whole range of contemporary socio-cultural, political and literary debates. It also explores how through writing and the process of

⁴⁹ Thain, *Poetic Identity*, 11.

writing these dramas, the Fields explored and defined their own literary identity both as individual ‘aesthetic women’ and as collaborators under a masculine pseudonym.

Chronologically, my selection of material encompasses the first emergence of Michael Field, dramatist with *Callirhoë* in 1884 and traces their developing dramatic style to 1896, at which point the Fields were established literary figures, and had taken one of their plays to the stage. this study is building upon the recent article “Hot House” by Ana Parejo Vadillo which focuses on their dramatic work 1895-1903. Vadillo defines this as a “reflexive period”⁵⁰ where they “reinterpreted and reinvented their dramatic production by returning archeologically and philologically to Greek drama and their own authorial debut *Callirhoë*.”⁵¹ A prolonged analysis of a selection of their early dramas and consideration of their debut as dramatists in this study opens up new ways of thinking about the Fields as dramatists-in-context, and new understandings of how their dramatic identity and output developed. By tracing this development through the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the context of both socio-cultural and literary change, this study makes a significant contribution to existing Michael Field scholarship. Focussing solely on the dramas, and referencing out to their wider engagement with contemporary figures (in their letters) and contemporary issues, in their life-writing, the work in this thesis is original in its approach and in its selection.

This study takes as its focus and selection of source material, the Fields’ early dramas, taking a line through them around the figure of the Fields’ eponymous heroines or ‘tragic women’. I have selected the first five plays published by the Fields between 1884 and 1896 which focus on a female protagonist: *Callirhoë* (1884), *Fair*

⁵⁰ Vadillo, “Hot-House,” 196.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

Rosamund (1884), *The Tragic Mary* (1890), *Stephania* (1892), and *Attila, My Attila!* (1896).⁵²

This selection is not in any way intended to represent the whole gamut of the Fields' plays as concerned solely with dramatizing the lives of women. In this period the Fields published eleven dramas, which represent a diverse range of historical or mythological protagonists, both male and female, including Roman emperors, medieval English kings, even a classical nymph. The Fields' dramas also demonstrate a variety of themes and settings. In two of their other early plays, the Fields focus on the relationship between fathers and sons, as a means to address and complicate issues of loyalty, kingship and the state. *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), for example, deals with the issue of father-son relationships as distorted by the demands of power and politics. *William Rufus* (1885) similarly addresses the conflicts between men, nature and the permanence of patriarchal society as an overestimation of male power. *Loyalty or Love?* (1885) and *The Cup of Water* (1887) are rather different; both engage with ideas of marriage, complex political commitments within society, and sexual relationships which cross racial and class boundaries. *Loyalty* explores the effect of socio-political concerns on relationships through a huge and racially diverse cast of characters, all variously having to decide between 'loyalty' or 'love'. The exploration of social mores through sophisticated and witty exchanges between characters provoke comparison with drama performance in the 1890s. In *Cup of Water* a complex love triangle calls into question the limitations of marriage as a permanent state. A motif in both *Stephania* (1892) and *A Question of Memory* (1893) Similarly, this selection does not represent any value judgement, the intricacy and density of the plays not

⁵² This is to be understood as a relatively loose term, which I have developed as a shorthand way of referring to the particular set of heroines and plays that concern this study. As is discussed in Chapter Five, one of the dramas initially named for its protagonist, Honoria, was ultimately published as *Attila, My Attila!* (1896).

mentioned or analysed could fill the pages of twenty theses. Just as the limitations of the earlier ‘recovery’ work came to be understood as contributing to a narrow approach to the ‘forgotten’ writing by Victorian women, so this study is written with an acute awareness of the dangers of (inadvertently) imposing narrow frameworks which privilege works evidencing pre-existing presumptions surrounding the Fields’ poetic output as well as their lifestyle. Surprisingly, perhaps, with the possible exception of Queen Mary’s relationship with her ‘Maries’, there is a remarkable absence of the kind of Sapphic sexuality in these dramas which critics have found a rich seam to mine in their poetry.⁵³ Through my selection, I do not seek to prove a fascination with female protagonists as supporting evidence for the idea that *because* of their sexuality and that they were women their work is predominantly or even exclusively concerned with this kind of identity, and by extension of their ‘subversive’ position, necessarily oppositional and negative in representations of male characters or heterosexual culture. The dramas with male protagonists, and plays which have almost an absence of women, would make a fascinating study at a later date. At this time, however - on the cusp of critical work beginning on their dramas - addressing their female protagonists first can open up discussion on how the Fields, and other female (or indeed male) writers, approached the issues of representation and construction of women in the late nineteenth century. This study represents a far broader approach to scholarship surrounding the particular ways women writers in the 1880s and 1890s address the difficult political and social issues of their time. Analysing the extent to

⁵³ See Ana Parejo Vadillo, “Another Renaissance: The Decadent Poetic Drama of A.C. Swinburne and Michael Field,” in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 116-140. Vadillo focusses here on the relationship between the Fields’ play and Swinburne’s, and analyses the unique relationship between Mary and her female attendants presented in both plays. I would further suggest that the relationship between Callirrhoë and Nephele would similarly make an interesting subject for such closer interpretation.

which their engagement with the dramatic form can be further understood as the negotiation of a literary (and performative) means to explore the possibilities and limitations of contemporary feminine identities, of legitimate subjectivity, as well as to participate in the construction and representation of new roles emerging for late nineteenth century middle-class women,

The significance of two women deploying and negotiating a legitimate male dramatic voice as Michael Field is considered against the contemporary context of late nineteenth century concerns with radical shifts in gender roles, constructions of femininity (and masculinity) and intersecting discourses surrounding female identity. This study traces through these early tragic heroines how the Fields engage with drama to explore the limits of what will be tolerated from a ‘woman’s lips’.

In their first drama, *Callirrhoe*, the Fields directly associate their first heroine, Callirrhoe with the source of the Dionysian cult, and with the foundations of Greek tragedy. It is her deeds that the Dionysian cult and its female devotees the Maenads, are to perform “We will praise the god / By sculpture of the deeds he hath inspired”.⁵⁴ Presenting hers as a “life sublimed” they determine: “we will put / Before men’s eyes the picture of high deeds / Their hearts will emulate. They shall see acts / Like hers” but “not in fixity”.⁵⁵ These dithyrambic dances, identified by Aristotle in *Poetics* as the source from which tragedy developed were cult songs performed in honour of Dionysus.⁵⁶ In *Callirrhoe*, these female devotee-performers are specifically dynamic - expressing true human emotions, tracking each passion and momentary desire: “Ye

⁵⁴ Michael Field, *Callirrhoe* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), III.viii.125.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, III.viii.125.

⁵⁶ Carl Shaw, *Satiric Play: The Evolution of Greek Comedy and Satyr Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 42. Vadillo, in “Hot-House” identifies that the Fields later uncover the dithyramb for a new age, see Vadillo, “Hot-House,” 214.

shall dance / And thunder in your mighty mountain hymns[.]”⁵⁷ By re-positioning the woman as the founding voice of drama the Fields make a clear statement of legitimacy, for tragic heroine and dramatist alike, to explore the limits of expression and self-definition through tragic drama. The Fields make this association clear in the preface, “he has represented this foreign cult struggling for recognition in the midst of a refined and even sceptical Hellas” further aligning the ancient establishment of the dramatic form to their struggle to take their place among the great bards as Michael Field.⁵⁸

The Fields engage with and challenge these particular issues concerning the limitations of female identity through the lens of historical tragedy. Locating the middle-class woman as legitimate heir to and founding voice of tragedy, and elevating her subjectivity as they do Callirrhoë’s to the subject of great tragedy, is part of a wider reinvention of middle-class female identity by the Fields across their early dramas. Issues concerning a lack of political, sexual or physical agency, as experienced (in different ways) by many middle class women, are explored through the aristocratic tragic figure and through queens. In dramatizing their identities, experiences or ‘voices’, the Fields are – to greater and lesser extents – ‘recovering’ women who have been variously excluded from historical record, silenced by successive patriarchal partisan re-constructions and re-definitions and aligning them with the subjective experiences of silencing and inertia felt by contemporary women. This study analyses how these heroines are deployed, as interventions into debates centred around middle-class female identity, not as objects nor as lone voices, but these issues are approached, as the Fields state their “Greek men and women are approached, not from the centre of nationality, but from the circumference of humanity. “All the worlds a stage”⁵⁹ The

⁵⁷ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.viii.126.

⁵⁸ Field, *Callirrhoë*, iii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, iii-iv.

Fields' carefully engage with these particular eras and heroines, and each is considered for relevant emphasis. For example Queen Mary was a figure of much fascination around the time *The Tragic Mary* was written and published, and like many of their contemporaries, the Fields used this volatile and contentious figure of history to explore complex contemporary concerns surrounding the public presence and role of women, particularly with regard to masculinised dress and female empowerment. The study reads their particular interpretation and construction of their heroines against a socio-cultural and historicist framework. By focussing on the plays which directly address these ideas of female identity and positioning, this thesis adds to understandings of the Fields' work in a new way, producing a meaningful analysis of how they located their work, and indeed used it, to explore the changing role and place of women in contemporary society.

This analysis of the Fields' dramas opens up new ways of thinking about how women engaged with ideals of femininity in literary and artistic representations, and how they identified the limitations of romanticised isolation imposed through male representations of the female object. In *Fair Rosamund* for example, Rosamund becomes the prisoner of a rose-labyrinth King Henry II constructs in an attempt to recreate her as an idealised captive woman. It is the voice of the female tragic muse (identified in the prologue) which releases her subjectivity from this mythologised fixity and, throughout the play, Rosamund is a responsive subject to her imprisonment - not a silent object. In the preface to *The Tragic Mary* the Fields similarly evoke ideas of a rift between idealised sculpture and subjective reality: "The Queen herself lies sculptured in Westminster Abbey, waiting with the serenity of patience a judgement other than that of man....the real woman of magical nature must remain undiscovered

and triumphant.”⁶⁰ Through the process of writing tragic drama, and positioning her as a tragic heroine she is symbolically ‘given life’: “Yet we are not permitted to withhold our human verdicts, if she is to live as a presence in our midst”⁶¹ By working through gender in the multiplicity of perspectives offered by the form, these dramas respond to the changing landscape, both in addressing the key issues of the day, but also their engagement with ideas of representation, animation, agency, performance and to “speak out and be heard”.⁶² The Fields also, later in this period, took into consideration the performance of their heroines, and even the individual actresses whom would be most appropriate. Their heroine Honoria from *Attila, My Attila!* was, they told George Meredith in 1895, “conceived with Sarah Bernhardt before us all the while.”⁶³ This statement indicates that, like their relationship with their publications and self-fashioned identity, their heroines were also constructed and conceived by a process of interchange between dramatist, character and actress.

Like Ibsen’s Norah whose animation is only possible upon leaving the ‘Dolls House’, through their tragic heroines, the Fields are creatively leaving the suffocation of drawing room convention and, through the construction and deployment of their heroines’ voices and tales, explore the extent to which escape is possible. This study contributes to thinking about the history of women’s drama by introducing new interpretations and readings of ‘forgotten’ nineteenth-century writing and particularly how these authors experienced and engaged with the dramatic form. By examining the emergence of the Fields’ dramatic works, and tracing their development through a

⁶⁰ Michael Field, *The Tragic Mary* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), viii.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

⁶² Katherine Bradley to Robert Browning 23 November 1884, repro. Field, *Works and Days*, 6.

⁶³ Field, *Works and Days*, 91.

period of radical change, this thesis offers an analysis which is absolutely essential to expanding academic understandings of the Fields as dramatists-in-context.

It is my argument that this dramatic literary space allowed the Fields to challenge the aspects of contemporary culture and society which oppressed, silenced or imposed upon women an ideology or position that was negative, limiting or indeed ultimately deadly. Individually, each chapter explores different issues surrounding the Fields' representation and interrogation of the altering position of women over this period.

The Fields, throughout this period (and beyond) were acutely concerned and vigorously engaged with contemporary debates and agitations surrounding the changing position of women, particularly with the individual middle-class woman's struggle (and their own) for political, social, literary and indeed sexual agency. Bradley was especially involved in public political activism for emancipatory causes such as Anti-Vivisection and the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts.⁶⁴ Diary entries and correspondence from this time also reveals that both women had a preoccupation with how to negotiate a legitimate literary voice and identity for themselves as female dramatists. I argue that these ideas are fundamental to the way the Fields utilise their heroines to negotiate, engage with and speak out about the contemporary positioning and construction of women, and reflect on the mechanisms and ideologies (historical and current) which silence their subjective experience. These plays are therefore approached in terms of the Fields' much wider concerns, not only with the silent, oppressed position of women within political, cultural and social

⁶⁴ The Fields' political activities, particularly while at University College Bristol, are discussed at length in Chapter One of this study. Chapter Two also considers their engagement with the Repeal campaigns in *Fair Rosamund* (1884)

structures as a whole but in terms of both self-construction or self-fashioning aesthetic and gender transgressive identities, and of emerging constructions and re-configurations of female identity such as the New Woman, the unmarried political activist or the ‘femme fatale’- new interpretations of dangerous or seductive female stereotypes.⁶⁵ In short, it is ultimately concerned, as the Fields were throughout their career, with the struggle of the individual woman to ‘speak out’, to legitimise her definition of her own identity as well as to define the reality of female experience as subject to imposed roles, exploitation and silence.

In this thesis, I am specifically concerned with text as text, particularly as this is still recovery work, and even basic analyses of the plays are limited. The predominant concern of this thesis is with reading the Fields’ engagements with specific contemporary political or socio-cultural contexts in their early drama through the figure of the tragic heroine – by a process of close reading and careful textual analysis. Such an approach is essential, particularly as their earlier works were not necessarily written with staging and practical theatre-craft in mind - weighed down by what Sturgeon calls “[t]he cumbrous Elizabethan machinery”.⁶⁶

Although Bradley and Cooper recognised that it was unlikely their earlier dramas would be performed, they were particularly attentive to the materiality of their dramatic (and poetic) publications, Oscar Wilde once commenting that *The Tragic Mary* (1890) was one of the “most beautiful books in appearance of the nineteenth-century”.⁶⁷ Their artistically designed dramatic publications were carefully linked with their consciously self-constructed aesthetic identity and appearance. Schaffer

⁶⁵ Chapter Three explores ideas of dress, emancipation and self-fashioning in *The Tragic Mary*, Chapter Five examines the heroine of *Attila* in relation to the New Woman, and Chapter Four assesses the engagement with decadent images of dangerous female sexuality in *Stephania*.

⁶⁶ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 165.

⁶⁷ Vadillo, *Another Renaissance*, 135.

suggests many aesthetic women writers employed this as a distancing strategy to explore challenging subjects such as female desire by presenting their work as a “deliberately crafted artistic object, not a personal revelation.”⁶⁸ The publication of these dramas and their presentation as aesthetic objects are in fact part of the Fields’ public performance and engagement as dramatists. There is a complex interplay and process of exchange at work between the Fields’ work and their literary identity. As Bradley writes in their diary upon receiving the specimen copy of *Long Ago*, “a red marker raw against the lovely orange-Greek. I arose – & at Marshall & Snelgrove’s matched the very tint”⁶⁹ The Fields’ work, poetic and dramatic was inexorably tied to processes of self-construction and self-fashioning, and it is upon their tragic heroines that these ideas and issues intersect. The Fields’ heroines are a key site of interrogation, exploration, and negotiation of contemporary middle-class female identity, furthermore, of challenging the cultural and artistic representation and positioning of women as ‘object’ rather than as active subject.

In their later works, from *Stephania* onwards, the Fields became increasingly concerned with stagecraft and theatrical performance, particularly in the years surrounding their theatrical debut with *A Question of Memory* in 1893. According to Donoghue, around this time “the plays of Henrik Ibsen – serious, emotionally convincing, written in relatively naturalistic prose – had been making the [Fields] think again about writing a modern prose drama for the stage rather than an ancient poetic one for the page.”⁷⁰ When J. T. Grein, founder of the Independent Theatre in London in 1891 a high-art and non-commercial theatre, offered to put on one performance of *A Question of Memory* on 27 October, Bradley’s birthday, Bradley and Cooper saw

⁶⁸ Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, 70.

⁶⁹ Katharine Bradley, 9 May 1889, repro. Treby, *Binary Star*, 112.

⁷⁰ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 67.

this as their opportunity to finally ‘speak out’, to bring their work and their voices fully into the public sphere: “Now at last we are to speak with living races of men – to give them *ourselves*.”⁷¹ For the performance, the Fields also carefully dressed to meet their public at last, “Katharine in a black and coral dress, with a green velveteen opera cloak edged with black fur, and two white flowers; Edith a beryl green dress with a red opera cloak.”⁷² Donoghue writes of *A Question of Memory*, their “prose is an interesting attempt at psychological realism, though it lacks the power of their verse”⁷³ Although a disaster, their increasing focus on theatre practice and performance is explored in my analysis of *Stephania* and *Attila, My Attila!*, both are considered as works designed for the stage in their conception, structure and stagecraft.

This study approaches the Fields’ female-centric dramas in far wider terms than that of the little existing critical work, which has tended mainly toward interpretations founded in concerns of sex and sexuality. This thesis takes a historically rooted approach, engaging both with sociocultural analysis and multidisciplinary materials such as art, political, medical and legal discourses as well as other and non-literary artefacts. The methodology of this study, therefore, has in its approach a particular focus on the socio-cultural and political environment surrounding the production of these dramas. Of course, this environment does not exist objectively. The ways in which historians and critics write about society and politics is always biased and driven by a particular agenda. My selection of this historical moment in itself represents a certain bias, as at this time mid-Victorian certainties of gender roles and the socio-cultural positioning of middle-class women and their sexuality in particular were

⁷¹ Michael Field, quoted in Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 67.

under sustained attack, the subject of political, cultural and scientific debate, and at the forefront of the public consciousness. Despite this state of flux, middle-class women writers still struggled to engage with these contemporary issues overtly, without coming under attack or facing familial disapproval. The Fields used different historical periods, settings, and scenarios to reflect covertly on key issues of their own day. By taking this historically rooted approach, therefore, this thesis will produce new analyses of, and insights into, not only their particular engagement with contemporary issues, but also their precise employment of these historical settings too.

My approach here is also driven in a large part by a concern with gender. Throughout the thesis I engage with a number of theorists and theoretical ideas surrounding the mechanisms of patriarchal power structures, models of gendered binary oppositions, vocal legitimacy, and institutional constructions of gender and identity. I also explore ideas of performed gender identities and female political intervention.

In Chapter One, I explore the Fields' interrogation of female silence and the oppression of the female voice in terms of Hélène Cixous' model of gendered binary oppositions that she sets out in *The Newly Born Woman*, (1986), characterising it as a disempowering value system which invalidates and silences female expression. As well as engaging with wider feminist thought on the woman's 'silent' position in the patriarchal order, I also explore the Fields' employment of the Maenad figure in terms of Joseph A. Kestner's theories surrounding the social and political function of Victorian classical painting as a means to reinforce masculine authority, which he sets out in his 1989 study: *Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting*.

In Chapter Two, the oppressive effect of the idealisation of female imprisonment in pre-Raphaelite art and nineteenth century medieval romance revivals are examined in terms of Christina Crosby's ideas of the relationship between middle class women and these historical representations of ideal womanhood as confined and inert. Furthermore, the Fields' 'recovery' of their protagonist from a prison of historical constructions is considered in terms of New Historicist definitions of histories and counter-histories as a political intervention by women writers in the work of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt.

Chapter Three is concerned with ideas of self-fashioning, gender inversion and the performativity of gender as a social construct (and clothed identity) rather than as biological essentialism. These are explored through both Judith Butler's groundbreaking theoretical engagement with performativity, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), as well as more specific theorisations of cross-dressing and late Victorian gender crises, such as in Ann Heilmann's "(Un)Masking Desire: Cross-dressing and the Crisis of Gender in New Woman Fiction" (2000). This chapter also approaches the struggle toward self-fashioning and physical autonomy in terms of Foucault's theorisation of behavioural containment that he sets out in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1997), as well as ideas of institutionalised methods of controlling and containing female bodies in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1.* (1978).

Chapters Four and Five, concerned as they are with issues of sexual autonomy, and the oppression or exploitation of female sexuality in the Fields' later work, explore these plays through a framework of socio-cultural thought. These dramas are approached in terms of theorising the intersections and interplay inherent in the relationship between contemporary constructions of female roles and identities, and

wider *fin-de-siècle* anxieties or fixations with sexuality, as both a potential threat to the stability of empire, and to the authority of patriarchal power structures. The Fields are engaged, in both plays analysed in these last chapters, with the contemporary focus on categorising and defining female sexuality, not just in medical or legal discourse, but in its wider cultural manifestations, such as in figurative art, decadent literature and in terms of the highly political and contested ‘New Woman’ figure. These issues are considered in terms of both Foucault’s theorisation of the late-Victorian institutional definitions of sexual ‘types’ in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1* and their relationship to cultural representations of ‘dangerous sexualised archetypes’ such as Salomé, and the *femme fatale*. In Chapter Five, these ideas of female self-construction and resistance to imposed identities are further analysed in relation to Sally Ledger’s theorisation of the “New Woman” in terms of female political engagements with re-constructing and re-configuring the position of women in *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin-de-siècle* (1997).

Fundamentally, the drive of this thesis is about literature’s political intervention by women, through the heroines of tragic drama. Specifically, with how the Fields particular interventions can be understood against wider theoretical models of the potential social and political agency which female writers found through literary production.

The thesis consists of seven chapters; an introduction, a conclusion, then five longer chapters focussing on five individual plays in chronological order. The use of a chronological ordering as opposed to thematic grouping allows the study to trace developments in the Fields’ writing, construction of their protagonists, or their approach over a limited part of their career. Furthermore, closer attention can also be

made to the specific social-cultural and political backgrounds which surrounded the production of each play.

The first chapter examines the Fields' first play, *Callirrhoe* (1884), reading it with a particular focus on education, political activism and ideas of the woman's voice in the contemporary literary landscape. The analysis here is also concerned with the ways in which the figure of Callirrhoe can be understood as a woman, like the Fields and many others, who was struggling to 'speak out' on issues surrounding female silence. This chapter also considers their use of the Maenad figure to challenge negative contemporary constructions of outspoken or dissatisfied middle-class women as 'shrieking sisterhoods'.

Chapter Two focusses on the way in which the Fields engage with the idea of womanhood as a prison through the incarcerated female figure of legend, Rosamund, in their second drama *Fair Rosamund* (1884). Here their engagement with wider contemporary and historical representations of Rosamund further address how the highly popular conventions of 'courtly love' and medievalist revival at this time were imposing severe limitations on the role and identity of many women. Also considered is how they engage with wider definitions imposed on female identity and sexuality and use the dramatic form to protest the romanticisation of female sexual exploitation and interrupt the oppressive object/subject dynamic.

Chapter Three focusses on *The Tragic Mary* (1890) as representative of a new kind of heroine for the Fields: the powerful female figure as anti-heroine, or queen-in-captivity. I pay particular attention here to the Fields' approach to Mary Stuart as a protagonist, and their fascination with her as a figure that they 'reconstruct' or 'recover' from their encounter with her material possessions and portraiture in Edinburgh the previous year. This builds on the preceding chapter with its comparative

discussion of the powerful figure of Queen Elinor (a character in *Fair Rosamund*) as another example of how the Fields engaged with more mature and complex female characters as their career progressed. This play is contextualised by the Fields' growing concern with dress reform, self-fashioning and establishing themselves as aesthetic literary women.

Chapter Four focusses on how the Fields engage with the issues of rape, and female sexual empowerment in *Stephania: A Trialogue* (1892). Here I analyse the ways in which the women utilise the setting of Imperial Rome as a mirror for the 'laxity – wealthy – degeneration' of 1890s decadent representations of dangerous female sexuality.⁷⁴ I explore how this play can be seen as an attack on the corruption of late nineteenth-century urban society through the figure of ultimate female corruption. Stephania is a unique character in the Fields' dramas, a prostitute-murderess heroine who constructs herself as an avenger against sexual violence and corruption. This builds upon the previous chapter by analysing the contrast between their choice of protagonists, as a shift from the virgin-heroine of their earlier works and by assessing their more direct engagement with sexual violence and dangerous sexual identities in its specific socio-cultural context. It also addresses the issue of the Fields' new focus on the performativity of their dramas and what this means for their heroines.

Chapter Five focusses on the Fields' negotiation of, and engagement with, the figure of the New Woman, in *Attila, My Attila!* (1896). After addressing the impact of the disastrous performance of *A Question of Memory* (1893) I pay particular attention to the way the Fields participate in the construction and positioning of the New Woman in terms of these contemporary crises. As the last

⁷⁴ Emma Cooper, quoted in Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 76.

chapter concerning a specific play, I also discuss here how this drama informs understandings of both their construction of women in earlier dramas, as well as in their later, devotional works.

The conclusion draws together the issues, ideas and avenues of investigation that have come out of this extended study of their dramas, and I consider both what has not been dealt with in this thesis and where future work might be done. This chapter also places a certain emphasis on those of the Fields' dramas that are almost devoid of women, such as *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), and what potential significance this has for wider understandings of the Fields' dramas in terms of contemporary masculine identities and the hierarchies of political power. I conclude by considering the afterlife of the Fields' early dramas, and address their recent re-emergence into the public consciousness.

My overarching argument in this thesis is that in these dramas the Fields found a literary space through which to explore contemporary ideas and concerns from many points of view and through the voices of many, often marginalised and silenced, female figures. Furthermore, that their characters are exploring ideas not possible in the poem form. The possibility for dialogue within drama, for issues to be not just presented in isolation but opened up to consideration and conflict, represents their experimentation with different voices and the exploration of any ideas that also would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the Fields to address directly. Overall, the whole thesis is arguing that the Fields' overlooked and 'forgotten' dramas represent a body of work that is in clear need of rigorous academic analysis. Existing studies have only looked at these works in terms of gender, sexuality and lesbian identity. The lack of attention to the Fields' political engagements, in this area of their work, means that

this thesis is not only going beyond the work already done, but making a significant contribution to the field of Michael Field studies. Furthermore, by locating their work in terms of their specific context and the Fields' own concerns and interests, this study will open up possibilities for new work and new avenues of investigation.

A Note on the Text.

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper were playful with their use of affectionate 'nick-names' for each other and their associates, something which can be confusing particularly when working with their life writing and letters. The adoption of the male pseudonym "Michael Field" for their collaborative literary output is specifically a singular one, and represents a conscious unified authorial identity. Throughout this study, the use of "Michael Field" acknowledges Bradley and Cooper's intention that a singular male identity be the named author of the dramas. In discussing texts produced under this pseudonym however, the duality of this identity and the work's collaborative nature is recognised in the use of the plural "Fields" only in reference to their collaborative writing. In all other circumstances they are referred to by their last names, which is particularly useful distinguishing between what is collaborative and what is individually produced writing.

Referencing

The British Library's collection of Michael Field papers encompasses Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper's unpublished joint journals "Works and Days," as well as eight volumes of correspondence. "Works and Days" are British Library, Add. MS. 46766-46804. The "Michael Field Correspondence" is Add. MS. 45851-45856. Where

these materials are referenced, I have indicated whether the author is Katharine Bradley or Edith Cooper, and the date of the entry.

Michael Field's dramas were published without line-numbers. When referencing their texts the Act, scene and page number are given, i.e. I.ii.20.

Chapter One

Female Education and Political Activism in *Callirrhöë* (1884): Mænads, Social Change, and ‘Speaking Out’

Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper’s career began, and their identity as ‘Michael Field’ truly became public, with *Callirrhöë: Fair Rosamund*, their first volume of dramas published in 1884. This chapter reads *Callirrhöë*, a classical tragedy, in the context of the Fields’ educational efforts and political activism in the years surrounding the play’s production and publication. Despite the many educational and political inroads being made at this very time, the vast majority of middle-class women could not access higher educational institutions and intellectual or professional roles on equal terms, both because of systematic exclusion and fear of attack or familial (and social) scorn and disapproval. *Callirrhöë* can be understood in relation to contemporary concerns and agitations around the struggle for the middle-class woman to ‘speak out’ or seek wider experience or professional training. Martha Vicinus’ observation of the latter half of the nineteenth century that, “all was not well in a world where so many young women longed for action in a wider sphere than their own families” has a particular resonance with *Callirrhöë*.¹ Bradley and Cooper were educational and political outsiders by virtue of their sex. As a ‘group’, women who pursued education and political roles outside the home were the target and focus of much anxiety and are often characterised or associated with ‘otherness’, sexual disruption, even madness. Although achieving educational access, and publicly engaging with political action, the Fields’ determination to succeed on equal terms

¹ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), 10.

with the male literary elite was fraught with internal and socio-cultural as well as familial conflicts and struggles. Bradley was aware of the struggle to ‘speak’ in public as a woman and bring about meaningful change: “The report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn...we shall never “speak out”. And we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips”.² Under their new male pseudonym they were free to participate on equal terms, allaying Katharine’s fears of being “robb[ed] of real criticism, such as man gives man”, and *Callirrhoë* is absolutely concerned with issues of access, barriers to expression and the intellectual as well as spatial limitations imposed on many middle-class women’s lives.³

Some critical work has been undertaken on *Callirrhoë*, specifically by Yopie Prins, T.D. Olverson and Sharon Bickle.⁴ These critics have tended to see *Callirrhoë* through the lens of female classicism, Dionysian eroticism and the Fields’ relationship to Walter Pater and Victorian Hellenism. Bickle, Prins and Olverson all focus particularly on the influence of Dionysian ideas in the text and the expression of (same-sex) desire, even though this time in the Fields’ career also found them at perhaps their most politically active and dissenting. I suggest instead that the ‘breaking out’ or ‘speaking out’ of women in the play, and particularly the eventual conversion of Callirrhoë to mænadism, represents a narration of individual negotiations on the part of many middle-class women, to reconcile a strong sense of familial duty and

² Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, repro. *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ Yopie Prins, “Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinster,” in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed., Richard Dellamora (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 43-82. Sharon Bickle, “Victorian Mænads: On Michael Field’s *Callirrhoë* and Being Driven Mad,” *The Michaelian* 2 (December 2010), <http://www.oscolars.com/Field/MF2/bicklearticle.htm> (Accessed: April 21, 2014). T.D. Olverson’s article, “Libidinous Laureates and Lyrical Maenads: Michael Field, Swinburne and Erotic Hellenism,” *Victorian Poetry* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 759-776, and Chapter Four of his study, *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 111-144.

threat of social rejection with a strong(er) desire to pursue wider intellectual and cultural interests and education - to challenge their position within the family and state.

Bradley and Cooper were educated women and women who took their intellectual pursuits as seriously as their literary aspirations. Katharine Bradley and her sister Lissie, as Emma Donoghue notes, benefited from “their mother’s belief in a liberal education” and were taught French, Italian, German, Classics and painting by a series of tutors.⁵ Bradley’s education took her to France in 1868 to study at the Collège de France and in 1880 to Italy for a miniature ‘grand tour’ of the arts and antiquities there, an experience she would later draw upon several times, most obviously in the poetry of *Sight and Song*, (1892). In October 1874, she attended one of the first all-female university colleges in Britain, Newnham College, Cambridge, founded only three years before by Professor Henry Sidgwick.⁶ Bradley also took Cooper’s education in hand, and by her early teens, according to T.D. Olverson, Cooper was already translating Virgil. The suitability of some of her selected texts, however, caused conflict within the family. Katharine Bradley’s letter of late summer 1880 exposes the tensions evident within their home:

Edith said, she is allowed to read ‘Romola’ till bed-time, but not to listen to ‘Isoude’...it is most painful to me that Lis will pursue a harassing policy. Edith has a hunted feeling; & I feel the sweetest

⁵ Emma Donoghue, *We are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1998), 14.

⁶ Girton College had previously admitted women. For more background information on the first students at Newnham, see Alice Gardner, *A Short History of Newnham College, Cambridge* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1921).

human intercourse now granted to me, sorely checked, & broken, by
unwise barriers.⁷

The approval of George Eliot's *Romola*, and rejection of the more sexually charged *Tristram and Isolde*, mirror some of the concerns current in Victorian society surrounding female education and censorship, or anxieties about what young women should read.⁸ Bradley's pain at the 'harassment policy' and of being 'hunted' and 'checked' by "unwise barriers" mirrors the experience of many women attempting to break into educational institutions, or simply to educate themselves within the family home, denied 'sweetest intercourse'.⁹ It was the family's move to Stoke Bishop, Bristol, in the autumn of 1879 that marked the beginning of their lifelong joint educational project. As Bradley would later write, in a printed edition of *Callirrhoë*, "Edith and I plunged into College Life".¹⁰ Beginning in October 1880, they attended lectures and classes at the newly-founded University College Bristol for over five years: it was known at the time as "a centre of intellectual studies freshened by currents of modern thought," - and they felt strongly encouraged and intellectually stimulated

⁷ Katharine Bradley to her cousin Frances Bradley Brooks, August 1880, Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.lett.d.405, 45-8. She is referring to George Eliot's historical novel, *Romola* (1863), and most likely the medieval romance *Tristram and Isolde* a popular subject for figures including Swinburne and Richard Wagner. According to Deirdre David, *Romola* "is a daughter kept firmly in her subjugated place by peevish reminders of her intellectual inferiority" - not a position that one can imagine the young Bradley nor her niece wishing to be kept in. See Deirdre David, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1987), 190.

⁸ According to Antony Harrison, this tale was an 'archetypal' "illustration of the need and modes for expressing heroic men's and women's essential and perpetual condition of passion", Antony H. Harrison, *Swinburne's Medievalism: A Study in Victorian Love Poetry* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State U.P., 1988), 82.

⁹ See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). For a good overview of the campaigns for higher education, and their relationship to literary writing, see Laura Morgan Green, *Educating Women, Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio U.P., 2001).

¹⁰ Michael Field, *Binary Star; Leaves from the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846-1914*, ed. Ivor C. Treby (London: De Blacklands Press, 2006), 85.

by this environment.¹¹ Certainly the axiom of the promoters of the college “that women should have the same opportunities as men within its walls [except in medicine]” was encouragingly reflected in the statistical gender breakdown of first year students.¹² With Cooper reaching adulthood, they could seize new emotional and intellectual freedoms, “going into public as a pair and walking over the downs...to lectures in Classics and Philosophy”.¹³ Donoghue observes that around this time, they also began “behaving as a couple”, indicating that their intellectual partnership was developing alongside their burgeoning intimate relationship.¹⁴ They were without doubt “two eager scholars”, interested in a wide range of subjects and well versed in modern and classical languages, with Bradley showing a great enthusiasm for Greek and Cooper having a particular talent for philosophy.¹⁵ This was a period of intense activity for the women, although as Cooper’s letter from December 1880 explains, it was not without difficulty: She found the “ordeal” of an exam in arithmetic and mathematics too much to bear, earning her a “nil result”.¹⁶ Yet she goes on, “Still I love Univ. Coll. as much as ever, & will try to regain my honour next term”.¹⁷ Indeed by 1881, Bradley and Cooper had both been awarded Honours in Professor R. Fanshawe’s Ancient History course, as well as in Moral Philosophy, “Katharine received Honours in Modern History and Edith...achieved Class I in the study of Logic”.¹⁸ Increasing numbers of middle-class women were entering higher education

¹¹ Ursula Bridge quoted in Field, *Binary Star*, 85. Ursula Bridge’s biography of the Fields is currently held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, it has to date never been published. See also Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co, 1922), 18-19.

¹² J.W. Sherborne, *University College Bristol: 1876-1909* (Bristol: F. Bailey and Son, 1977), 2. Of the ninety-nine day students, sixty-nine were women compared to only thirty men, and of the two hundred and thirty-eight registered evening students, a healthy ninety-five women attended with one hundred and forty-five men. See *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ Ivor C. Treby, *The Michael Field Catalogue: A Book of Lists* (Suffolk: De Blackland Press, 1998), 29.

¹⁶ See Ursula Bridge, quoted in Field, *Binary Star*, 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁸ Olverson, *Women Writers*, 120.

and over the last two decades of the nineteenth century access did gradually increase although degrees, despite being first awarded at the University of London in 1881, were not awarded by Oxford and Cambridge until 1920 and 1921 respectively. Women like the Fields, therefore, remained outsiders, debarred from equal opportunity or qualification.

Donoghue tells us Katharine Bradley “became a life self-educator, fearless in libraries”, and the Fields were certainly engaged in developing important intellectual relationships outside the institutional environment, not seeing it as the ‘whole’ of their education.¹⁹ It was at this time that their relationship with Robert Browning began, initiated in July of 1883 when Cooper’s admiring article on Browning’s ‘Jocoseria’ was published in *Modern Thought*.²⁰ By June 1885, their relationship had become a close one; Cooper refers to him in a letter to her cousin Fanny as “our father poet” - “Ah! He was gracious and fatherly...[and] left us the benediction of his belief. Indeed we love him devotedly”.²¹ They found support in relationships with other ‘outsiders’ such as Browning who, like they, faced barriers to entering elite institutions. Lower middle-class men could no more access what their contemporary Thomas Hardy described as the “educational resources of the intellectual elite” than middle class women could - class, gender and financial resources all affected one’s access to higher education.²² According to Pamela Neville-Sington, Browning “had always felt himself to be on the outside looking in”, as Browning’s Congregationalist family background,

¹⁹ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 14.

²⁰ Treby, *Field Catalogue*, 30. This article provides an interesting insight into how Edith viewed the approach that should be taken to poetry - see Edith Cooper, “‘Jocoseria’ By Robert Browning,” *Modern Thought: An Independent Review of Politics, Religion, Science, Art and Literature* 5.7, no. 55 (1 July 1883): 297-300.

²¹ Edith Cooper to ‘Fanny’, June 1885, iField, *Works and Days*, 11.

²² Quoted in Green, *Educating Women*, x-xi. See introduction to Green for a broader explanation of the wider cultural environment. The Fields’ were fortunate to have these financial resources as Katharine’s father, Charles, came from a respectable Birmingham tobacco-merchant family.

Sarah Wood notes, “debarred admission to Oxford or Cambridge”.²³ Instead of university - he fled home from UCL after only six months in 1829 - Browning taught himself German, Latin and Greek, and, “devot[ed] his time to literature”.²⁴ Browning certainly encouraged the Fields to read widely and non-canonically. In a visit to his house in 1886, Browning brought out the first book he bought as a boy, a ‘Commonplace Book’ by Felicia Hemans, his wife’s Hebrew Bible and Euripides.²⁵ Indeed, letters and accounts of their meetings are littered with classical figures and works. Sington also points to the fact that “many of his works explore historical figures long forgotten whose stories had been left to gather dust on old library shelves” - something with which the Fields’ choice of an obscure classical nymph, Callirrhoë, as heroine of their first drama strongly resonates.²⁶ Browning’s influence and support can be found throughout the Fields’ early writing. The encouragement to ‘self-educate’ and read widely and non-canonically gave them a sophisticated if not institutional knowledge of literature and the classics which enriches their dramas particularly, with original perspectives on established historical figures and events.

Strong objections to the education of women, and what they should or should not be reading or learning, emerged in response to these new educational achievements, being viewed by some as a fundamental threat to patriarchal authority. Such anxieties emerged from the powerful idea that middle-class women’s education was not meant to prepare them for any career but that of wife and mother, attitudes an article in the *Quarterly Review* in 1869 succinctly sums up: “The sphere of woman is

²³ Pamela Neville-Sington, *Robert Browning: A Life After Death* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 82. Sarah Wood, *Robert Browning: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 21. His father, as a clerk in the Bank of England, could not have afforded to send Robert, with costs upward of £200 per year.

²⁵ See Cooper’s letter, Letter from Edith Cooper, 18 May 1886, in Field, *Works and Days*, 15.

²⁶ Neville-Sington, *Browning*, 62.

home. Such a cultivation that will make a really good wife, sister or daughter, to educated men, is the thing to be aimed at”.²⁷ For women to enter into the field of higher education, “where strictly intellectual pursuits are exclusively pursued away from home”, was considered inconsistent with their proper role. For a woman to educate herself ‘professionally’, furthermore, was a fundamental challenge to the Victorian social and financial organisation.²⁸ As Perry Williams puts it, “[t]he cardinal objection, variously conceived as a violation of the laws of god, the laws of health or the laws of social conduct, was that the accepted role of the middle-class woman was being repudiated”.²⁹ Laura Green argues that given these facts, most of the first students enrolled at Girton had to “conquer not only strong familial objections but also their own feelings of transgression”.³⁰ In letters home from one of the first students at Newnham in 1876, M. de G. Verrall, we can see an example of a similar family rift. She writes that if her father will not promise to visit her, she will overwork herself, “in which case I shall look like a walking shadow... in wh. case he will have to come, whether he likes it or no.”³¹ History does not tell us if he did visit, but objections to female study, particularly of the classics, were numerous at this time both within and without the family. The few but increasing number of middle-class women who were gaining access to the institutional study of Greek were often seen as encroaching into what had traditionally been an elite male area, and contemporary responses were highly critical. According to Olverson:

²⁷ “Female Education,” *Quarterly Review*, April, 1869, no.126 (): 465.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 465-6.

²⁹ Perry Williams, “Pioneer Women Students at Cambridge: 1869-81,” in *Lessons for Life: The Schooling of Girls and Women, 1850-1950*, ed. Felicity Hunt (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 184.

³⁰ Green, *Educating Women*, 6-7.

³¹ Extract from M. de G. Verrall, “Letter Home 7 May 1876,” reproduced in *A Newnham Anthology*, ed. Anne Phillips (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1979), 7.

It was...widely suggested by commentators using a combination of sexism, evolutionary theory and eugenics, that women educated in...the classics would be inclined to refuse marriage and motherhood...[and] would thereby jeopardise the future of the British Empire.³²

Such apocalyptic, gender-transgressive associations seem extreme, but as Olverson notes, the Fields themselves were “highly conscious of the transgressive potential of Hellenism. To have such illicit knowledge and be in such exclusive company was thrilling”.³³ Greek and Latin are seen in particular as appropriate education for a male poet. According to Olverson, the Fields employed Hellenism and their classical education “as an authoritative and scholarly discourse through which they could subversively celebrate (same-sex) sexual pleasure”.³⁴ I would suggest they go much further than this, employing a classical Greek source to engage with subversive ideas of female freedom and social revolution - celebrating and empowering the cause for female public participation and voice.

There were undoubtedly an increasing number of unmarried middle-class women, not wanting to be ‘spinsters’ or governesses, who were frustrated with the limited options open to them and the restrictions of the family home. Perry Williams states, “[r]epatedly we find that [women] were still driven by a need for something which would relieve the tedium of their cosseted middle-class idleness...[t]hey saw in higher education the promise of something which would give their lives purpose and point.”³⁵ A particularly revealing entry in one of Bradley’s early notebooks similarly

³² Olverson, *Women Writers*, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁴ Olverson, “Libidinous Laureates,” 760.

³⁵ Williams, *Pioneer Women*, 176.

shows a desire for a life more broad than one spent in domestic service to her family.

She writes:

When I look inward to my own life, I feel I was made for something nobler than to be an old spinster aunt and assist Lis in the care & education of her children. Such people may seem to be of use; but they are really superfluous.³⁶

Higher education and political activism, as well as social activities such as charity work for the dispossessed, offered opportunity not only to escape staid domesticity, but also to engage in debates surrounding social change and improvement - to be not 'superfluous' but to have purpose and value.³⁷ Mary Sturgeon writes of the Fields' time at Bristol as "an era when higher education, and Women's Rights and Anti-vivisection were being indignantly championed...all by the same kind of people. Katharine and Edith were of that kind".³⁸ Certainly there was at this time a number of high-profile women, including Josephine Butler, Emily Davis, Barbara Bodichon and Frances Power Cobbe, who were publicly debating and engaging with precisely these issues, as well as other political causes such as the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the rights of the working classes, prisoners and prostitutes. Sturgeon writes that both Bradley and Cooper joined the debating society of the college and "plunged into the questions of the moment...spoke eloquently in favour of the suffrage of women and were deeply interested in ethical matters".³⁹ In September 1883, Bradley

³⁶ Katherine Bradley's exercise book, cover inscription 'Newton 1867-', Fragmentary diary of Katharine Bradley. Records the final day of her mother Emma Harris Bradley. Katharine Bradley, 1867-8, Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.misc.e.336, 94 leaves, 45-8.

³⁷ See Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 10-45. This chapter, "Revolt Against Redundancy" explains these struggles in context of late-century social change.

³⁸ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 20.

³⁹ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 20-1.

addressed a Congress in Den Haag, where she spoke in support of the abolition of ‘State-regulated vice’.⁴⁰ A draft of this speech to ‘ladies’ is written on an exercise-book draft of *Callirrhoë* from Act II-V dated ‘finished Aug 29 1882’, evidencing the close connection between her increasing activism and their burgeoning writing career.⁴¹ Bradley was also a key advocate of the Anti-Vivisection movement, her name appearing in the list of honorary corresponding members as “Miss Bradley, Ivythorpe”, and she remained a secretary to the local branch until 1887.⁴² Such a spread of interests was not unusual, according to Donoghue, as “feminism and animal rights often went hand in hand in those days”.⁴³ The Anti-Vivisection movement was engaged with wide ranging concerns and debates surrounding the silenced and disempowered animal/object - as Susan Hamilton argues, “paramount in all of these questions, [was] who should decide? What constituted ‘expertise’ in decisions about animals, pain, and the determination of knowledge?”⁴⁴ Cobbe’s response to a demonstration of vivisection at a meeting of the British Medical Association in 1874, sums up precisely these prevailing concerns with the authority of the male ‘expert’ and a particular anxiety about the unregulated nature of the private laboratory: “what will others feel free to do unseen in private laboratories?...What are the experts up

⁴⁰ Treby, *Field Catalogue*, 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴² *The Vivisection Controversy; a Selection of Speeches and Articles from the Publications of the Victoria Street and International Society* (London: Victoria Street Society, 1883), 3. Katharine met George Bell, their first publisher, through their shared involvement in the Anti-Vivisection movement.

⁴³ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 33. According to Richard French, roughly 40-60 percent of those involved in the movement were women, this level of female participation is perhaps among the highest of any non-specifically feminist movement of the era. See Richard D. French, *Anti-Vivisection and Medical Science in Victorian Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 239-240. Also see, Mary Ann Elton, “Women and Anti-Vivisection in Victorian England: 1870-1900,” in *Vivisection in Historical Perspective*, ed. Nicolas A. Rupke (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 259-294.

⁴⁴ Susan Hamilton, introduction to *Animal Welfare and Anti-Vivisection 1870-1910: Nineteenth-Century Woman’s Mission*, ed. Susan Hamilton (London: Routledge, 2004), xvii.

to?”⁴⁵ The ‘secrecy’ of the vivisectionist’s gruesome experiments in the closed laboratory, appears (briefly) in *Callirrhoë*, where the doctor, Machaon, is seen in private, taking much disturbing delight in the dissection of a child’s hand, “What delicate work this is!...I will keep the secret of it, though. The acts of introspection are not for the crowd.”⁴⁶ The focus of these movements, much like in debates for repeal, was the authority given to male individuals to act ‘unseen’ on the bodies of prostitutes and animals alike, particularly by the exclusion of women from participating in the same institutional training or entering the professional sphere as ‘expert’. In the case of repeal, the focus was on the rights of male individuals to detain women on the *suspicion* of prostitution, and subject them to what the repeal movement called an “instrumental rape”, often on little evidence.⁴⁷ These legislations, Judith Walkowitz suggests, “were consistent with a set of attitudes and ‘habits of mind’ toward women, sexuality and class, that permeated official Victorian culture.”⁴⁸ They were founded on and simultaneously acted to establish, through their “clear cut legal distinctions between genders and classes...an officially sanctioned double standard of sexual morality.”⁴⁹ The medical professional male, along with the lawmakers and politicians were institutionally authorised to impose violence, silence and abuse on women (and animals) unchallenged, as these groups are excluded from professions and their institutional discourses, except as silent objects of study. By engaging in these debates, middle-class women showed their contempt for the way that patriarchy treated animals

⁴⁵ Susan Hamilton, *Introduction*, xvii.

⁴⁶ Michael Field, “Callirrhoë,” in *Callirrhoë: Fair Rosamund* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), II.ix.73.

⁴⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 104.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70. Also see Jane Jordan and Ingrid Sharp, eds., *Josephine Butler and the Prostitution Campaigns: Diseases of the Body Politic. Volume I: The Moral Reclaimability of Prostitutes* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

and, by extension, them. Voicing their objections and agitating for change, they challenged not only the treatment of prostitutes and animals, but also the elevated position of male professional objectivity and authority to speak about and for women in general.

Such public and vociferous activities, however, were often not approved of by middle-class women's families and wider society in general – and they were subject to scorn, public mockery and cruel epithets. According to Walkowitz, “the participation of middle-class women in repeal efforts fascinated and shocked many contemporary observers, who regarded this female rebellion as an ominous sign of the times”.⁵⁰ Such disquiets went to the highest echelons of government, as a concerned MP said to Josephine Butler:

We know how to manage any other opposition in the House or in the country, but this is very awkward for us – this revolt of the women. It is quite a new thing; what are we to do with such opposition as this?⁵¹

The act of ‘speaking out’, especially about prostitution and venereal disease, was also considered to be a social transgression, as Paul McHugh writes: “to agitate on a subject which so many found distasteful was an achievement in itself...yet here were women trespassing upon ground which was anything but proper”, adding that those women who did thus ‘trespass’ were subjected to “tremendous attacks”.⁵² The *Saturday Review* similarly criticised the Ladies’ protests for ignorance of factual detail, “as well

⁵⁰ Walkowitz, *Prostitution*, 1.

⁵¹ An M.P. to Josephine Butler, quoted in George W. Johnson and Lucy Johnson, eds., *Josephine Butler: An Autobiographical Memoir* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent & Co., 1909), 90.

⁵² Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 165.

as resorting to insulting monikers such as the “shrieking sisterhood”.⁵³ Even in parliament such campaigning was roundly denounced, as McHugh recounts: “No debate was complete without a denunciation of the women, sometimes in terms as lurid as those of the *Saturday Review* - ‘those dreadful women’, ‘indecent Mænads’”.⁵⁴ An unwelcoming attitude to say the least, and one which created even greater barriers to ‘speaking out’ as a woman.

Callirrhöë is saturated with late-nineteenth-century concerns surrounding speech, silence, and the place of women. This drama represents a wide-ranging engagement with, and narration of, the multiplicity of struggles and conflicts surrounding unmarried middle-class women and their resistance to what Vicinus calls the “narrow interpretation of a spinster’s duties” - “the spinster had thrust upon her absolute purity and goodness...she was supposed to remain virginal and utterly self-sacrificing for all who needed her”.⁵⁵ The increasingly visible and vocal female challenges emerging through many disparate routes such as political activism or entering higher education, were particularly disruptive to this ideal traditional model of servility. The Fields demonstrate how these conflicts play out not only on a personal, familial level – through Callirrhöë’s struggle to reconcile her duty to her family with her desire for “wider care” and her unspoken passions - but also on a social, political and cultural level, specifically the challenge the Mænads as empowered female ‘outsiders’ pose to the rigidly patriarchal order of Calydon.⁵⁶

⁵³ “The Shrieking Sisterhood,” *Saturday Review*, March 19, 1870, 391.

⁵⁴ McHugh, *Social Reform*, 165.

⁵⁵ Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 10; 5.

⁵⁶ Field, *Callirrhöë*, l.iii.22.

In *Callirrhoë*, the Fields reinterpret an obscure classical myth, taken from Pausanias.⁵⁷ Their version narrates the tale of Callirrhoë, a young and dutiful daughter to the blind Cephalus and sister to the impulsive, cowardly and narcissistic Emathian, who is to be found obediently at her spinning. Callirrhoë, like many of the women of Calydon, is increasingly wondering if there is not more to life than marriage or spinsterhood, especially as many are leaving their duties of the hearth and home to revel in the hills outside with the new cult of Bacchus, led by Coresus and his Mænads. Coresus determines to win Callirrhoë, calling her his “true maenad”, and approaches her as she collects water on the edge of the city.⁵⁸ She refuses his advances and declines to join his cult on the grounds that she does not wish to disrupt her family or plunge the city into chaos, despite her clear desire and need for a wider experience and expression of passion. Angered and disappointed, Coresus calls upon Bacchus to bring a pestilence on the citizens of Calydon, although this fever is already beginning among those who have been to the hills, and, far from being divinely imposed, is the result of panic agitating the usual ‘summer fever’.⁵⁹ As the fever worsens, and despite the best efforts of Machaon, a doctor (with strikingly nineteenth-century understandings of disease), the panic spreads, and Emathion is sent to consult the priestesses of the oracle at Dodona. In the meantime, the Mænads increasingly encroach into the city space, attracting more and more of the young away from their families and homes to the revel. On Emathion’s return, the city is informed that only the sacrifice of Callirrhoë will satisfy the gods’ anger, unless one offers to die in her stead. Only Demophile, Callirrhoë’s close confidante and wet-nurse offers, but is declined. Her father dies, and Emathian attempts to run, only to go mad after committing murder, and Callirrhoë

⁵⁷ See Pierre Grimal, “Callirrhoë,” in *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. Stephen Kershaw (London: Penguin, 1991), 82.

⁵⁸ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.i.9.

⁵⁹ See Machaon’s medical assessment of the situation, *Ibid.*, II.vi.57-8.

bravely goes to her death. However, upon seeing her on the sacrificial altar, Coresus is overcome by love and instead kills himself. Inspired by his act, Callirrhoë declares herself a Mænad, takes the sacrificial knife, escapes to the city boundaries and kills herself, first entrusting the leadership of the Bacchic cult to Machaon.

The ever-popular Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary* ascribes this myth to Coresus not Callirrhoë, "who treated him with disdain", and she kills herself here, "conscious of her ingratitude for [his] love".⁶⁰ What is perhaps most striking about these accounts in Lemprière is the lack of detail regarding Callirrhoë's identity. The focus is on Coresus' desires and action, and Callirrhoë is presented in terms of an object or geographical location - "Callirrhoë, killed herself on the brink of a fountain, which afterwards bore her name" - and her 'ingratitude' for the advances of a priest.

⁶¹ The androcentric bias of Lemprière's account was commonplace in contemporary dictionaries and translations; as Joseph Kestner puts it, "myths were modelled to suit the contemporary situation" through a process of exclusion, selection and partial appropriation, and this "process...accorded with the patriarchally biased definition of the male and female natures...[and] roles".⁶² The Fields' significant advantage in being able to access and interpret Pausanias' account in its original Greek meant that like an increasing number of female classical scholars engaging with original texts, "they were no longer reliant upon male interpretations...[and had] crucial access to the interpretative processes of translation...adaptation and editing".⁶³ Such access

⁶⁰ John Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* (London: Bracken, 1994), 173. In fact, this entry appears not under 'Callirrhoë' but under 'Coresus', the former simply refers one to the male entry.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁶² Joseph A. Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 48.

⁶³ Olverson, *Women Writers*, 17. For a full contemporary translation of Pausanias' account, see Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece*, 2 vols. trans., Arthur Richard Shilleto (London: George Bell and Sons, 1886), vol.2, book VII, ch. XXII. For a specific discussion of female writers' relationship

allowed them to re-interpret Callirrhoë - as Olverson notes, “the tragic women of antiquity allowed Victorian women to express themselves from within the boundaries of a prestigious, culturally legitimated, male-dominated discourse” - and let them define for themselves the meaning of her myth, and negotiate a space to reformulate female roles and identities within the elite tragic form.⁶⁴

Callirrhoë, initially at least, embodies the ideal Victorian domestic ‘spinster’, caring for her brother and father. Her first appearance finds her at her ‘spinning’, and her identity is strongly tied to the ‘distaff’. Callirrhoë as a ‘spinster’ is represented by the distaff, however the thyrsus, the symbolic wand of the Mænads, is, in contrast, a symbol of empowerment and the free expression of passion. The Fields adopted this symbol, combined with two interlocking rings, as a visual representation of their dual literary and creative identity. Callirrhoë remains indoors, “lead[ing] so still a life”, and her position defines her whole experience, much as the limited education open to middle-class women was designed to limit their aspirations and activity: “From earliest days / I have been trained in the old pieties”.⁶⁵ She is, however, conflicted (even before Coresus provokes her to recognise her dissatisfactions in the next scene), struggling to reconcile her “reverence” for her “father’s old grey head” and “antiquity” - the authority of the “elder age” - with her desire and longing “for the hills” and wider experiences and roles.⁶⁶ Ana Parejo Vadillo argues that central to the Fields’ dramatic work is the historical heroines’ “struggle between old and new social and political

to the classics in context, see Shanyn Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Athens, OH and London: Ohio U.P., 2008).

⁶⁴ Olverson, *Women Writers*, 21.

⁶⁵ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.ii.16; l.iii.25.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, l.ii.20; l.ii.17.

formations, of which they were agents and victims”.⁶⁷ Callirrhoë, here, “tired of spinning”,⁶⁸ similarly questions her role in a speech which reflects the debates surrounding the struggle for many middle-class women to reconcile their assigned role with desires for wider experience and new educational and professional opportunities:

“Can it be meant,” I often ask myself,
“Callirrhoë, that thou shouldst simply spin,
Be borne of torches to the bridal-bed,
Still a babe’s hunger, and then simply die,
Or wither at the distaff, who hast felt
A longing for the hills and ecstasy?”⁶⁹

Here Callirrhoë is criticising, by literally ‘speaking out’ to herself, the limitations of a middle-class woman’s life: marriage, childbearing then death, or servile spinsterhood, her body and passions ‘withering’ at her spinning or ‘distaff’. George Eliot in *Armgar* (1874), similarly presents a female protagonist aware of this ‘gospel’ of gendered roles, that women “shalt not desire/ to do aught best, save pure subservience”, and, as Sonjeong Cho points out, Eliot’s female characters particularly, as Callirrhoë does here, “fail in the sense that...they can find no social medium for their desire outside domestic wifedom.”⁷⁰ Callirrhoë’s language also echoes that of Katherine’s early

⁶⁷ Ana Parejo Vadillo, “Outmoded Dramas: History and Modernity in Michael Field’s Aesthetic Plays,” in *Michael Field and Their World*, ed. Margaret D. Stetz and Cheryl A. Wilson (High Wycombe: The Rivendale Press, 2007), 237.

⁶⁸ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.ii.17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, l.ii.18.

⁷⁰ George Eliot, “Armgar,” *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1874). George Eliot is often criticised for the conservatism of her heroines, and their habit of subsuming to the idea that marriage and familial obligation are, if not the happiest lot, certainly the most likely and satisfying for all concerned. See Kate Flint, “George Eliot and Gender,” in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2001), 159-180. Sonjeong Cho, *An Ethics of Becoming: Configurations of Feminine Subjectivity in Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot* (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 152. The women of Calydon and Callirrhoë find precisely this medium in the Bacchic cult and the figure of the Mænad.

journal entry: “I feel I was made for something nobler than to be an old spinster aunt.”⁷¹ Callirrhöë’s longing for purpose is in conflict with her submissive role; as Ben Griffin puts it, “the terms of Victorian moral discourse reinforced the idea that the ideal woman, the moral woman, was a submissive woman”, something which extended to the disavowal of women protesting or acknowledging, publicly or privately, that they had their own needs or desires.⁷²

Callirrhöë’s expression of dissatisfaction and desire is in direct conflict with the Calydonian ideology - it is here a transgression of the divinely ordered spaces and roles assigned to women by the twin deities which preside over Calydon, Apollo and Artemis. In Classical myth, Apollo is associated with the Sun, with ideal youthful masculinity, and frequently depicted with a bow or lyre; certainly, “his worship and power were universally acknowledged” in the classical world.⁷³ Artemis, who assisted at her brother’s birth, is the patron of unmarried girls and, like the Roman Diana, associated with the Moon and hunting. In the Fields’ play, these attributes manifest as binary gender oppositions. Artemis is associated with silence - the “fair twinned sister of the Delian, / Must empty the rich passions of her heart...[i]n safest silence” - as well as requiring her female devotees to be *necessarily* voiceless - the repetition of ‘must’ here defining silence as a prerogative: “[s]he must be mute”.⁷⁴ The expression of ‘rich passions’ or any dissatisfactions is clearly a transgression, not just against social mores, but as Callirrhöë’s prayer to Artemis indicates, against the gods and the divine ‘order’: “Hear me, thou holy Huntress, and protect/ My thoughts from lawless

⁷¹ Katharine Bradley ‘Newton 1867-’, Katharine Bradley, 1867-8, Bodleian Library, MS.Eng.misc.e.336, 94 leaves, 45-8.

⁷² Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women’s Rights* (Cambridge: C.U.P, 2012), 48.

⁷³ Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary*, 61. Although as Lemprière suggests, his conflation with the sun may be a misunderstanding. See page 62.

⁷⁴ Field, *Callirrhöë*, l.ii.18.

wandering beyond bound / Of thy own sacred precincts[.]”⁷⁵ The masculine role represented by Apollo, is, for example, set up in clear opposition to the silent domesticity assigned to woman, particularly through the contrasting imagery of the lines, “For him, the sunshine and the song; for her, / The virgin lip and inviolate shade”.⁷⁶ The alliteration of ‘sunshine’ and ‘song’ is melodious and light-hearted, in conflict with the stilted effect created by that of ‘virgin’ and ‘inviolate. The euphony of ‘sunshine and song’, opposed to the contrasting dissonant effect created by this awkward alliteration, functions to not only emphasise the irreconcilability of these two identities, but gives a strong impression of discordance, of obstacles to free expression. The link between the ‘virgin’ lip and the ‘inviolate’ space of the ‘shade’ further suggests a connection between controlled, suppressed female sexuality and a silent unviolated mouth. Virginité and silence are therefore set up in opposition to sexuality and speech, precisely the possibilities offered by Coresus’ cult. The spiritual and physical domain of the woman similarly locates her in the ‘shade’ or “household darkness”, identified in this system as an ‘inviolate’ space, which ‘protects’ her body and virtue from outside threats such as unauthorised sex (outside marriage) thus isolating her from meaningful experience, expression, wider public influence or participation; as Vicinus puts it, “an ideal of domesticity masked the exclusion of middle-class women from political, economic and social power” and here from ‘speaking out’.⁷⁷

These deities, as the foundations of an opposing system of gender roles, reflected the contemporary situation since at the time, according to Kestner, “mythological allusion was [often] used either to reinforce or condemn a certain norm

⁷⁵ Field, *Callirrhoë*, I.ii.18.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, I.ii.18.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, I.ii.18; Vicinus, *Independent Women*, 2.

of behaviour” and particularly through artistic representation, “controlled, reinforced, or created definitions of male and female character through the legends and situations represented”.⁷⁸ For example, Apollo as an icon, Kestner writes, “reinforced male heroism and patriarchal dominance” and “embodied sexual and racial supremacy” particularly in classically inspired art.⁷⁹ Such representations, therefore, acted to reinforce the patriarchal dominance of contemporary society, as they do in the Fields’ Calydon. As Kestner puts it, “the eternality and universality inherent in mythic representation convinced the culture that certain sexual qualities were unchanging verities” - their employment reinforcing the legitimacy of prescribed roles and spheres as founded on ‘inherent’ or ‘timeless’ sexual difference and associated limitations and characteristics.⁸⁰

Callirrhoë’s struggle to ‘speak out’ or find self-expression is depicted by the Fields here as a struggle against a set of binaries - a whole order of hierarchical oppositions - which figure the woman or female as passive, silent and domestic in direct conflict with the freedom, speech and independence assigned to men. The Fields’ exposure of this system of classification as not ‘natural’ or ancient, but partisan and oppressive – thereby disrupting its authority and legitimacy through the clamour of dissatisfied and agitating female voices such as Callirrhoë’s and the Mænads’ – can be read as a sophisticated interrogation of the wider ideological structures or systems, and their (almost) exclusively male institutions. Institutions which, through a multiplicity of intersecting discursive constructions, function to silence or limit the potential of (middle-class) women in wider society to domestic passivity.

⁷⁸ Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny*, 5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 40, 41.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Hélène Cixous, in her collaboratively produced work, *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), addresses precisely these concerns, identifying the patriarchal foundations of western civilisation and philosophy as fundamentally oppressive.⁸¹ She recognises this order as one of self-perpetuating patriarchal authority, which locates women as always within the passive half of a gendered hierarchical binary system and endlessly reproducible sets of oppositions.⁸² Cixous presents a set of these binaries, which mirror those of Artemis/Apollo: “Activity/passivity”, “Sun/Moon”, “Culture/Nature”, and “Head/Heart”, arguing that these correspond to an underlying man/woman opposition, an inevitably positive/negative evaluation -“Superior/Inferior” and a hierarchical structure where male privilege and sexual difference is “shown in the opposition between *activity* and *passivity*”, and sustained throughout philosophical, literary, in fact all organized discourse.⁸³ Like Michael Field, Cixous is concerned with the ‘active’ or male as the philosophical constant within this order, privileging ‘the father’ (and writer) with “Intention: desire, authority”, which, in terms of literature and philosophy, inasmuch as it conveys or defines ‘meaning’ or reality, reinforces the passivity and silence of women by excluding or denying her existence.⁸⁴ This makes expression or ‘intent’, outside her subordinate binary position - “woman is passive or she does not exist” - an impossibility. What she might be, or want, like Callirrhoe’s attempt to limit or silence her desires, is “unthinkable, unthought”, and therefore

⁸¹ Although an early text, discussing the possibilities of feminine expression and addressing the foundations of political inequality, it nevertheless offers a useful framework through which to read the Fields’ engagement here with ideas of patriarchal myth-making and strictly delineated roles as key factors affecting the individual middle-class woman’s struggle towards independence in thought and action.

⁸² Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual: Feminist Literary Theory* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 101.

⁸³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: M.U.P., 1986), 63 and 64.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

cannot find expression within this system.⁸⁵ A key problem with Cixous' view of ideology here, as a totally closed system, is that if it was uniformly consistent, without fault, then it would remain undiscoverable. She further identifies that endlessly reproduced stories and myths tell women both that "women represent the eternal threat, the anticulture for [men]", and that "[t]here is no place for your desire in our affairs of State".⁸⁶ Under the heading, 'a woman's coming to writing', Cixous' analysis of the struggle to self-expression and identification, as women as "[i]nvisible, foreign, secret, hidden...forbidden", and as kept "on the edge of the stage", certainly chimes with the idea of women who 'speak out' - here, the Mænads - as struggling against these negative 'absent' and oppressive 'attributes' which reinforce their position.⁸⁷ The Fields' employment of the outside cult of Bacchus provokes those within the system, like Callirrhoë, to recognise and confront this oppression through legitimising the vocalisation or enactment of their individual desires and dissatisfactions. The Fields are, in Cixous words, "bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial - to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural".⁸⁸ The individual experiences, circumstances and capacities of the women within the Calydonian system interrupt its stability through expression legitimised and provoked by the new Bacchic cult.

Coresus' cult is located outside the binary patriarchal order of Calydon, both geographically (as their temple is in the hills outside the city) and ideologically, as this group and its leader actively encourage, and provoke, women to enact, explore and vocalise their suppressed desires. This is certainly the case for the women of Calydon

⁸⁵ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 64.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

who have joined the revel in the hills. Callirrhoë asks if they, “[do] so ill to flee to him for joy?” – that is if Bacchus/Coresus can ‘deliver’ or release women, “from their toil / In household darkness to the broad sweet light”.⁸⁹ Many have fled to the “sunshine on the hills” and have left the family home and virginal (or married) domesticity to revel outside.⁹⁰ This activity can be understood as related to the mænadic ritual of *oreibasia*, a revel in the mountains which released the repressed “emotional energies” of women.⁹¹ The Dionysian cult traditionally encouraged women to celebrate their God out in the open, “beyond the walls of the *polis* and away from the prying eyes (and laws) of men”, and here, the situation mirrors the drive among middle-class women to leave their role as spinster aunt, or escape the drudgery of motherhood and marriage, and go out to explore educational, professional, as well as personal and passionate experiences.⁹² Certainly the idea of an all-female environment within which to live and learn, away from the constant observation of family or judgement of wider society, was one of the many appeals of colleges such as Girton and Newnham. Just as the women of Calydon who join this community, however, are vilified for their “irreligion” and for flocking to “unseemly revel”, women's colleges, despite their praise by some, were seen by conservative onlookers as “subversive institutions which dangerously empowered rebellious women by taking them away from home and giving them a sense of collective power”, a power denied them by the patriarchal institutions of family and heterosexual marriage which isolate them in the domestic sphere.⁹³ This does not provide an alternative, however, as these experiences and

⁸⁹ Field, *Callirrhoë*, I.ii.18.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, I.ii.17.

⁹¹ Olverson, “Libidinous Laureates,” 765.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 765.

⁹³ Field, *Callirrhoë*, II.ii.42; Olverson, *Women Writers*, 16.

efforts in fact represent part of their attempts to gain entry into the *polis*, as participants into the institutions and socio-political spaces normally the reserve of men alone.

Callirrhoë is challenged by Coresus to ‘speak’, to express her dissatisfaction as well as her ‘passions’. According Olverson, in this religion, “the profane desires of Greek maidens are given precedence and sacred status”.⁹⁴ He confronts her -“Look in mine eyes, and say if servitude / Be not your daily portion” - before asking:

Can you set
Your limbs free to the rhythm of your soul?
Is there a passion in you that dare speak?⁹⁵

Setting her ‘limbs free’, and the idea her ‘soul’ has an inherent ‘rhythm’, implies that physical freedom and free expression are closely associated, rousing her from her ‘stillness’, as well as referencing the mænadic rites of dancing.⁹⁶ ‘Dare speak’, like Callirrhoë’s later questioning “[c]an I trust my voice [?]”, also references the insecurity suffered by many female writers about the legitimacy of their ‘voice’ and their ability to express themselves.⁹⁷ Provocative statements such as ‘can you’, “speak in earnestness”, “[a]sk yourself have you not a deeper need”, “[t]ell me about yourself!” place an overwhelming focus here on Callirrhoë’s needs and desires, in direct opposition to the ‘safest silence’ demanded of her within her home and Calydon.⁹⁸

Callirrhoë’s desires are far from a crazed thirst for power or unbridled sexuality, but a ‘deeper need’ than superfluousness or servitude can satisfy.

⁹⁴ Olverson, “Libidinous Laureates,” 762.

⁹⁵ Field, *Callirrhoë*, I.iii.22.

⁹⁶ The connection between physical freedom and expression of self in *The Tragic Mary* (1890) is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

⁹⁷ Field, *Callirrhoë*, II.ii.40.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, I.iii.22-3.

I oft have longed
For speech with the dark sea and glittering hills,
For stories of the world, for wider care
And love of creatures other than myself.⁹⁹

Here the three key longings, ‘speech’, ‘stories’ and ‘love’, mirror those of many contemporary middle-class women concerned with their idealised position as silent, isolated and devoid of experience. Callirrhoë’s desire for ‘wider care’, to know the ‘stories of the world’ (this being one of the more obscure that the Fields worked to recover) furthermore resonates strongly with the Fields’ educational and professional aspirations. In a letter to Browning in 1884, Bradley wrote: “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”.¹⁰⁰

For Callirrhoë, however, Coresus’ promise of freedom and pleasure creates a terrible dilemma, the struggle to reconcile her desire for ‘wider care’, knowledge and passion with her sense of familial and religious duty:

My dear father’s peace
I will not wreck, as Nephele;
[...]he ne’er
Shall miss his daughter at the evening board.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.iii.23.

¹⁰⁰ Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, repro. in Michael Field, *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T. & D.C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 6.

¹⁰¹ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.iii.26.

Her response here foregrounds the tension felt by many middle-class women at the time, between familial duty and personal liberation. Her “common household work”, and its supposed importance - how “like the blessed gods my hands / From chaos could educe a tiny world / Of perfect order” - implies that through the domestic work assigned to her it is she who maintains the social and universal order.¹⁰² Both elevating her and confining her to this ‘tiny world’ as a divine duty, this actually functions to prevent any attempt to move outside her role, perceived as it is as an act which will destroy her family and social stability, and consequently bring chaos. Such disruption, however, is already evident, the intensifying fever being blamed on those women who have ‘fled to Bacchus for joy’. Callirrhoë’s father (who is consistently dismissive of the ‘new god’ Bacchus) states “drunken heaps/ Of maddened women have infected it [Calydon]” and “[m]en, of their wives forsaken, have grown wild, / Disordered, hungry and uncivilised”.¹⁰³ The result of Callirrhoë’s seeking out this new religion, or a life outside her role, she realises, comes at the price of her family’s happiness and her father and brother’s masculine authority. Olverson’s interpretation of this dilemma - “She would be a beneficiary of social change, but her father and brother would be compelled to endure a loss of power and identity under a Dionysian system” - mirrors contemporary anxieties surrounding the consequences of women rejecting their prescribed role, transgressing into the male public sphere and its institutions.¹⁰⁴ The reaction of the Calydonians here offers particular insight into the experiences of, and responses to many middle-class women who demanded a public presence and voice at the time.

¹⁰² Field, *Callirrhoë*, I.ii.18.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, II.ii.43.

¹⁰⁴ Olverson, “Libidinous Laureates,” 768.

After Callirrhoë, the Mænads are the most prominent female figures within the play, and are used to reflect on attitudes to women who attempted to ‘speak out’. This middle-class movement by some women to speaking ‘outside’ their assigned role, as Robyn Warhol points out, ran the risk “of endangering not only [their] feminine reputation, but also the public perception of her female sexuality”.¹⁰⁵ The woman who speaks out is therefore perceived as a sexually subversive and potentially disruptive figure. During her long public campaign for repeal, for example, Josephine Butler and her female supporters were subject to the “cold newspaper scorn of ‘the clamour of these *indecent Mænads*’”.¹⁰⁶ Such terms and mythological figures were used to characterise outspoken women as sexualised or animalistic, associating speaking out with uncontrolled sexuality, madness and mænadism.¹⁰⁷ Some discussion of the contemporary tensions and ideas surrounding Mænads, then, and their relationship to representations of women as well as their meaning and use by female writers is useful, as Ivor Treby notes: “References to the Mænads, and other ladies who lynch, are better enjoyed when one appreciates the connotations”.¹⁰⁸

Mænads in Greek culture were devotees of the god Dionysus, or Bacchus, the god of wine and drama. His female followers formed a band, a sacred *thiasos*, and, adorned with animal skins, and bearing the symbolic ivy-twined *thyrsos*, engaged in ritualistic dancing, intoxication, and reached a state of frenzy, becoming ‘Mænads’ - literally mad ones. There is evidence that, at the very least, the ritual of *oreibasia*

¹⁰⁵ Robyn R. Warhol, *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 159.

¹⁰⁶ D. L. Hobman, *Go Spin, You Jade!: Studies in the Emancipation of Woman* (London: C.A. Watts & Co, 1957), 73.

¹⁰⁷ The name ‘Mænad’ has its origin in the Greek word ‘to be mad’ “because they were frenzied in the worship of Dionysus” See Sir William Smith, *A Classical Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography, Mythology and Geography* (London: John Murray, 1904), 516.

¹⁰⁸ Treby, *Binary Star*, 33.

played a key part of the social organisation in Ancient Greece as a rebellious ritual for women, outside the central *polis*. According to Prins, this was a “ritualised transgression” which “ultimately served as a form of social containment”, as the women returned to the city state and legitimate marriage once their suppressed energies had been released.¹⁰⁹ In classical myth, however, the Mænad is a far more fearsome and violent figure, engaging in the rites of *sparagmos* and *omophagia*, the rending or tearing apart of the sacrificial animal and the pleasurable consumption of raw meat or blood. Euripides, for example, presents them in precisely this way in his *Bacchae* (c.405 B.C.), as, once whipped into a wild frenzy, the Mænads attack Thebes and violently dismember its leader. Richard Jenkyns describes this text as “[a] work of violent beauty and ferocious imagination”, and it was a favourite of Walter Pater.¹¹⁰ In late-Victorian literary and artistic culture, the Mænad is variously depicted as a figure of madness, violence, as a “seductive wanton, murderous femme fatale, or raging madwoman”, according to Prins.¹¹¹ Mænads, like publically visible and vocal women, can therefore be understood as sites of intense debates and anxieties surrounding not only the ‘nature’ of women as inherently sexually dangerous, but as a threat to social and moral order. Joseph Kestner identifies this association:

Women’s latent sexual frenzy is suggested in the depictions of the devotees of Dionysus...it was easy to equate female sexual desire with hysteria and neurasthenia via the image of the Bacchante or

¹⁰⁹ Prins, *Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters*, 49. For a wider examination of the meaning and rituals of Dionysian worship, see Richard Seaford, “Dionysus as Destroyer of the Household: Homer, Tragedy, and the Polis,” in *Masks of Dionysus*, ed. Thomas Carpenter and Christopher Faraone (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 115-146.

¹¹⁰ Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 108. The interrelations between the Fields’ work and Pater’s *Greek Studies* (1890), particularly the essays “A Study of Dionysus” and “The Bacchanals of Euripides” is explored in Prins, *Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters*, 49-54.

¹¹¹ Prins, *Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters*, 49.

Mænad...Bacchantes embodied images of female lust, demonstrating women were potentially mad by virtue of their sexuality.¹¹²

To some, the Mænads seemed to provide incontrovertible evidence of the enduring sexually chaotic or wild 'nature' of womanhood in general. The Mænad as a figure resonated particularly with ongoing and intensifying debates on 'The Woman Question' and what it is women are or should be. According to Prins, at this time, "Greek Mænads seemed the very embodiment of feminine rebellion and unruly female sexuality, denounced by some and celebrated by others".¹¹³ Certainly women scholars of the classics found in them a fascinating opportunity to explore an alternative female identity.¹¹⁴ Across the last decades of the century, such Mænad identities were repeatedly employed to criticise or characterise what Eliza Linton termed 'Wild Women' - those who seek out education and employment, at the expense of domestic duty and motherhood - who, like the dissatisfied women of Calydon, "stream out" of the domestic darkness, "for the excitement home cannot afford them".¹¹⁵

There can be little doubt that the Fields were conscious of precisely these connotations and associations, of the fine line they were treading in invoking the 'Mænad', between perpetuating the 'myth' which reinforced the rhetoric of patriarchal

¹¹² Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny*, 52. Kestner's extensive study of the visual representations of mythology and women in Victorian culture demonstrates the relationship between the appropriation of myth by institutions which exclude women, such as in classical education or painting, and how these studies reinforced the established ideas of female submission and their place as passive or sexualised.

¹¹³ Prins, *Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters*, 49.

¹¹⁴ The significance of Mænads and Dionysus both in late-Victorian culture, and in terms of women's increasing engagement with the classics, is extensively discussed in Olverson, *Women Writers*, 10-26.

¹¹⁵ Eliza Lynn Linton, "Nearing the Rapids," *The New Review*, 1894, March, reprinted in *Prose by Victorian Women*, ed. Andrea Bloomfield and Sally Mitchell (New York: Garland, 1996), 380. Also Eliza Linton, "The Wild Women: No. I, As Politicians," *Nineteenth Century*, 1891, July: 79-88, where refers to these women as a "knot of noisy Mænads," see page 79.

dominance - on the basis of womanhood as inherently disruptive or mad - and overcoming or successfully ‘re-formulating’ this identity as a means to negotiate new spaces and representations of active, vocal womanhood. In *Callirrhoë*, the Fields engage with these negative representations in the figure of Anaitis, who is presented in sexualised, violent and animalistic terms. She is an eroticised figure who seduces Nephele, later saying about Callirrhoë: “Let me tear her...I’m hungry for her”.¹¹⁶ Coresus also describes her, fearfully at times, in specifically alarming terms, “Mad fury!”, “Look not so wild!”, “Woman-tiger”, “a wild beast”.¹¹⁷ Anaitis, is not, however, representative of the other Mænads. Coresus observes that her actions are motivated by her envy of Callirrhoë, “[s]hrink to mere woman in thy jealousy”, essentially debasing the elevated non-gendered role of “comrade”, capable “[o]f lofty energies, needs, sympathies, / Beyond thy sex”, which privileges mænadic devotees.¹¹⁸ This clarification and distinction between the petty jealous fury of ‘mere womanhood’ and the ‘lofty’ energies of the Mænad as elevating them ‘beyond their sex’, specifically identifies mænadism in this play with female qualities and desires which surpass sex, gender and narrow domestic concerns. Despite the sexualised nature of mænadic revel, the Fields very carefully configure this role in terms which echo the rhetoric of agitations for wider educational access – as an outlet and provision for the ‘lofty’ or sophisticated energies or abilities of many middle-class women, which appear to surpass the supposed capacities or biologically determined limitations of ‘womanhood’. She is a figure of contrast, deployed to challenge and diffuse

¹¹⁶ See Nephele’s confession to Callirrhoë, Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.ii.12., and l.v.29.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, l.i.10; l.i.11; l.v.29; l.i.7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l.i.10.

precisely the crazed, negative concept of Mænads (and women in general) which prevailed in dominant cultural representations.¹¹⁹

To those women such as Bradley and Cooper, who were among the first (and few) to receive a formal higher education in classics, the figure of the Mænad became one of possibility, and many female writers, activists and classical scholars saw its imaginative potential as an alternative archetype for the Victorian spinster, as a symbol of empowerment and resistance. As Olverson suggests, they “grasped the opportunities offered by the fierce female figures...to articulate the disparities in civil status between men and women in Victorian society and the home”¹²⁰ In George Eliot’s dramatic poem *Armgarth* (1871), Armgart makes a similar association between being “[m]ade...a Maenad”, and lacking an appropriate outlet for her self-expression. Walpurga, her friend, states, “She often wonders what her life had been / Without that voice or channel to her soul.”¹²¹ Dionysus, Olverson suggests, not only “celebrates nature and femininity as the deity of female community”, but, as a ‘transgressive god’ who, “like the classically educated woman writer, threatens to destabilise social and political institutions”.¹²² The Fields similarly identify the Mænads and Coresus in the preface: “The Author...has represented this foreign cult struggling for recognition in the midst of a refined and even sceptical Hellas”.¹²³ The ‘foreign cult’ refers to both Bacchus, and the ‘cult’ of ‘shrieking sisters’, the indecent *modern* Mænads who clamoured at the political and social fringes, as well as those who pursued their own path to educational or emotional enlightenment. Mænads, therefore, were both used to

¹¹⁹ Anaitis dies before Coresus, excluding her from the Mænads reformulation by Callirrhoë’s death, see Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.iii.89. For Olverson’s observations of Anaitis’ function within the text see Olverson, *Women Writers*, 136-8.

¹²⁰ Olverson, *Women Writers*, 21.

¹²¹ Eliot, “Armgarth,” 75.

¹²² Olverson, *Women Writers*, 19.

¹²³ Michael Field, Preface to *Callirrhoë* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), iii.

characterise educated and outspoken middle-class women negatively, as dangerous, sexually frenzied, mad and generally intolerable and inhuman, and, through (female) scholarly and literary re-formulation, functioned as a figure of potential empowerment or resistance to the limitations and confines of late-century feminine identities. The later women's movements adopted such mythical women as their figureheads in their campaigns and banners; according to Olverson, "the figure of the 'unnatural woman', whether Maenad or Amazon, was embraced by the suffragist movement", demonstrating their empowering potential for political protest and revolt.¹²⁴

The Fields' Mænads represent not a seething mass of angry Bacchantes, but rather a multiplicity of individual women, both from outside Calydon and from within, who adopt and engage with the mænadic rituals and spaces in response to their particular circumstances. Their need to express desires, freedom of experience, or indeed flee abuse and servitude, reflect the many disparate motivations which brought middle-class women to social/political action or to higher education. Dione, Machaon's sister, for instance, has joined the Mænads before the play opens, and has participated (albeit reluctantly) in the ritual of tearing flesh, *sparagmos*. Her distress at this experience causes her to flee, only for Anaitis to fling her by the hair "amid the bloody fragments".¹²⁵ Yet as is revealed by her mother, Dione's motivations for leaving home, and her subsequent rejection by her family, are as a result of relatively minor transgressions. Aglauria tells Machaon:

You speak as she were mine---a wayward girl
Her father could not curb --- a restless sprig.

¹²⁴ Olverson, *Women Writers*, 138. For a study of the imagery employed by the suffrage movements see Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of the Suffrage Campaign: 1907-1914* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987).

¹²⁵ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.i.8.

And not thy sister.¹²⁶

Dione has been driven to the Bacchic cult by what sounds like minor disobedience to the patriarchal order of the home, a ‘restless sprig’ who rejects the authority or ‘curbing’ of her father. She has been disowned for the sake of wanting to experience more of life. This exchange between Machaon and their mother, after he has rescued Dione from attack in the city, further explores the social exclusion of outspoken women. Even being seen to associate with the Mænads brings negative associations on the family. Machaon is warned if he wishes to make a good marriage, “thou wilt be wary thyself, and not scuffle in the street for the rescue of these vile foreign women”.¹²⁷ The language used to refer to Dione by her own mother further reveals negative attitudes within families and wider society as a whole. No longer recognised as her child, or even human, she has become “the witless thing”.¹²⁸ The Fields explore, through the character of Dione, that for a woman to speak out or to seek expression possibly results in complete rejection by her family. She is no longer within the prescribed role so is ‘othered’ by her disobedience – she becomes ‘vile’ and ‘foreign’, a ‘mad one’.

The cult or role of Mænad is, however, empowering here, as it allows them freedom, experimentation and pleasure or ‘release’ of their voice - they ‘dare speak’. Indeed, even though Nephele’s seduction and subsequent experience at the Bacchic revel brings on a terrible fever and death, it offers her release from the abused and confined position she is in. Coresus describes her as “a fleet roe, / Tethered...pulling

¹²⁶ Field, *Callirrhoë*, II.ix.76-7.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, II.ix.75-6.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, II.ix.77.

the cord, / Not pasturing”.¹²⁹ She is struggling against her ‘cord’, her position as a possession or animal. Not ‘feeding’ can further be understood as a desire for control over her body, something she is denied. She is also abused by her father, Megillus, telling Emathion, “I wish my father loved me, / He beats me”.¹³⁰ Later in the play, Machaon informs her father that the fever, and her death, are as the result of his abuse, giving her some (posthumous) restitution at least.¹³¹

The Calydonian’s response to the Mænads, even those who were once kin, is where the Fields further explore some of the anxieties and characterisations which focussed on contemporary middle-class women. The Mænads are described by the citizens in animalistic, violent, ‘wild’ or aurally disturbing terms, as an exchange between Emathion and Machaon demonstrates:

Emathion: I’d have

These Maenads cleared away. I hate their cries.

Machaon: As peacock-shrieks at night.

Emathion: I hate their wild

Contorted forms.¹³²

The image of the ‘peacock-shriek’ chimes with the intolerance to the woman’s voice in public institutions and spheres, conjuring a vision of the ‘shrieking sisterhoods’ of the *Saturday Review*. Their association with animals, or contorted ‘wild’ figures here, is also consistent with both their contemporary representation in art, and in the press.

In a striking reversal of the ritual of *sparagmos* the Calydonians, in their fevered madness, threaten to dismember the Mænads in a violent attack in the public

¹²⁹ Field, *Callirrhoë*, l.i.9.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, l.iv.27.

¹³¹ See *Ibid.*, III.i.80.

¹³² *Ibid.*, l.ii.17-8.

square. This is ostensibly an understandable reaction, as the Mænads gleefully trample on the pyres of the dead: “Down with the jackal laughing on our dead”, calls a citizen as Anaitis dances with ‘light feet’, “[u]pon this carpet of transformèd men / Grey as wolf-skin”.¹³³ Yet the Mænads’ actions here can also be read as highly symbolic - in their dancing and shouting and singing, they are literally ‘trampling’ on the established social order and its associated historical authority. The response by the citizens to their presence, however, is extreme in its viscerality. Upon seeing Anaitis and Dione, the mob turns against them:

3rd Citizen: We’ll trample her to death.

1st Citizen: Ay, an’ we’ll force the lock of every joint
 And strain the hinge of every sinew in
 This hateful impious body! Drag her on!
 To the temple! Here’s another. Break her up!¹³⁴

Such a violent attack echoes Coresus’ earlier warning to Callirrhoë about her people: “In bestial ignorance of your intent, / They trample, tear you”.¹³⁵ Highlighting the resistance to female education or activism as a stubborn sweeping denial and reflects on the need to destroy the (perceived monstrous) body. By this refusal to acknowledge the (often very ordinary) ‘intentions’ of such women, the male citizens characterise them instead as a disruptive mass, The intent of Mænads such as Dione is rendered meaningless by this violent reaction - “All men have / mocked at us. We have come back half murdered from the town” - much as the attacks on women such as Butler, employed a generalised negative rhetoric which likewise shouted down their

¹³³ Field, *Callirrhoë*, II.vii.60; II.vii.59.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, II.vii.60.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, I.iii.22.

individual aims.¹³⁶ The identification of these women's bodies as 'hateful' and 'impious' also foregrounds contemporary anxieties which focussed on the female body as dangerous or sexually transgressive, particularly in legislation such as the Contagious Diseases Acts.¹³⁷ The Mænads are, as the politically or intellectually vocal women in late-Victorian society often are, silenced, beaten back, shamed by threats and accusations of immorality or subversiveness.

The Fields often considered themselves as Mænads, in private play, in their relationship and in their commitment to art. Katherine wrote in 1882, "The Persian [Edith] & I are now Mænads" just as they were embarking on their career as dramatists and poets, and as public literary figures, albeit under their male pseudonym.¹³⁸ The Mænads here are highly political, as Olverson suggests; the Fields' "bacchantes revel in a celebration of Dionysus, but they do so with political revolution in mind".¹³⁹ It is they who, like the Fields, carry Callirrhoë's story into history. It is after all a 'new cult', a new possibility for expression which is outside the suffocating limitations of the Artemis / Apollo binaries of Calydonian / Victorian society. Propriety and duty do not affect the Mænad, because she is permanently excluded from the *polis* and her family, and the Fields' 'becoming' Mænads is therefore a symbolic leaving behind of their domestic, family life, and a going out into the world of education, debate and literary production. In fact entering into the *polis* on their own terms, in a role and identity they construct and enact. They were indeed able to lead an independent life together, intellectually and professionally, their relationship existing outside that of

¹³⁶ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.viii.124

¹³⁷ See, for example, *The Social Evil with Suggestions for its Suppression and Revelations of the Working of the Contagious Diseases Acts, by an Ex-Constable of the Devonport division* (Bristol: W.H. Morrish, c.1883).

¹³⁸ Treby, *Michael Field Catalogue*, 11. The Fields often enjoyed such role play in private entertaining, see Logan Pearsall Smith, *Reperusals and Re-collections* (London: Constable and Company, 1936).

¹³⁹ Olverson, "Libidinous Laureates," 25.

the familial patriarchal order, being comprised of two women. Equals under Dionysus, and unified under the sign of the thyrsus, they were free to participate in the ‘revel’, in the literary sphere at least, and they do so here by reformulating and re-characterising the women who ‘speak out’ as not a dangerous ‘other’, but rather as an inspirational source of the spirit of enthusiasm who can bring about positive social change.

Emathion’s return with the oracle’s declaration at the beginning of Act Three, “Callirrhoë herself, so she find none to die for her, must die for scorn of Evius’ priest”,¹⁴⁰ initiates Callirrhoë’s final trajectory towards mænadism and death. Demophile bravely calls, “I will die gladly and who would not die?”¹⁴¹ Yet this call falls on deaf ears and to avoid demands for their own lives, the citizens, including her uncle Cleitophon and Emathion, decide a substitute will not do. One calls, “‘Tis settled, she must die for us, / She dies! She must! she shall!”, threatening “ruffiantly / To fright and bind her” with no concern for her will or her dutiful nature - displayed throughout the play: “she sits and spins”.¹⁴² She is, when brought the news of her fate, disappointed that no-one has offered to die for her, particularly her brother: “Indeed, I thought / The city loved me”.¹⁴³ She still, however resists Machaon and Emathion’s suggestion should escape, determining “My city – I will save it!”¹⁴⁴ Callirrhoë also recognises the narrowness of her role, now observing, “[m]y little bed / looks dreary, as they’d newly borne away / A corpse from it; ay, and a maiden corpse”.¹⁴⁵ There is

¹⁴⁰ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.i.82. Evius is another name for Bacchus.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III.i.82.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, III.i.83; III.i.85; III.i.79.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, III.ii.86.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, III.ii.86.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, III.ii.88.

little comfort in her realisation that she has not given her body, “with its great desire / For love – the very love its fashioned for”, crying “shame on me!”¹⁴⁶ When she reaches the altar, however, her willing act of sacrifice - “My people, I am come to die for you; / Curse me no more” – is shouted down by the assembled citizens, who never address her directly: “Hurry her on!”, “Oh! let her die”, concerned only with their own suffering.¹⁴⁷ The Sculptor, too appropriates her act and pose, “Ah! superb, / Her attitude!” seeing not a woman facing death, but “a subject that will make me great”.¹⁴⁸ She is here, as throughout the play, unable to find expression, objectified by the male artist, silenced by the male citizens and the crowd, her speech and action stripped of its original and noble intent. At the last moment, provoked by Coresus, the citizens declare their loyalty to Bacchus - “We do confess the Bromian / Have mercy, Dionysus!” – and Coresus determines to leave her, and to die himself, pouring his ‘wine’ blood on the altar instead.¹⁴⁹ This act ultimately releases her and she is able to ‘speak’ and to define herself in empowered terms: “I am his Mænad, I alone believe” and “I am a Mænad”.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, her declaration she that she ‘thirsts’ for “love’s wine” and “drank thy love” while addressing Coresus’ bleeding corpse, certainly evokes the mænadic ritual of *omophagia*, and this ‘thirst’ for love, or expression inspires her.¹⁵¹ She is finally free of her duty to family and city, only at this point achieving true autonomy and independence: “Alone at last; deep in the shady hills, / The dark heights I have yearned for”.¹⁵² Her death at her own hand is founded on her ‘dearth’, her failure, “simply to have lived my summer through / And borne no roses!”, to have not

¹⁴⁶ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.ii.88.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III.v.93; III.v.94.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, III.v.94.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, III.v.99.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, III.v.100; III.v.101.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, III.v.101.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, III.viii.117.

taken up, not only Coresus' love, but the chance to explore her passions and desires, now wishing to "die his Mænad"¹⁵³ Yet, as Prins argues, she sacrifices herself not for him, but for "these future maenads" As a 'true spinster', in death she legitimises their expression of enthusiasm and the mænadic identity is mythologised - defined by her actions - entering into dominant public discourse as a new and positive, active and professional or literary feminine identity, one which interrupts the tired binary oppositions of male/female, or Apollo/Artemis inherent in contemporary social philosophy and ideology.¹⁵⁴

Callirrhoë's sacrifice brings hope for a re-characterising of female action or voice as a force for positive change, as a spring of creativity. Locating her as part of the birth of the Bacchic cult positions her as a 'source' for the origins of tragedy. She commands the people of Calydon to commit to the 'solemnization' of mighty passions in "masque and chorus" and no longer to live "to common ends", which silence and oppress expression.¹⁵⁵ This tragic drama - a form originating with the cult of Bacchus - can be understood, therefore, as functioning to provide a literary space through which the Fields examine and challenge the patriarchal hierarchies and oppositions they recognise as being at work in late-Victorian society. Callirrhoë, in fact, authorises the female dramatist-as-Mænad, exchanging the distaff for the thyrsus, as the Fields did as part of their unification under "Michael Field". It is the Mænads who ultimately carry the cult and the tale of Callirrhoë out into the world. Like Pater, the Fields draw from the 'enthusiasm' of the Mænads, "altogether new motives of freedom and energy, of freshness in old forms".¹⁵⁶ Machaon in fact instructs that their "agitated gestures"

¹⁵³ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.viii.117; III.viii.119.

¹⁵⁴ Prins, *Greek Maenads, Victorian Spinsters*, 60.

¹⁵⁵ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.v.100.

¹⁵⁶ Walter Pater, *Greek Studies: A Series of Lectures, 1895* (New York: Chelsea House, 1983), 55.

will become, “rhythmic in tidal influence, your hoarse shrieks / Sonorous inotations”, a far cry from their earlier ‘shrieking’, animalistic constructions, they now have a purpose, and a legitimate form of expression.¹⁵⁷ The Mænads’ role in *Callirrhoë* also strongly resonates with Cixous’ assertion that should the functioning of oppressive patriarchal systems be exposed, as they are here, “all the stories would be there to retell differently” (as the Fields retell Callirrhoë’s myth), and “the historic forces...will change hands and change body...will transform the functioning of all society”.¹⁵⁸ As much as this play is a call for women’s speech to be heard, then, it is also an incitement to speak out, to bring about change. The fountain which feeds and nurtures the cradle of (white, western) civilisation, springs from the breast of Callirrhoë, since she nourishes the world in her death, her sacrifice nourishing the female inheritors, such as Bradley and Cooper, with her uncompromising example. Such mythologizing was of some importance to them, they wrote, “We find ourselves bound in life and in literature to reveal - as far as maybe – the beauty of the high feminine standard of *the ought to be*”.¹⁵⁹ The Fields are here bestowing upon readers a strange mænadic anti-mother to the artistic and poetic expressions of contemporary middle-class women, a legitimate classical reformulation of women successfully ‘speaking out’ and enriching the socio-cultural environment with their voices. Indeed the Fields can be understood to have, through their Mænads, their new male pseudonym and publication of *Callirrhoë*, found a literary medium to express their own sense of passion, adventure, and indeed creativity, to ‘speak out’ and to be heard.

¹⁵⁷ Field, *Callirrhoë*, III.viii.126. A review of *Callirrhoë* in the *Academy* by A. Mary F. Robinson, particularly sympathises with the Mænads, see, A. Mary F. Robinson, “Review of *Callirrhoë: Fair Rosamund*,” *The Academy*, June 7, 1884, 395-96.

¹⁵⁸ Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 65.

¹⁵⁹ Field, *Works and Days*, 8.

The Fields' next drama, *Fair Rosamund*, displays some similar concerns, particularly addressing issues not so much of 'silence' generally but of imprisonment, exploitation and an individual woman's struggle for not just speech but physical and sexual autonomy, through its maiden protagonist, Rosamund Clifford. Their use of, and engagement with, English (mythologised) history in this drama marks a shift away from classical Greek subject matter in their dramas, but their commitment to recovering and reworking fragmentary Greek writing and its obscure figures continued, reaching its zenith in their publication of *Long Ago* (1889), a collection of poetry founded in the remaining fragments of Sappho's work. The radicalism of *Callirrhöë*, gives way somewhat to a more sophisticated re-negotiation of individual female figures of history, often those most defamed such as Mary, Queen of Scots, as their dramas progress, and this frenzied enthusiasm is countered by what I read as a damning interrogation of 'womanhood' as a 'prison', in *Fair Rosamund*.

Chapter Two

Fair Rosamund (1884): Victorian Medievalism and the ‘Prison of Womanhood’

“Was not the World a vast prison, and women born slaves?”¹

Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft, writing her unfinished work *Maria* in 1798, was asking a question which many women (and men) came to ask themselves and society itself in the years which followed. The ‘prison of womanhood’, or the idea of womanhood as a ‘prison’, was something which was closely identified with slavery, with an existence without autonomy or emancipation, particularly by those involved in the political agitation and campaigns which developed across the nineteenth century. Politically active women such as Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who had also been the first to enjoy the benefits of an expanded higher educational system, were among those who engaged with this idea in their writing as well in their participation in public debates. Nearly a hundred years after Wollstonecraft wrote these words the majority of even upper-middle-class women still found themselves confronted by a severe lack of opportunity to express academic achievement, or exercise hard-fought literary and intellectual skills in a professional capacity. Furthermore, they found themselves increasingly imprisoned or limited by idealised medievalist-revival images of ‘courtly ladies’ awaiting their knights; by the ever-narrowing definitions of legitimate and ‘othered’ womanhood (legal, medical, social) set down by predominantly masculine

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798; reprint, New York: Norton, 1975), 27.

discourses authorised by patriarchal institutions; and by the construction of women within closely defined and delineated roles and spaces. Many writers in this period were concerned with the ways in which artistic and literary cultural artefacts represented ideal women as existing only within the private sphere in a state of passivity. In *Fair Rosamund*, the Fields engage with this issue through the figure of Rosamund Clifford, perhaps the ultimate example of the ‘imprisoned’ woman who was, according to legend, history and romance, installed in a rose-labyrinth or maze by her lover, Henry II. This chapter explores how the Fields’ recovery and deployment of Rosamund’s tale represents an interrogation of the specific ways in which contemporary, middle-class, educated women increasingly found themselves defined by confinement or imprisonment. The play is read as a protest against the exclusion of women from the male-dominated institutions and discourses that form dominant definitions of ‘womanhood as a prison’ (or, womanhood more generally as a category). *Fair Rosamund* represents an attempt by the Fields to redefine or release the silenced and imprisoned voice of the individual woman, Rosamund, and by extension, bring her (and other women’s) individual subjectivity into the public sphere in a legitimate way.

The decades preceding the production of this drama represent a period of rapid social, economic and technological change. The expansion of the professional and middle classes, and altered configurations of work and family life, had profoundly affected the way women were thought of and positioned. As Jan Marsh suggests, this period of intense change:

[E]stablished new structures of feeling and of representation whereby women were both elevated and constrained, worshipped and restricted

to specific roles. Framed images of idealised women, displayed on the walls of bourgeois homes and art galleries, were a kind of metaphor for the position ascribed to women in Victorian society.²

The Fields certainly engage with ‘framing’ as a metaphor for the increasingly defined position of middle-class women throughout *Fair Rosamund*, particularly as Rosamund was a figure who to many seemed the very embodiment of a framed, idealised woman. At a time when the relationships between the sexes and the traditional patriarchal social structures were under stress - particularly from the agitations by women for reform, equal rights and a legitimate public and political voice - these representations of women as ‘framed’ or idealised decorative figures and the discourses surrounding their appropriate position, were being hotly contested, rethought and reformulated. Womanhood as a ‘prison’ or as an inert static identity became the focus of both romantic idealisation as well as resistance and protest in the work of many writers and artists across the century.

Much of the rhetoric of politically active women at the time focussed on issues of physical autonomy or public freedom and was particularly concerned with challenging legislation which limited these rights further. It is well documented that the Fields, more specifically Katharine, were similarly actively and publicly involved in the debates and agitations for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts for example. The Acts imposed the forced confinement of women to ‘lock hospitals’ and invasive examinations for venereal disease, based on the orders of male individuals and authorised by institutions of medicine, law and politics. Such judgements were founded on the public visibility of a woman (being outside unescorted as many

² Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987), 10.

working-class working women had to be) or perceiving her as displaying transgressive behaviour.³ These Acts were therefore seen by some as an attack on an individual woman's ownership of her body, by the power of the state and its institutions; an attack which prioritised the health of the men who used prostitutes over the rights of the women themselves - as well as being seen as negatively characterising middle-class female public visibility as indicative of sexual (and social) subversion. Yet the Fields were keenly aware that there were still severe limitations as to what it was possible to discuss in public as a woman and that overt engagement with these issues would have proved very difficult. This struggle is clarified by Ann Scott, who notes that "while issues relating to health, disease, sexuality and the body were of the deepest importance...mid-Victorian feminists had found few means of addressing them. Social conventions regarding female respectability and modesty had constrained women's freedom of speech and action in this area."⁴ In *Fair Rosamund*, the Fields can be understood to utilise a (relatively) obscure historical female protagonist, tale and setting to address very contemporary political concerns surrounding the position of women, albeit in a necessarily codified and covert way. As Joseph Bristow says of their dramas, "their interest in the hideousness of the past bore an oblique but critical perspective on their present: a time whose cultural trends and political upheavals they knew it would be impossible...for them to address directly."⁵ In *Fair Rosamund*, the

³ For an in-depth study of the socio-cultural impact of, and responses to, the Contagious Diseases Acts and their repeal, see Phillip Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2009). For further information on the repeal movement see Sung-Sook Lee, *Victorian Feminism and 'Fallen' women: The Campaign to Repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts in Britain, 1869-1886* (University of Sussex, Thesis, 2001) and Jean Lawrence L'Espérance, *Prostitution, Purity and Feminism: A Study of the Campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts: 1864-1886* (Montreal: McGill University, 1982).

⁴ Anne L. Scott, "Physical Purity, Feminism and State Medicine in Late Nineteenth-Century England," *Women's History Review* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 628.

⁵ Joseph Bristow, "Michael Field in Their Time and Ours," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 29, no.1 (Spring 2010): 161.

Fields present these difficult issues of female imprisonment and dis-empowerment through the lens of the popular medievalist-revival romances, and through a figure whose own imprisonment was often presented as idealised or romantic, in order to provide a critical perspective on problems which they otherwise could not directly address.

The medieval revival, founded in eighteenth-century antiquarianism and the gothic revival, emerged early in the nineteenth century, with the publication of a number of historical studies and translations of medieval texts which ignited interest in this era as one which could reflect upon the mores and morality of contemporary Christian society in a way that the concurrent Hellenic classical revival could not.⁶ Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a renewal of interest in rewriting and reimagining these medieval romances in the culture of medieval courtly life and particularly, via the Pre-Raphaelite movement, through the figures of Arthurian legend, with its passive ladies and chivalrous knights. The term ‘courtly love’, for example, was first used in 1883, to refer to the adulterous affair between Guinevere and Lancelot.⁷ This movement frequently prioritised the idealisation of the ‘embowered’ or enclosed woman, the woman in the tower, the labyrinth or, even, the ‘drawing-room’. Images of her awaiting the return of her lover, or pining after some such chivalrous hero, were increasingly commonplace. Rosamund’s tale clearly

⁶ Sharon Turner’s *Medieval and Anglo-Saxon* researches published in c.1799, for example, presented the era as a more acceptable subject of study to the early nineteenth century readership by altering its perception from being barbarous and uncivilised, to a respectable and cultured historical era. For a more detailed explanation of the changing perspectives towards the era and the effects on historical, as well as literary production, see Clare A. Simmons, *Reversing the Conquest: History and Myth in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New Brunswick, London: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

⁷ For a fuller explanation of the origins and conventions, medieval and more modern, of the idea of ‘courtly love’, see Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977).

belongs to this movement of Victorian medievalism as she was the subject of a number of contemporary renderings in art and print. From the second half of the nineteenth-century, for example, there were at least ten paintings which addressed the legend, by figures including Holman Hunt and D. G. Rossetti. These were mainly created during the heyday of history painting and the early pre-Raphaelite movement, and fed into its themes of “medievalist nostalgia.”⁸ Walter Scott, whom both Katharine and Edith read keenly early in their education, also acted to further popularise the era through his literary use of medievalism.⁹ As Alice Chandler notes: “Scott created an imaginary medieval world that most of his readers took for real...a whole century dreamed and philosophised about it”.¹⁰ Furthermore, highly-regarded figures such as Pugin, Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris all engaged with this mode and, according to A. Dwight Culler, were “criticising their own society in the light of an ideal.”¹¹ At the time *Fair Rosamund* was published, then, contemporary Victorian culture was awash with both these idealised images of women, and an idealised medieval era positioned as a critique of, and in some ways an appealing alternative to, the uncertainty of their modern world.

The response of middle-class women writers to this increasingly idealistic movement was often quite different to that of their male counterparts. Medievalism did hold some appeal for a few middle-class women writers who recognised the

⁸ Michael R. Evans, *Inventing Eleanor: The Medieval and Post-Medieval Image of Eleanor of Aquitaine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 98.

⁹ See Emma Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1998), 40. Donoghue’s work gives some useful information on the influences behind the Fields’ work including the educational background of Bradley and Cooper.

¹⁰ Alice Chandler, “Sir Walter Scott and the Medieval Revival,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19, no.4 (March 1965): 315. *The Father’s Tragedy* (1885), which Cooper began aged about sixteen, was “inspired by Walter Scott’s version of the clash between Robert III of Scotland and his son” in his 1828 novel, *The Fair Maid of Perth* see Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field*, 40.

¹¹ A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 152.

middle-ages as a time, in contrast to their own, “in which at least some women had control over their property or destiny and the courage to venture into the ‘male’ arenas of politics and war.”¹² The intensification of the “framed images of idealised women” however, across the century came to be seen by some middle-class women writers as a negative and dis-empowering ideological system which increasingly restricted their position.¹³ More specifically, those who engaged with this issue, according to Clare Broome Saunders, “were particularly critical of the modernised code of chivalry...which encouraged an ideal of female passivity. Hemans, Landon and...Elizabeth Barrett Browning...display frustration at the chivalric social constrictions for women.”¹⁴ As Jennifer Smith suggests, many women writers – as well as modern feminist critics –

have seen the misogynistic impulses of the system, which limits the agency of women by banishing them to the pedestal, where, as ‘ladies’ they are differentiated from ‘women’... silent and chaste, the lady is denied both desire and a voice with which to communicate it[.]¹⁵

Many female writers, therefore, engaged with medievalism not only to protest against the intensification of its ideals, but also as a respectable guise for the more serious political or social challenges they wished to make in their writing. As Saunders says, “they consistently use[d] medievalism to highlight and critique what they viewed as a

¹² Deborah Byrd, “Combatting an Alien Tyranny; Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Evolution as a Feminist and Poet,” *Browning Institute Studies* 15, no. 1 (1987): 33.

¹³ Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 10.

¹⁴ Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth Century-Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 6.

¹⁵ Jennifer Smith, “Courtly Love Tradition,” in *Encyclopaedia of Feminist Theories*, ed. Lorraine Code (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 107.

revival of past errors in the present age.”¹⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s use of medieval settings in her poems of the 1830s and 1840s, for example, functions as a veil for the politically challenging content of some of her works.¹⁷ For even the (marginally) more emancipated female writers of the 1880s, like Bradley and Cooper, medievalism provided a still necessary “masquerade, [a] means of upholding the appearance of conformity, while offering the opportunity to comment imaginatively on contemporary socio-political issues that were not considered her sphere.”¹⁸ Engaging with medievalism, therefore, can be understood as a mode of protest, and a useful guise, for a number of middle-class female writers to intervene in the idealisation of womanhood as a passive, inert and imprisoned state, and deal with otherwise difficult issues in the public literary sphere. We can further understand the Fields’ engagement here with the figure of Rosamund as part of a wider concern among particularly middle-class female writers with challenging the oppressive nature of an idealised system of ‘courtly love’ conventions, chivalrous ‘knights’ and passive, inert ‘queenly ladies’ which was repeatedly reinforced through such historical revivals and their representations of women in art and literature.

Despite Rosamund’s relative familiarity to the contemporary reader of *Fair Rosamund*, to the modern reader her tale requires some contextualisation and explanation. In general terms, the tale of Fair Rosamund can be understood as follows. Rosamund Clifford, a woman of noble birth, begins a relationship with Henry II at the time he was about to marry, or was already married to, Eleanor of Aquitaine. For assumed reasons of safety, he installs Rosamund in a ‘bower’ or separate building to

¹⁶ Broome Saunders, *Women Writers*, 6.

¹⁷ For a more in depth discussion of how women engaged in medievalism as a guise, see, Broome Saunders, *Women Writers*, and Judith Johnston, *George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006).

¹⁸ Broome Saunders, *Women Writers*, 6.

his palace at Woodstock, which is protected from unauthorised access by a maze or labyrinth surrounding it, through which only he knows the way. Unfortunately for the lovers, his wife discovers the existence of Rosamund and, driven by rage and jealousy, finds her way to the centre of the labyrinth where she offers Rosamund the choice of poison or a dagger as her means of death. In most versions she chooses the poison and is killed before Henry can get back from the war in France. She is finally interred in a tomb at Godstow nunnery.

The tale of 'Fair Rosamund' was, however, the subject of numerous rewritings and reimaginings which have served to alter the events and characters of this legend dramatically over time. To many early chroniclers and religious leaders, Rosamund was a figure of questionable sexual morality. Rosamund's reputation had become the subject of record not long after her death in 1176 and initial records of her status as an unmarried mistress were often unpleasant and heavily moralistic.¹⁹ George of Wales, for example, described Rosamund in a (now famous) pun, as 'rosa immundi', meaning unclean rose, not as here 'rosa mundi' (rose of the world), and Roger of Howden recorded how she was called 'harlot' by the bishop of Lincoln and, upon his insistence, her tomb was removed from within the chapel to outside since it was considered unseemly that a woman of such lax morals should be interred inside.²⁰ However, as Michael Evans points out, "from this unflattering beginning developed a legend in which Rosamund was transformed into an innocent heroine, she and Henry into star-

¹⁹Adolphus Ballard, in his detailed research on the history of the area in 1896, gives a good survey of the agreed 'facts' of the legend as well as the conflicts and contestations surrounding Rosamund's actual demise. See Adolphus Ballard, *Chronicles of the Royal Borough of Woodstock: Compiled from the borough records and other original documents* (Oxford: Alden & Company Ltd., 1896), 4-5.

²⁰ See Fields' Prologue to *Fair Rosamund*, Michael Field, "Fair Rosamund," in *Callirrhoe, Fair Rosamund* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), 133. Also see K. LoPrete, "Adela of Blois: Familial Alliances and Female Lordship," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. T. Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 26-8.

crossed lovers, and Eleanor – the wronged party – into a murderess.”²¹ To modern historians or writers, therefore, she became a more complex figure of victimhood and romantic innocence and she was represented by a number of contemporary poets and artists as an idealised figure awaiting her king in a labyrinth-palace, or at the moment of being murdered by a vengeful, jealous queen. In D.G. Rossetti’s 1861 work, *Fair Rosamund*, for example, Rosamund’s upper body and head fill the whole frame, tightly contained by a balustrade decorated with hearts and crowns over which she leans, awaiting Henry. Her hair is loose, and within it is the red and white rose which bears her name. She wears rich red and gold jewellery, and her dress, similarly patterned with red roses, is slipping off her shoulders in an impractical but also highly sexualised way. With a flushed face and flame-coloured hair, she seems to be primarily a physical, sexual figure, barely contained by her dress or her bower, occupied only by awaiting her lover. She is also very particularly presented as a non-productive sexual woman, as opposed to a legitimate wife and mother - a king’s mistress without an identity outside this role. In contrast, Edward Burne-Jones’ 1862 painting, *Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor*, depicts a young Rosamund in a long demure dress of pale blue and white, colours associated with virginity and innocence, fearfully attempting to escape the figure of Eleanor who is looming over her from the left of the frame. Eleanor is, conversely, a tall, older, sinister figure, her black and dark red dress almost a part of the murky shadows from which she is emerging to kill Rosamund. Burne-Jones’ work offers a clear example of the kind of ‘innocent victimhood’ which came to be associated with Rosamund’s tale and her character. John William Waterhouse’s work *Fair Rosamund* (1916), although much later, is still a sympathetic, if still heavily idealised, depiction of Rosamund. Here she is shown demurely kneeling

²¹ Evans, *Inventing Eleanor*, 35.

at a window in a position which heavily suggests prayer, or submission, looking out for (presumably) Henry. Her tapestry-work to her right is her only visible occupation within what looks like a stone building or tower. The sinister figure of Eleanor peers through the curtain to her right, in a foreshadowing of the tragedy to come. The majority of representations at this time, and later, frequently concerned themselves with her state of confinement, or her death as a victim of Eleanor's rage, but not with Rosamund as possessing any autonomy or individual identity outside this role of passive, romanticised, victimhood or barely contained sexuality. Waterhouse's version suggests that the idealised 'imprisoned' inert Rosamund the Fields attempt to challenge, prevailed into the early twentieth century.

In *Fair Rosamund*, the Fields present a far more complex and diverse legend than is presented by many of their contemporaries. Their play has, for instance, a wide and varied cast of characters including Rosamund's foster-family (her forester father Michael and sister, Margery), Henry's wife (here Elinor not Eleanor) and children, and their court of knights, nobles and servants. Rosamund as a character is also significantly different. She is not Rosamund Clifford the noblewoman from an elite family; rather she occupies a far more natural and simple space in the woodland as the 'fosterling' of a forester. As she tells Sir Wilfred: "We are simple folk, / And I am no court-lady."²² This version is further differentiated by the principal focus of the narrative being on Rosamund's experience of her progression towards, and incarceration within, the labyrinth. The Fields trace here how her relative freedom and autonomy as a fine "girl 'o the country" - passing freely through the woods and caring for her foster father and sister - is eroded by Henry as he increasingly redefines her

²² Field, *Fair Rosamund*, I.ii.15.

and confines her to a passive role, specifically that of the ‘court lady’ or Lady of Shallot-like figure, his “Lady Rosamund” his “Royal Rose”.²³ The Fields’ Rosamund is therefore presented not as solely existing within the labyrinth for Henry’s pleasure; rather, she is an individual woman who is forced and coerced into this position. In the play Rosamund, again in contrast to established versions, also chooses to take a dagger from Elinor and stab herself with it rather than take the poison, an act in conflict with the passive victimhood often presented by the numerous historical, artistic and literary renderings of this tale. The Fields’ Rosamund therefore, is a complex figure, whose humble origins and strike at self-determination are at odds with the established versions of the Fair Rosamund legend. It is significant that the Fields’ version varies from contemporary expectations so dramatically here and elsewhere, as it is precisely this variance that allows the Fields to open up a space where they can interrogate the idea of the idealised ‘woman in prison’ and therefore interrupt its presumptions through the introduction of a different Rosamund, an individual subjectivity, a ‘genuine’ Rosamund.

In the prologue, the Fields clearly position their Rosamund as having been confined to an identity constructed by successive historical and contemporary representations. Rosamund is very particularly located as a figure who is being recovered and released from silence or darkness into the world of the narrative by the Chorus. This hidden identity is specifically characterised as a ‘truth’ which has been broken out of a ‘night’ or ‘prison of secrets’ and is spoken by the voice of the (female) tragic muse:

So doth the buskin’d Muse of tragic lore

²³ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133; II.v.186; II.v.187.

Burst through the ancient adamantine gate
That gives to night the secrets of the past.
Listen! She opens rounded mouth to tell
A thing, unguessed before – revealed at last.²⁴

The language here, of ‘bursting through’ and ‘revealed at last’, only serves to reinforce the sense that Rosamund is a figure who has been long imprisoned and silenced, characterising her ‘bursting out’ as an escape from an ‘ancient’ or historically limited position. The emphasis placed on the woman’s voice, commanding they “Listen!”, associates the tale which follows with a ‘breaking out’ of female voices and ‘true’ identities. The idea of ‘breaking out’ or ‘speaking out’ is something which radical feminism particularly has engaged with, frequently in terms of escaping or challenging patriarchal social systems and their associated relationships of male dominance and female oppression. Patriarchy, in these terms is, “viewed as a transhistorical system of institutionalised relationships of power” much as the power relationship between Rosamund and Henry is defined by his elevated position within a patriarchal hierarchy.²⁵ The ‘release’ of Rosamund’s tale here can be understood in terms of the approach of some radical feminist thought which “emphasises the importance of speaking out as women” and, furthermore, can be linked to the idea that “freedom for women can be achieved only when they break out from the patriarchal system and discover their own ‘true’ consciousness and voice”.²⁶ The emphasis here on the voice of the many, the chorus, directing the reader to ‘listen’ to the female muse represents a strong statement regarding this idea of imprisonment or indeed, ‘breaking out’ as an

²⁴ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133.

²⁵ Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe, “Radical Feminism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research*, ed. Albert J. Mills, Gabrielle Durepos and Elden Wiebe (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2010), 778.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 778.

issue which has much wider resonance, for not only many women, but also for society as a whole. Yet unlike many later radical feminists, who often placed great importance on “identifying women’s experience as universally shared”, the Fields here specifically present a multiplicity of female voices, all of whom are subject to the inequality of patriarchal power relationships, but only one of whom actually resides within a tangible prison.²⁷ The Fields draw focus instead to how Rosamund’s incarceration and its successive idealisations comes to impact on other women, albeit in differing ways. The Fields are, in fact, revealing the woman’s ‘true self’ from behind the official versions of history and ‘truth’; building awareness of sub-histories, or individual female subjectivities, and giving subaltern or marginalised figures such as Rosamund a voice with which to speak of, and break out of, their experience of a prison of patriarchal values and ‘truths’. This introduction, or releasing of alternative histories marks a clear challenge to the prevailing images of not only Rosamund, but of incarcerated womanhood in general, as well as confronting the absence of women’s voices from the institutions and power-structures which produced these discursive constructions of ‘womanhood’.

In the prologue the tale of Rosamund is carefully characterised as having achieved this release from darkness and silence only at great effort. The line, “As toiling Hercules forced Hell’s grim door” draws powerful associations between this ‘feminine’ struggle to reveal the truth and the (most) masculine trials of ancient mythology.²⁸ Such associations indicate that the narrative that follows is not one of romance and passivity, but of an heroic struggle to ‘break out’ of a prison of silence

²⁷ Mills, Durepos and Wiebe, *Radical Feminism*, 778. This idea of ‘universality’ is problematic, as issues of class, race and other such individual differences have a profound effect on subjective female experiences.

²⁸ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133.

and darkness on the part of Rosamund, and the female muse of 'tragic lore'. The employment of this distancing technique by which Bradley and Cooper utilise the public, literary, and masculine guise of Michael Field to engage a chorus which reports the muse's release of Rosamund's voice to the world can be understood as participating in a contemporary struggle for some women writers to discuss these issues surrounding female imprisonment and silence in a meaningful and legitimate way. It is significant, for example, that the 'history' rendered here is fictional or literary, rather than a straightforward intellectual study; as Michael Evans puts it: "historical fiction...was a field in which it was possible for educated women to operate. The academic discipline of history, which was being created at that very time, was, however, male-dominated...historical fiction could therefore fill a vacuum for female writers – and readers – who were excluded from male academia."²⁹ So we can read their use of fiction (or tragedy) and these distancing techniques as an attempt to break into, or interrupt, the dominant male academic definitions of - specifically Rosamund's – history and various constructions of female figures within it.

In the prologue, the Fields establish a clear opposition between the female muse revealing an imprisoned 'truth' and the Rosamund boasted of in these established (male constructed) versions of her tale, here referred to as 'proud histories'. There is a striking contrast, for example, between the "true" Rosamund as a country girl, "delicately made/ Of blushes and simplicity and pure, / Free ardour" and the 'boasting' of the 'proud histories' which construct her as an elite figure with 'crimson' or sexualised appeal.³⁰ Rosamund thus:

²⁹ Evans, *Inventing Eleanor*, 134.

³⁰ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133.

Was no rich crimson beauty of old line,
As fabled in proud histories and lays;
No Clifford, as 'tis boasted,³¹

The 'true' Rosamund here is set up in conflict with the imagery of the 'courtly woman' as a 'rich crimson beauty' – language strongly associated with the sumptuousness of the art works which presented her as a highly sexualised figure. The references to 'old line' and 'Clifford' suggest an emphasis within these proud histories, on the hierarchies and class systems which underpinned the patriarchal Victorian culture and society. These 'proud histories' are identified as specifically male constructions by the lines, "For Rosa Mundi, of this truth be sure, / Was nature's Rose, not man's" and this gendered emphasis implies that this construction is part of a possessive dynamic which the Fields' work is attempting to rebalance or resist.³²

The Fields' use of this gendered opposition between the 'true' individual woman, and the construction of an ideal by male-dominated institutional discourses, foregrounds how genuine female subjectivities are erased or excluded from history. As Cristina Crosby puts it, "[h]istory is marked by what it must repress and refuse in constituting itself as universal, [and] is disfigured by difference."³³ The tale of Rosamund the Fields present is specifically located as one that has been repressed and refused and her difference from these established versions draws attention to the problems with the universality of established representations of her. They are therefore interrupting and 'disfiguring' the idealised version of Rosamund and of courtly female figures in general. The introduction of an 'alternative' version of Rosamund can also

³¹ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133

³² *Ibid.*, 133.

³³ Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and "The Woman Question"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 8.

be read as an example of what New Historicism understands as ‘counter histories’, the points of resistance and frictions which emerge between texts (canonical or otherwise) and their cultures. According to Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, the practice of new historicism involves the ‘mining’ (or releasing) of “counter histories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism.”³⁴ The particular version of Rosamund who has been recovered and presented here is a figure who is deployed to expose precisely these kinds of absences and presumptions about the idealised incarceration of women. By revealing her “true” *individual* nature they are, by extension, revealing to the reader the falseness of the idealisation of imprisoned womanhood which she had come to represent. Furthermore, by exposing the chasm between the true Rosamund, and the Rosamund Clifford defined by history, literature and art, they are interrupting the authority of these institutions and their discourses – still the exclusive domain of white upper-class men - and breaking into intellectual spheres which still excluded women almost entirely. The Fields highlight to the contemporary reader the problems with the universality of idealised representations of women as confined, by both foregrounding the absence of women from the institutional production of historical discourses or ‘proud histories’, and introducing ‘released’ counter-histories such as Rosamund’s and the numerous other female figures in the narrative such as Queen Elinor and Margery. This prologue locates the narrative which follows as a challenge to both historical and contemporary constructions of Rosamund, but also as one which traces how women become thus confined and defined by an ideal.

³⁴ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.

In *Fair Rosamund*, the labyrinth symbolises the construction of Rosamund into an ‘ideal lady’ by King Henry. The Fields demonstrate how, by building a space to contain her, Henry can transform Rosamund into the specific kind of ‘court lady’ or ‘ideal lover’ which he desires. The labyrinth can be similarly read as a metaphor for the limitations and strictly defined boundaries which many middle-class women found themselves subject to in wider contemporary society. The Fields utilise the labyrinth here to engage with a number of ideas surrounding not only the idealisation of incarcerated women, but to challenge the limitations placed on women’s spaces, roles, occupations and even appearances, as subject to male demands of their position within a labyrinth or ‘prison of womanhood’.

Fair Rosamund opens with Henry and his architect overseeing the progress of building a labyrinth with some urgency. By beginning with this building scene, the construction of Rosamund’s prison comes before her voice has even been heard in the text, something which sits in sharp contrast to the ‘release’ of Rosamund promised by the prologue. Henry’s pre-emptive construction of the labyrinth strongly identifies Rosamund’s position within it as one which is forcibly imposed, not a true reflection of her desires or their romance, and certainly not to secure her safety. The Fields are mirroring and protesting the experience of many contemporary middle-class women who found themselves similarly forced and coerced into adopting decorative or inert roles. Furthermore, they demonstrate through Rosamund’s experience of the labyrinth how this ideal is produced through a process of limitation, oppression and threats by male individuals and authorised by wider patriarchal power structures. The imposition on Rosamund by Henry of his idea of appropriate clothing, decorative occupations,

and of her as a symbolic representation of womanhood, a 'rose', demonstrate how women are oppressed by a multiplicity of these intersecting definitions.

The labyrinth is first and foremost a physically limiting space which denies Rosamund any autonomy. Cut off from the outside world and all contact with her family, Rosamund is closely guarded by a knight, Topaz, and is denied any recourse regarding her position. When Rosamund pleads "Let me be free to gossip with the woods",³⁵ Henry sternly insists "My lady keeps her bower."³⁶ This prison and her position within it is no romantic ideal; rather it is presented as an oppressive and permanent state of isolation: she asks Topaz: "will you never let me out again?" to which he responds "Ny, nay; you'll be very happy."³⁷ This incarceration is prefigured by Rosamund's dream, she tells Henry, "It fulfils / My dream, - You shut me in a prison close".³⁸ Upon discovering her outside the maze, for example, Sir Topaz exclaims, "[t]is a strict command I have that you never stray from the door" and physically takes her inside by the arm.³⁹ Rosamund's full incarceration within this space at the command of a king, therefore, further highlights to the reader the struggle for self-determination in the face of an overwhelming authority and power, a king, and, by extension, the hierarchy of the patriarchal society he represents. Powerless in the face of such authority, she is brought into to a position of tight confinement and surveillance within a highly idealised and romanticised love-labyrinth, or in reality, a prison.

The Labyrinth here can also be understood to stand for the limitations of the designated domestic space assigned to many middle-class women, and Rosamund's

³⁵ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, I.vi.165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I.vi.165.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I.vi.170.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I.iv.158.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, I.vi.170.

experience within it, for an increasing dissatisfaction and frustration with the idealised restrictions regarding the mainly decorative pursuits open to them, such as music or needlework. Rosamund is an inert figure within the enclosure rendered by Henry for over half of the play - completely restricted and trapped within the expectations of her performance as Henry's lover and lady, as his "Royal Rose!"⁴⁰ Rosamund is here taught to take up the occupations that are deemed suitable for the role of the 'court lady' and for Henry's pleasure. As Sir Topaz insists, "I've taught you to play on the lute, and made you the lady you are – his very queen and idol."⁴¹ Rosamund is not only limited to occupations which please Henry, but she is also very much a product of Henry's idealised vision of her, down to the very clothing she wears. Henry's construction of her in the first scene, for example, where he fantasises about her as "folded up in crimson like a queen", is directly mirrored by the robes she is instructed to wear by Topaz for the king's impending arrival, at the end of Act Two, thereby framing her, and the narrative, within his ideal vision:

He comes to-night; for good Sir Topaz said,
"My lady, put you on the crimson gown
The king has wrought for you, and ask no more,
But trust an old man's word.
And be you ready."⁴²

Unusually, the instruction is 'reported' to the reader by Rosamund, and Topaz's words come from her lips.⁴³ The Fields employ this device to foreground again (as they did

⁴⁰ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.v.187.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II.v.186.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I.i.137; II.viii.197.

⁴³ Henry's employment of a knight (effectively the ultimate figure of ideal chivalric duty) to refine, construct and supervise her transformation, further associates the idealisation of womanhood evident in medievalist-revival works, with male power and dominance.

in the prologue) how the power of the male voice can act to define a woman's role or identity, indeed to subsume it to his orders. The language here is also particularly firm and instructive - 'put you on' and 'ask no more' - leaving no opportunity or suggestion she has a choice here but to obey. The further reference to the gown as one that the king 'has wrought', provokes a number of associations with the idea he is 'fashioning' her or controlling her, but also that this garment represents something he has worked at with some effort. Overwhelmingly, however, this scene reinforces the idea that Rosamund is, or becomes, an object, fashioned for male pleasure, and fashioned to embody the perfect imprisoned lady. When Rosamund appears in Act Two, scene eight, playing the lute as she awaits Henry's return, dressed in the 'crimson robes' he has given her, she has been transformed, externally at least, into the cloistered female figure of contemporary medievalist romances. Changing her behaviour to suit the demands of Henry - "I'll be a rose for fragrance, not for thorn" - Rosamund does eventually submit to fashioning herself as she is asked, "I am his Lady and his Love".⁴⁴ However the Fields immediately undermine this effort with her recognition of its artificiality, "Alas! when we were lovers, I ne'er asked / What mood my love would like!"⁴⁵ Rosamund is visibly and practically transformed from an active and simple girl to a passive and sexualised 'queen', unable to move outside of the role that Henry has constructed around her in the form of the labyrinth: "I must just sit down / On the edge of the bed, and comb my hair and wait".⁴⁶ This image resonates strongly with the idea of her trapped within a frame, or within the constructions of her produced and authorised by the 'proud histories', histories which (as the prologue suggests) originate from, and reflect the priorities of, Henry's transformation and incarceration of her

⁴⁴ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.v.187.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II.v.187.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II.viii.198.

within this labyrinth. The ‘prison of womanhood’ the Fields interrogate here, therefore, is presented as a prison of imposed and closely defined performances, costumes and roles.

Throughout the narrative of *Fair Rosamund*, the Fields evoke the strong traditional association made between Rosamund and roses to further interrogate the ways in which she is transformed from the ‘true’ Rosamund to an idealised figure or symbol. The construction of Rosamund by Henry here is characterised as the transformation from her as “nature’s Rose” - as she was in the prologue - to Henry’s definition of her as his “garden rose, our cultured rose.”⁴⁷ She is, throughout her time in the labyrinth subject to ‘culturing’ or ‘cultivating’ by Henry and her guard, the knight Sir Topaz, who both participate in turning her into the perfect ‘rose of womanhood’ symbolically bringing her in from the wilds of nature to the garden within the labyrinth – and literally constructing her, and positioning her as, ‘man’s rose’ not nature’s in direct conflict with the prologue. The garden within the labyrinth, the only contact with ‘nature’ she is permitted, is presented as one which is correspondingly artificially cultivated, as Topaz tells Rosamund: “There’s a little garden within...I’ve planted sunflower and sweet basil against the season[.]”⁴⁸ He means here that the garden has been stocked in preparation for the season to come, strongly indicating that she is to remain interred here in this prepared space. The idea of cultivating Rosamund into the distinctly unnatural ‘man’s rose’ or a ‘garden rose’ for Henry’s pleasure has an even greater significance here, as the red and white rose “Fair Rosamund”, which is depicted in Rossetti’s painting of her, was said to have

⁴⁷ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, 133; l.i.137.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, l.vi.170.

been created on the orders of Henry II to commemorate her beauty and their love.⁴⁹ The further association made between this symbolic ideal, then, and the shape of the labyrinth “‘tis so fair a building - a very rose – you’ve carved on the ground” suggests that the labyrinth itself is built upon these ideas of women-as-roses which were, according to Jan Marsh, “traditionally expressive of youthful love and gently unfolding bliss[.]”⁵⁰ What the Fields present here, however, is a rose rendered in stone, an attempt by Henry to set down for eternity the ‘ideal Rosamund’: the ideal woman. There is no sense here that this building or its form represent anything approaching ‘unfolding bliss’ or are expressing ‘youthful love’; rather it is a severe and artificial symbol of Henry’s will to possess and transform Rosamund into an ideal. The Fields purposely reveal here how this outward transformation of her from a ‘fair girl of the country’ to a courtly figure is consistent with the established constructions of both Rosamund, and other idealised figures such as the Lady of Shallot, to foreground the process by which she comes to embody the archetypal ‘imprisoned woman’.

The Fields further utilise the labyrinth to tackle some of the contemporary reasons for the ever-intensifying idealisation of the ‘confinement’ of women. Henry, for example, is motivated to push her further and further into the bower as his own anxieties about the security of his crown intensify:

A fearfulness

Possesses me that here you are not safe.

I’ll hide you deeper, you sweet-smelling Rose,

For safety with my treasures; you shall have

⁴⁹ Although in fact, there is little evidence for this legend - many rose experts date the introduction to England of this particular strain to around 1500 - but it is not impossible that it may have existed as far back as the mid-twelfth century in France where the Gallica rose sub-type to which it belongs flourished prior to the sixteenth century.

⁵⁰ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.i.136 and Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 10.

The custody of my imperilled crown[.]⁵¹

The Fields here refer to the conditions of the 1880s, a time of significant socio-cultural upheaval, public agitation (often by women) and political insecurity. They draw a strong correlation between the idealising of these courtly roles and contemporary insecurities surrounding the perceived disintegration of national identity and masculine authority. The ‘imperilled crown’ can be understood as referring to anxieties regarding the security of the prevailing patriarchal hierarchy which positioned upper and middle-class men as ‘kings’ of their own domain; be that on a domestic scale in terms of their position as heads of the family; in terms of social class structure and order; or in wider institutions of politics and education from which women were excluded. This increasing idealisation of a confined position for middle-class women can be thought of as having been, to an extent, part of a wider response to the perceived ‘chaos’ brought on by this same class of women ‘breaking out’ - as Rosamund’s tale does in the prologue - from their ‘traditional’ decorative or domestic roles to participate in public debate or paid employment. The ideal woman is therefore closely associated with the security of existing power structures and hierarchies; just as the ‘angel in the house’ had been entrusted with the morality of the nation and the home earlier in the century. By extension, this conversely associates women who exist outside this ideal as a potentially disruptive force which may undermine or ‘imperil’ these established structures and disrupt the set of heavily gendered binary oppositions which underpin its authority and ideology.⁵² As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary anxieties surrounding the potentially disruptive, and even catastrophic, effect on social stability of women ‘breaking out’ of their domestic role are specifically

⁵¹ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.v.188.

⁵² See Field, *Callirrhoe*, II.ii.41-42.

addressed by the Fields in *Callirrhöë*. Here, the people of Calydon identify the abandonment of domestic duty by some women, and their escape to the pleasures of the Bacchic revel in the hills, as the source of the disastrous plague. The Fields here are not simply engaging with the ‘labyrinth’ and Rosamund as a way to challenge the way these renderings reinforce and reformulate an oppressive patriarchal order on a cultural level, but are also making wider connections between contemporary socio-political conditions, their anxieties and the intensification of female oppression in popular culture.

Henry quite clearly ‘defines’ Rosamund through the building of the labyrinth, the limitations imposed upon her activities, her appearance, and her inert position. Yet the Fields also interrogate wider contemporary issues surrounding the oppressive and disempowering nature of legal and medical definitions of ‘womanhood’, and specifically, present how these definitions function to authorise and idealise sexual servitude and violence. In Act One, scene four, for example, Henry’s definition of Rosamund as “woman now” can be interpreted as a codified protest against the contemporary medicalised definitions of ‘womanhood’ which act to impose a regulatory categorisation upon women on the basis of female sexual and physical difference and its supposed disruptive potential. Rosamund’s ‘womanhood’ or identity as a ‘woman’ is shown to be defined wholly by Henry: “What, weep to-night, / Your Birthday? Rose, you are woman now[.]”⁵³ It is through Henry’s definition here, and the violent or possessive actions and language which follow it, that the Fields demonstrate how the very categorisation of ‘woman’ is one which is imposed by those in a position of institutional and intellectual authority. Rosamund, for instance, loses her autonomy

⁵³ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.iv.156.

and is pushed into the labyrinth at the very moment she ‘becomes’ a woman in Henry’s terms. The Fields are here interrogating how the limitations of the woman’s ‘role’ and ‘space’ which the labyrinth represent are based upon presumptions regarding the ‘nature’ of women and womanhood, reinforced and defined by the increasing influence of the medical and scientific professions, and its (almost) exclusively male practitioners.

Rosamund’s challenge to Henry’s identification of her crystallises the debates regarding the arbitrary categorisation of the female body and sex:

How should I know
That I am girl, or, if you’ll have it so,
With this May-moon rise woman, save for love?⁵⁴

Rosamund is shown here to have little or no connection to Henry’s definition of her as ‘woman now’. There is a clear conflict set up here between Rosamund’s self-identification as ‘girl’, an innocent, inert and unthreatening virginal identity, and his insistence that she is now ‘woman’, an identity which carries powerful implications of sexual maturity and availability. This conflict is further highlighted by the line “if you’ll have it so”, which specifically foregrounds how this categorisation, a category which is founded on nothing more than the rise of the May moon, comes to be imposed upon her on his terms. The Fields are here interrupting the presumption that an arbitrary measure of time can mark the change from ‘girlhood’ to ‘womanhood’ - that somehow this is a transformation which happens overnight - and therefore exposes such definitions as relating not to the body or mind of the individual woman, but as a discursively produced categorisation that imposes a whole set of socio-sexual

⁵⁴ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.iv.157.

identities, roles and limitations on her. As ‘woman’, as opposed to ‘girl’, her (now developed) sexuality precipitates the necessity of her entry into the labyrinth. This exchange reveals to the reader that Henry’s urgency to finish building the labyrinth within five days in the first scene - “[n]ecessity is on her knees to us” - is precisely because this birthday marks the moment she enters ‘womanhood’ and therefore must be brought under his control and possession, to preserve her sexuality and virginity for his use alone⁵⁵ The Fields interrogate here how contemporary prioritising of the incarcerated woman-within-the-labyrinth as *the* ideal was negatively associating female freedom, public activism, and non-passivity (or activity) with subversiveness and even sexual availability. Within the labyrinth her sexuality and ‘womanhood’ is confined to a safely delineated and ideal inert state; outside it, however, she is public, potentially disruptive, and her ‘womanhood’ is potentially associated with working-class sexual availability and prostitution.

Henry’s preoccupation with Rosamund’s ‘womanhood’ or sexuality and containing it mirrors a wider contemporary concern with these issues. In the same way that the categorisation of a woman as a ‘prostitute’ (visible, public, working-class) came to imprison numerous women in lock hospitals under the Contagious Diseases Acts, the categorisation of Rosamund as ‘woman now’ precipitates the same result: the loss of autonomy and control of one’s body to the power of the ‘professional’, or the authority of those who deploy such discursive constructions of women and womanhood. In this scene, therefore, the Fields also obliquely refer to issues surrounding the arguments for the repeal of the Acts which often focused on the way women were imprisoned into a life of sexual servitude as prostitutes, to ensure the sexual health of those men who used them. Rosamund is taken into a labyrinth here

⁵⁵ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.i.137

that distinctly represents a state of idealised sexual servitude, enslaving her to one master and confining her actions to those which satisfy his pleasure.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as Foucault identified, there was a growing preoccupation with sexuality, particularly that of certain kinds of subjects: the recognisably marginal figures of Victorian society, such as women, the working classes and homosexuals. From the “host of practices and techniques of power, which formed specific mechanics of knowledge and power” concerning the medicalisation of (female) sexuality, there emerged several specific “objects of knowledge...types of human subjects, subjected targets of and anchorages for the categories which were being simultaneously investigated and regulated.”⁵⁶ The predominant category here is in fact that of ‘womanhood’ which, like sexuality in general, “must be viewed as a *constructed* category of knowledge, rather than as a *discovered* identity”.⁵⁷ Such investigation and regulation was in the hands of the medical professional, the law-maker, the politician, and was deployed through the intersection of multiple discourses which both defined the category of womanhood and set out its parameters. Just as the magistrate and the lock hospital investigated, defined and incarcerated those publically visible women under the Contagious Diseases Acts, in the case of Rosamund, her ‘regulation’ by Henry is in the form of the labyrinth, and as his ‘woman now’ she is fitted within precisely these intensifying categorisations. The Fields expose here how the category of womanhood is not the ‘natural given’ that it is presented as and presumed to be; rather, it is produced by the intersection of institutionally approved discourses on the individual female ‘object’ whose identity is an historical and cultural construction. As Foucault says of sexuality, womanhood “must not be thought of as a

⁵⁶ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The regulation of sexuality since 1800*, 3rd ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2012), 7 and 8.

⁵⁷ Tamsin Spargo, *Foucault and Queer Theory* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 1999), 17.

kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge gradually tries to uncover. It is the name that can be given to an historical construct".⁵⁸ Such constructs are the product of language, and part of a wider system of divisions of knowledge linked to specific discourses, which, when deployed by the powerful, patriarchal institutions of law, politics, literature and art, act to both produce and police sexuality (and womanhood). As Jeffrey Weeks argues, "[t]he thrust of these discursive creations was control; control not through denial or prohibition, but through 'production', through imposing a grid of definitions and the possibilities of the body, through a new pattern of power".⁵⁹ Henry, for example, can be seen to discursively produce the idealised state of 'imprisoned womanhood' for Rosamund by defining her in terms of medievalist-revival romance, the 'lady in the bower', then imposing the limitations or possibilities of this role upon her through the creation of the labyrinth and securing her within it.

Henry's invocation of this categorisation of Rosamund as 'woman now' is also what authorises and legitimises his demands that she now leave her home and life of relative freedom in the forest and enter the labyrinth, a space of isolation where she is defined by her servitude to his romanticised sexual desires. When she resists his insistence they go into the labyrinth. "I will not go / Where I have never loved you", her protest is met with denial and threats - she has no recourse or agency now: "Ha! Not come? / Who is it orders?"⁶⁰ The violent language and undercurrent of sexual threat in this scene only serves to reinforce the idea that the 'prison of womanhood' - far from being a natural or ideal state - is in fact an arbitrary categorisation which

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1*, (London: Penguin, 1998), 152.

⁵⁹ Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 8.

⁶⁰ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.iv.158

authorises male domination and sexual violence. Such power over a woman is likewise shown to turn quickly to tyrannical extremes: “You shall love me...Where’er I will; what pain I put you to. / You shall not choose. Is this your loyalty?”⁶¹ Romanticised sexual desires manifest themselves here in a language of violence and sexual violence and are authorised and legitimated not only by these arbitrary definitions of female maturity or ‘womanhood’, but also by the employment of romanticised images and tropes surrounding the imprisoned woman or lover.

Victorian-medievalist ideas are, the Fields demonstrate, a language and set of images and tropes which may on the surface appear to be one of worship and courtly love, but in fact are enacted here to oppress and dominate women in multiple ways when employed by a figure of ultimate authority, or indeed any contemporary man of sufficient status or professional, institutional education. The Fields attempt to subvert the contemporary employment of the romanticised language and imagery that Henry uses to construct her: “I’ve built a fair bower-nest for thee, my bird, / And there we’ll mate” to disrupt its potential to idealise female suffering and male violence.⁶² Henry’s invocation of the idea of the ‘nightingale’ in his attempt to get her deeper in the wood where he can satisfy his desire for her, provokes associations with another well-known example of idealised sexual violence:

The nightingale!
Dost hear that urgent note? – a thorny sigh,
A prick sets bliss to bleed, desire too sharp
For tolerance – a pang.⁶³

⁶¹ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.iv.158.

⁶² *Ibid.*, l.iv.157.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, l.iv.157.

The nightingale's "urgent note" would have had far wider significance here for the contemporary reader. The song of this bird had long been associated with melancholy, female suffering and sexual violence. In classical mythology, the gods turn Philomena into a nightingale after she is raped and silenced by her brother-in-law.⁶⁴ However the nightingale as a symbol has been transformed from a tragic figure into a vision of poetic beauty, particularly by a number of Romantic poets, including Keats and Coleridge. As with Rosamund, the brutal reality of Philomena's tale has become silenced by the imposition of a romanticised vision of beauty. The 'urgent note', therefore, can be interpreted as a warning of what is to come for Rosamund, or potentially any woman, in the face of this loss of agency to her male 'over-lord'. This is particularly effective as it is presented as part of Henry's urgency to sexually possess her. The lines, "a thorny sigh, / A prick sets bliss to bleed, desire too sharp / For tolerance – a pang" are strongly suggestive of an aggressive phallic sexual penetration, which will set her 'bliss' or vagina to bleed as Henry takes her virginity, within the rose-prison.⁶⁵ Even her sexuality is shown to be here characterised and objectified in terms of Victorian-medievalist imagery. The Fields' invocation here of a tale of brutality and sexual violence transformed into an idealised image, points to how even the appalling mistreatment of women in contemporary society can become thus idealised in the popular imagination.

Wilfred's treatment of Rosamund's foster-sister Margery is a further example of how such actions are thus 'authorised' by the implications of Henry's romanticised

⁶⁴ In classical mythology, Philomena, daughter of Pandion, king of Athens, was raped by her sister's husband, Teresius King of Thrace, as he took her to visit her sister. He cut out her tongue to prevent her speaking of what he did, only for her to express it to her sister through a tapestry. The gods then turned Philomena into a Nightingale before Teresius could kill her. For a full explanation of the classical mythology associated with Philomena, see John Lemprière, *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary of Proper Names mentioned in Ancient Authors*, 3rd ed. (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 479.

⁶⁵ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.iv.157.

treatment of Rosamund. Wilfred seduces Margery, a simple and uneducated girl, with promises of fine clothes and the pleasures of the city, only to abandon her, ruined, with a pouch of gold pieces. After unsuccessfully trying to return her to her father, she becomes a pawn in Elinor's revenge against Rosamund and is, for the rest of the play, treated as a servant or prostitute by Wilfred and other characters.⁶⁶ As Wilfred tells her, as he takes Margery away to be seduced, "That lady [Margery] is *my* prize, if you're the king's".⁶⁷ Wilfred clearly states, that Rosamund's position as Henry's 'embowered lover' has set an example for his actions: "Fair precedent / You've given my audacity. The thing you call her ruin had been triumph if / The actress were yourself".⁶⁸ He similarly justifies his manipulation of Margery, characterising the taking of her virginity and abandoning her to ruin as no different from Henry's behaviour. In the last scene, when Henry discovers Rosamund and Margery dead, and Wilfred bleeding from a wound she inflicted, he challenges the King, "Like enough / Your lady rent her body a command/ Of majesty. What will not ladies do / For monarchs' pleasure – eh?"⁶⁹ Despite Henry's protest that "I worshipped...You, I swear....defiled", Wilfred calmly reminds him "We had our pleasure the forbidden way, / Each after his own fashion."⁷⁰ The Fields here explore some of the wider consequences of this authorisation of upper-class men to possess and confine women for their own ends, which particularly resonated with a Victorian concern with 'fallen women' and the sexual exploitation of the innocent and not so innocent alike. Here the Fields directly link such exploitation to the power of men, both by class or

⁶⁶ See particularly, her 'ruin', Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.ii.177-180, and her encounter with her father when Wilfred returns her home, *Ibid.*, II.iv.182.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I.vi.167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, I.vi.168.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, II.viii.203.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, II.viii.203.

professional education, to define womanhood and its spaces as well as the power-relationships that make this possible.

Rosamund is far from being the only woman in ‘prison’ within the narrative, although hers is the only tangible, physical manifestation of this confinement. In fact, all the female figures are entrapped by some manifestation of a patriarchal system of power to a certain extent. Throughout *Fair Rosamund*, the Fields construct Queen Elinor as a similarly imprisoned figure, albeit trapped in a very different way and she is, like Rosamund, a prisoner of Henry’s desires and demands. Her prison is the role of “Queen, wife, and mother”, specifically her loveless political marriage to Henry, a relationship which, earlier in the narrative, the Fields show is based on his aspirations to gain wider political influence: “I embraced your lands, / Not you.”⁷¹ It is the distortion of this ‘sacred’ married (and royal) relationship which provokes Elinor’s revenge narrative against Henry. Within the text, this narrative progresses from turning his sons against him, “reared a treasonous brood from his own blood...have it at my call” to the intent of poisoning his lover, “Elinor / Come to put bitter poison in the cup / The king drinks deep of[.]”⁷² Her rage is focussed on his mistreatment of her and that she is trapped in a dissatisfying relationship where “stony lust” takes the place of loving union.⁷³ The Fields present the idea that precisely the role he imposed on her as his wife, to secure a further addition to his political domain has brought about her and their sons’ resentment:

Embraced my lands!

⁷¹ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.viii.199; I.iii.153.

⁷² *Ibid.*, I.ii.151, II.viii.198.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I.iii.154.

Had you embraced me, I had borne you fruit
Of soft-fleshed children. Hug the progeny
Of your stony lust, and curse me!⁷⁴

This scene opens up clear fault lines in the idea of Elinor as simply evil or jealous. She is here presented as a complex, powerful individual whose fully justified rage poses a significant threat to Henry's masculine authority within the social hierarchy; after all, she has turned his own progeny against him. The Fields present the issues of female imprisonment, therefore, as affecting different women in different ways depending upon their status and the role they are positioned within. Elinor has a level of autonomy that Rosamund does not, due to her class, but also as a legitimate wife and mother. She uses her status within the patriarchal hierarchy and order to authorise her actions; as a Queen who can decide life or death, "[t]he Queen, who'll give you access to your/ God;" and as a wife, who has a legitimate claim to her husband, over his mistress, "[t]he wife, who'll doom the leman."⁷⁵ Through this Queen-figure, the Fields indicate how such roles offer some power, but are ultimately part of the same system of limitations which produce all repressive constructed female identities. The only power she has in this revenge narrative is to attack Rosamund and take away what it is that Henry loves. The Fields here draw particular attention to the ways in which these principally male constructed roles of 'womanhood' have, by being imposed on these women by Henry, brought them to this position of revenge and suffering. Elinor has only the elite masculine language and culture to draw from and she adopts the role of vengeful queen and jealous hateful wife as a role which will, as far as she hopes, give her some recourse for her own suffering at the hands of Henry.

⁷⁴ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, I.iii.154.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, II.viii.198.

The Fields' version of Rosamund and Elinor's encounter in the labyrinth, in line with many of the others, has Elinor bring both poison and a dagger to present to Rosamund. What is perhaps most significant about this scene, however, is that Rosamund chooses to penetrate her own breast with the dagger rather than take the option of the poison. She has already, earlier in the scene, recognised and contemplated the final stage of her loss of agency which will come with the impending arrival of Henry to consummate their relationship. This is what provokes her first real questioning of what *she wants*, and of what her choices might be, if any: "What is't I want - / God, or the King?"⁷⁶ Rosamund finally recognises the only choice she has open to her: that of going to 'God' a virgin in death, and thus retaining her ownership of her identity and body as pure, or entirely subsuming herself to Henry's desires and allowing him to take possession of her body completely through sexual penetration. He has constructed a role, identity and a prison around her and the only way for her to escape is through death - through the self-penetrative act which denies him his ultimate goal of complete possession of her body. In death, then, she chooses to remain a virgin, she 'goes to God'. She takes possession of her destiny for the first time in the play and finally escapes the control and surveillance of her life within the labyrinth by denying Henry's demand to take her virginity, a demand which Lloyd Davis defines as "a masculinist attempt to survey and control a woman's past".⁷⁷ Taking her own life, then, allows her to take control of her body, her past, and to an extent her future, once more. It is in this sense presented as a source of power or resistance against oppression. As Chris White argues, the Fields document across their dramas how "the possession

⁷⁶ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.viii.197.

⁷⁷ Lloyd Davis, "The Virgin Body as Victorian Text: An Introduction," in *Virginal Sexuality and Textually in Victorian Literature*, ed. Lloyd Davis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 11.

of virginity is the sole source of female power, freedom and joy”.⁷⁸ At a time before effective contraception, where virginity still marked perhaps a middle-class woman’s only valuable asset in terms of securing financial stability through marriage, to remain so allowed a woman to avoid the oppressive role of wife or prostitute, both of which represented to some merely differing forms of sexual slavery.⁷⁹ Striking at her breast, her act of self-penetration is to strike against the oppression of these imposed roles. By taking her own life, being the first to penetrate herself by, in fact, taking ownership of her ‘debt’ or ‘wrong’ to Henry’s legitimate spouse, the Fields present the reader with a figure who is attempting to define herself outside the terms which have come to imprison her.

Rosamund’s violent taking back of ownership of her body, however, does not allow her to escape the ‘prison’ to which her story becomes confined over time. She does not achieve the autonomy over her body in the present any more than she can within the narrative. She is re-constructed in death, while still warm, by Elinor who defines the scene as her own act, leaving Henry a gruesome tableau to discover, “I’ve made my lord / A bridal bed – a royal recipe/ For slighted wives”, an image which can often be found in the artistic depictions of this encounter.⁸⁰ Rosamund here becomes a pawn in the game between Elinor and Henry; she was always his ‘rose’ to manipulate and play at ‘romance’ with, but Elinor’s appropriation of her death, like that of many subsequent writers and artists, once again denies her the identity which is being eroded

⁷⁸ Chris White, “The Tiresian Poet: Michael Field,” in *Victorian Women Poets: a Critical Reader*, ed. Angela Leighton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 152.

⁷⁹ Ideas surrounding the potential power or emancipation offered by virginity as an identity and state, were also closely linked to mid- and late-century Marian debates, which focussed on the Virgin Mary as a figure of resistance and disruption to the patriarchal hierarchies of both social and religious power structures. For a further discussion of these ideas in terms of gender and faith, see, Carol Engelhardt Herringer, *Victorians and the Virgin Mary: Religion and Gender in England, 1830-85* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

⁸⁰ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, ll.viii.200.

throughout the play. The narrative is framed by the idea of her as ‘man’s rose’, or as symbolic possession, by the direct mirroring of the language of the prologue. Here Henry addresses her corpse, “Ah! Rosa Mundi! Thou / That wert to the king a tender sweet-brier rose”⁸¹ which is the first time she has been identified as ‘Rosa Mundi’ outside the prologue. The Fields’ employing of his definition of her here as ‘rose of the world’ foregrounds how her identity is becoming symbolic of precisely the same idealised confinements and performances which she took her own life to escape. Rosamund has only escaped this prison through death and her release from her silence was only achieved through the herculean effort of a female muse and though the duality of Michael Field.

Fair Rosamund is an undoubtedly highly politicised play, especially given the Fields’ exploration of so many contemporary issues surrounding womanhood as a prison, as well as wider issues of oppression and escape. It was, after all, written at a time when Katharine and Edith were enthusiastically pursuing their own education at University College Bristol, becoming politically engaged with ideas of emancipation and equality, as well as beginning to negotiate a public presence as activists and writers. The ‘breaking out’ of Rosamund and the ‘breaking up’ of her associated confined identities and ‘histories’ shows how the limitations associated with ‘womanhood’ were of deep concern to Bradley and Cooper at this early stage of their writing career and collaborative writing project. As female writers, they were attempting to break into a predominantly male elite literary sphere, that of tragic drama, and ‘break out’ of the limitations imposed on many contemporary middle-class women spatially, socially, and professionally.

⁸¹ Field, *Fair Rosamund*, II.viii.204.

Deep anxieties surrounding an inability to ‘speak out’ and be heard, and of being confined by the public revelation of their gender are reflected in their letters of the time. Both women wrote to Browning, concerned with the need for ‘strict secrecy’ from him concerning Michael Field’s ‘sex’, given that he was the only person aware of their identity at this time.⁸² In November 1884, Bradley wrote:

The report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn...we shall never “speak out”. And we have many things to say that the world will not tolerate from a woman’s lips[.]⁸³

Intolerance to the woman’s voice, and the inability for women to speak about certain issues are, as I have discussed, key concerns that the Fields explored throughout their first two plays. They were however, similarly troubled that exposure of their sex would prevent their work from receiving equal and fair critical responses; as Bradley put it: “robbing us of real criticism, such as man gives man.”⁸⁴ This statement reveals a strong desire on their part to achieve a professional status and reputation within the public literary sphere and to have their work legitimised by the ‘real criticism’ reserved for the ‘serious’ work of men. Indeed, their wish was granted, initially at least. One of the early reviews of *Fair Rosamund* in the *Spectator* on 24 May is very complimentary, admiring the dramatic qualities of the two dramas. This reviewer gives perhaps the highest praise of all to be found at this time, stating that: “To him it sounds like the ring of a new voice, which is likely to be heard far and wide among

⁸² Edith Cooper to Robert Browning 29 May 1884, reproduced in Michael Field, *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 3.

⁸³ Katherine Bradley to Robert Browning 23 November 1884, reproduced in Michael Field, *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

the English-speaking peoples”.⁸⁵ Yet Mary Sturgeon laments that there is a terrible irony here, since “these pæans of welcome died out and were replaced as time went on by an indifference which, at its nadir in the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, could dismiss Michael Field in six lines”.⁸⁶ Their anxieties surrounding this revelation of their ‘sex’ and its implications, however, were not unfounded. As Sturgeon commented, “[when] the critics learned that Michael Field was not a man...work much finer than *Callirrhoë* passed unnoticed or was reviled.”⁸⁷ J.W. Mackail’s 1885 *Academy* review of their second volume of dramas, gives some indication as to how their work was received differently once their gender and duality was known:

Mr Field – for so it appears simplest to call him, without inquiring too curiously into details of number and gender – made a name last year with his plays of ‘Callirrhoë and ‘Fair Rosamund’[.]⁸⁸

The fascination with a ‘new voice’ has here given way to a suspicion regarding the ‘arrangement’ of writers under the ‘Michael Field’ pseudonym and, more significantly, their gender and number have, as they feared, taken attention away from genuine, even criticism of their work in its own right.

Such bias emerging in criticism of their writing, however, did not deter the Fields from continuing to engage with highly political subjects in the plays which followed such as *The Father’s Tragedy* (1885), *William Rufus* (1885) and *Canute the Great* (1887). These plays are, unlike the first two, marked by an almost complete lack

⁸⁵“A New Poet: Callirrhoë. – Fair Rosamund By Michael Field,” *The Spectator*, May 24, 1884, 681.

⁸⁶ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 28.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁸ J.W. Mackail, “Michael Field’s New Volume. The Father’s Tragedy; William Rufus; Loyalty or Love?,” *The Academy*, no. 689, July 18, 1885, 36.

of female characters. Concerned predominantly with ideas of state, kingship and political versus familial loyalty, these dramas frequently interrogate conflicts between the powerful patriarchal institutions of church and state and the regenerative as well as destructive forces of nature.⁸⁹ Labyrinths or prisons, however, did continue to be a thematic motif in their work of this time. In *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), for example, the starvation of Rothsay in the dungeon of Falkland Castle represents a powerful indictment of the demands for obedience and conformity at all costs by fathers (or kings) from their sons (or subjects), leading as it does, for Robert III, to the loss of both his son in death and his kingdom to traitors.⁹⁰ The Fields also employ prison imagery to reflect on the dangers of narrow-mindedness and blindness on the part of those in power, and often characterise male figures as imprisoned by their superior position and by a heavy burden of political demands – the strain of which brings about madness, murderous rages, and destroys precious familial bonds.

As their work progresses towards the 1890s, it becomes less obviously politicised and they began to pay more attention to aesthetic and artistic concerns, particularly in terms of exploring their own identity as women writers and aesthetes. The Fields were now developing and experimenting with female identities and self-construction as well as role-play; a clear shift from the imposed performances and romanticised inertia challenged in *Fair Rosamund*. Ideas of silence and imprisonment did remain important to the Fields throughout their work, but there is a clear move towards exploring radical, transgressive figures and roles, such as gypsies or other

⁸⁹ See *William Rufus* (1885). Rufus' forced enclosure of 'hunting lands' for his use alone, disrupts the natural balance between the resident charcoal makers and the forest itself, and, in a fascinating exploration of nature-in-revolt, the death of the King is here caused by the deflection of an hunting arrow from an oak tree.

⁹⁰ This play is also remarkable for the scenes which unfold between the starving Rothsay in his cell, and Emmeline, an armorer's wife, who takes pity on his thirst and breastfeeds him through the bars. See Michael Field, *The Father's Tragedy* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1885), IV.iii and IV.iv.

working-class identities and even cross dressing in their 1890 drama, *The Tragic Mary*. The Fields' initial concern with presenting through their work the 'high feminine ought to be' so tragically embodied by Callirhoë and Rosamund both going to their self-inflicted deaths heroic virgins had given way, by the publication of *Mary*, to a fascination with, and exploration of, the possibilities of new, challenging, complex female identities, through the figure of a more powerful, mature, (potentially transgressive) sexual and maternal figure, Mary Queen of Scots.

Chapter Three

The Tragic Mary (1890): Clothes, Costume, Cross-Dressing and the negotiation of new female identities at the *Fin-de-Siècle*.

In this chapter I discuss Michael Field's play *The Tragic Mary*, first published in 1890. The focus of this analysis is on the particular way in which the Fields place emphasis on ideas of costume, role-play and the construction of female identity in terms of the central protagonist, Mary Queen of Scots. In this period, the Fields' self-construction and self-definition as poets and dramatists was very much connected to their clothing and appearance, and I discuss here how this play can be understood as part of their participation in and engagement with wider contemporary concerns surrounding revisions of women's dress and prescribed roles. By the 1890s, mid-century idealised womanhood and its 'angelic' domestic virtues and wifely duties were no longer regarded as relevant or satisfactory for an increasing number of middle-class women who were agitating for a greater public presence and for further reforms in employment and professional training – an economic necessity for the growing number who remained unmarried.¹ This was a time of great change and opportunity for many middle-class women sought to build on the legal reforms and educational expansions of the previous decades, although, as Bonnie Robinson suggests, there was "still far to go in terms of pay, job opportunities, education and suffrage".²

¹ The 1891 census revealed there were nearly 2.5 million unmarried women, and there were approximately 900,000 more women than men. See, Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester and New York: M.U.P., 1992), 11.

² Bonnie J. Robinson, "'Individable Incorporate': Poetic Trends in Women Writers, 1890-1918," *Victorian Poetry* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 2.

In this chapter, I argue that in *The Tragic Mary* the Fields engage with ongoing drives for female independence, autonomy and political power through Mary's experimentation in the play with multiple costumes, alternative femininities and cross-gendered identity as she struggles toward self-definition. This time finds the Fields experimenting in their own lives with the possibilities and limitations of costume, dress and self-fashioning as a means to negotiating legitimate literary, aesthetic or, in Mary's case, liberated identities. This chapter then, contends that the Fields here employ the tragic and mis-represented Queen Mary to explore and experiment with a range of (in one case, scandalising) clothed or imagined alternative 'identities' and costumes. Although not as overtly politically engaged as their first two dramas, I argue that this play intervenes in highly-charged contemporary debates surrounding Dress Reform and anxieties relating to 'masculinised dress' causing the breakdown of gender roles. Most significantly, through Mary's cross-dressing scene, the Fields expose gender roles and identities to be clothed performances, not founded in biological difference, thus directly undermining the founding binary oppositions of the disempowering 'separate spheres' doctrine.

The Tragic Mary was both written and published at a time of considerable change and upheaval for Katherine and Edith, as they had moved from Bristol to Reigate, Surrey, in 1888. On 14 April this year they also made the first entry in their joint diary, *Works and Days*, arguably the moment when their collaborative writing project as their unique literary identity truly began to take form. After the death of Edith's mother on 19 August 1889, their shared life intensified and they became increasingly independent. As Emma Donoghue notes, they now "came into their own as 'poets and

lovers'...edging away from the family...spending more time in London".³ Their engagement with political and social concerns, as well as their growing interest in aestheticism (particularly in terms of dress and self-definition) continued within their dramas and recent critical writing on Michael Field has begun to turn towards a focus on clothing and the 'politics of dress', as a framework for reading the Fields' work.⁴ *The Tragic Mary* is read here as closely intertwined with the Fields' emerging concern with dress and masquerade as a means of public self-definition and expression of their identity as poets, dramatists and women.⁵

Dress was, at this time, both a political and aesthetic concern for the Fields. Mary Sturgeon writes of their time at Bristol that "[i]t was an era...when 'aesthetic dress' was being very consciously worn – all by the same kind of people. Katherine and Edith were of that kind".⁶ They fully committed to this look, Sturgeon continues, and "wore wonderful flowing garments in 'art' colours, and dressed their hair in a loose knot at the nape of the neck" - art colours being the muted natural colours which came into favour initially with the Pre-Raphaelite movement – and their appearance challenged the conventions of corsetry and ornament: "[t]heir style of dress was daringly clinging and graceful in an age of ugly protuberances".⁷ Dress was also vital to the expression of their cultured and educated identity as poets, as Ana Parejo Vadillo suggests, not only did the Fields see "dress as a manifestation of their aesthetic

³ Emma Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1998), 55.

⁴ Two key articles appeared in 2013 which I engage with throughout this chapter: Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Living Art: Michael Field, Aestheticism and Dress," in *Clothing the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth-Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreskim (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), and Sarah Parker, "Fashioning Michael Field: Michael Field and Late-Victorian Dress Culture," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18 no. 3 (September 2013).

⁵ See Logan Pearsall Smith, *Reperusals and Recollections* (London: Constable & Company, 1936), 85-87.

⁶ Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co, 1922), 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21; 22.

personalities and of their joint authorship” but further, they were passionate that “their clothes had to express their innate sensibilities and assert their own values and cultivated tastes”.⁸ The aesthetic movement and its creative, intellectual and liberating possibilities - particularly through fashion – certainly drew the attention of women like the Fields. For as Talia Schaffer argues, the wider community of ‘female aesthetes’ found in fashion an area where they could assert their entitlement to be aesthetic; they “claimed that they had made clothing into art, and...displayed the elite education associated with the connoisseur”.⁹ Bradley and Cooper’s joint diaries “Works and Days” are saturated with examples of the Fields’ engagement with aesthetic dress. An 1892 entry, for example, describes a ‘dress-congress’ with Louie Ellis, the Fields’ friend. Cooper writes:

My robe of black & bright olive-green veiled with black lace is severe & rather dark. Louie herself is worthy of Sargeant’s [sic] brush – a fine green tea-gown, boldly embroidered with damask-velvet thread & the high lights flushed across it with brilliant blood-red beads.¹⁰

Louie Ellis’ dress is extremely aesthetic; according to Sara Parker, “embroidery and ‘art beads’ were key ingredients of the aesthetic ‘look’, while the ‘tea-gown’...was associated with artistic types in the 1860s...[b]y the 1890s, [it had] become a highly fashionable item, commonly worn at ‘aesthetic functions’”.¹¹ Looser than those dresses commonly worn in public (as they were originally for informal home use), the

⁸ Vadillo, *Living Art*, 244 and 245.

⁹ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 103.

¹⁰ Edith Cooper in Michael Field, “Works and Days,” 30 March 1892, British Library, Add.MS. 46780, fol.5. Cooper may be recalling John Singer Sargent’s 1889 work *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth*, in which a fierce-looking Terry is depicted, crown held aloft, wearing a long, loose peacock-green gown, covered in copper-red beads and metallic belt, very like Louie’s.

¹¹ Parker, “Fashioning Michael Field,” 321.

popularity of the style was based in part on its association with earlier pre-Raphaelite ideals which prioritised the uncorseted female form, subdued colours and clinging, but flowing fabrics. Liberty's, as the only place in London selling such styles, supplied burgeoning aesthetes with their garbs; Wilde, Ruskin, Rossetti and Morris were all customers, as were the Fields, and the establishment became, according to Vadillo, "synonymous with aestheticism and oppositional culture", a world in to which they were increasingly venturing.¹² Patricia Cunningham notes that aesthetic dress, particularly tea gowns, were "thus appropriate for fantasy dress, fancy dress, masquerade, fetes and intimate clothing. In [aestheticism's] manifestation as tea-gowns, all women could wear it in their homes, the more daring and avant-garde wore it in public."¹³ The Fields' experimentation with aesthetic dress, then, was clearly related to its creative and expressive potential as costume, masquerade and performance, both public and literary and, according to Vadillo, was closely tied to its imaginative potential:

[A]esthetic dress represents not just identity but also the imaginary...Field deliberately used dress as an expression of their dreams and desires...the choices they made about their dress evolved organically with the distinctive phases of their aestheticism and of their writings.¹⁴

Throughout *The Tragic Mary* dress is similarly used to express Mary's dreams and desires and its imaginative potential as masquerade and as a way to explore new femininities and challenge the limitations of established roles and identities. It is

¹² Vadillo, *Living Art*, 249.

¹³ Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health and Art* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State U.P., 2002), 103.

¹⁴ Vadillo, *Living Art*, 246.

through Mary's adoption of these various identities that the Fields explore and challenge the limits of established femininity, its assigned duties and spaces, and protest and subvert presumptions of female inferiority based on biological essentialism or artificial archetypes. With the cavalier scenes particularly, they engage with inflammatory debates surrounding cross-dressing, or masculinised women, and expose the fallacy of male supremacy as enforced through performed and clothed gender identities.

Dress, as a means of self-expression, a way to define oneself, was a politically charged issue for the Fields, as it was for many middle-class women at the time, and they engaged with activism and philosophies surrounding the reform of dress. Katharine expressed her support for Dress Reform at a debate when she was still at University College. She recorded this in an undated letter to Edith's father: "We had a very stormy debate here the other night on Reform of Dress" (emphasis in original), repeating that she argued in favour and stating her opinion that "dress was more interesting when it was made a means of self expression [sic]".¹⁵ Indeed, the "two eager girls who walked over the downs for lectures every morning" with "careless hair and untidy feet" were hardly likely to accept the confines and inconveniences of extreme corsetry and heavy crinolines.¹⁶ Concerns surrounding health issues, practicality as well as the necessities and realities of modern female experience dominated debates on reform of dress. In discussing skirts, specifically the 'absurd' crinolines, the president of the Rational Dress Society, Viscountess Harberton, stated: "It is the cause of endless accidents...and as for accidents to women walking or trying

¹⁵ Katharine Bradley, undated letter to James Cooper. This letter is held in the Unpublished Manuscript Collections at the Bodleian Library. Katharine Bradley, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng.Lett.d.400 for. 160.

¹⁶ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 22.

to run...their name is legion. Every quick and sudden movement becomes a danger[.]¹⁷ Reformers were also particularly opposed to corsets and the arguments against their use came from a wide range of quarters, including doctors advising of the deformities caused and the hygienic issues for women's health in general, as well as the recommendation of looser, even bifurcated garments (a version of the unsuccessful 'Bloomers').¹⁸ The reform of women's dress also posed a direct challenge to the dominant ideas of sexual difference and its assigned roles and space. As Florence Pomeroy argues, female dress imposed "a traditional state of calm repose" rather than reflecting the day-to-day realities of most women, described in 1884: "[t]hey have to catch trains and get about quickly in all weathers, almost as much as the men".¹⁹ These garments were thought to hinder the presumed intellectual and physical capacity of women in general, and give (and perpetuate) an impression of frailty, weakness and inferiority to men. As Pomeroy put it:

At present women's appearance, dressed in a manner that plainly shows they cannot easily perform what they undertake, must and does impress all beholders with a feeling that they have a low grade of capacity...the world forgets that these disabilities are artificial, and by consequence, the *status* of women generally, becomes lowered...their appearance gives an unconscious impression of foolishness.²⁰

Emancipation from this dress was therefore closely aligned with emancipation from the confines of domestic servitude and intellectual restriction, as it proved the

¹⁷ Florence Pomeroy (The Viscountess Harberton) (President of the Rational Dress Society), *Reasons for Reform in Dress*, (London: Hutchings & Crowsley Ltd., 1884), 5.

¹⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of dress reform and its activists, see Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the 19th Century* (London: John Murray, 1974).

¹⁹ Pomeroy, *Reform in Dress*, 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

‘incapability’ of women to be an impression created by its contortions. As Diana Crane argues, “fashionable clothing exemplifies the doctrine of separate spheres...[i]t suited the subordinate and passive social roles women were expected to perform”.²¹ Dress reformers, in line with many women’s movements, as Ann Heilmann argues, were therefore “challenging biological notions of sexual difference deployed to rationalise women’s political disempowerment as the product of ‘nature’”.²² Experimentation with dress (aesthetic or bifurcated) can therefore be understood to be related to the need for clothing, identities or roles which reflected the capacity and experience of the number of increasingly public and active middle-class women and as a key part of emancipatory arguments relating to female intellectual and physical equality or freedom. The Fields’ presentation of Mary’s cross-dressing and imaginative role-play in *Mary* functions to foreground ideas of gender and femininity as culturally constructed identities imposed and reinforced by the confining nature of female dress, and as a visible representation of a whole set of ideological definitions of submission, weakness, ignorance and domesticity.

We can read *The Tragic Mary*, therefore, in terms of the Fields’ developing ideas of self-construction and dress, actual or imaginary, as an expression of creativity, desire and the articulation of new femininities. Mary, after all, is often found embroidering, making clothing or undertaking tapestry work, something which gives her a space to express her creativity and individuality. Furthermore she continually adopts a variety of costumes, both literally (as a cavalier) and imaginatively (as the ‘Gypsy-queen’ or shepherdess), as an exploration of her own needs, desires and

²¹ Diana Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago and London: Chicago U.P., 2000), 100.

²² Ann Heilmann, “(Un)Masking Desire: Cross-dressing and the crisis of gender in New Woman fiction,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 83.

dreams.²³ The status and interpretation of women's 'craft' in this era, however, was ambiguous. In *Callirrhoe*, for example, Callirrhoe's weaving is both a divinely handed down duty and symbolic of the limitations of her virginal isolation in domestic toil. It was also variously presented in terms of women's idleness, and as an ideal feminine occupation. To an extent such activity was an act of performed femininity, a way to display the delicate loveliness of hands used only for decorative pursuits.²⁴

Bradley and Cooper's fascination with their protagonist was, as the preface states, the result of a visit to Holyrood Palace, Edinburgh, where they encountered the artefacts of Mary's life being exhibited in her former residence:

In the apartments at Holyrood we can touch the very silks that Queen Mary handled...the flushed tatters of her curtains are before us...[B]eholding these things we are seized with a passionate desire of access, an eagerness of approach: we cannot pause to wonder, or debate, or condemn; an impulse transports us: we are started on an inevitable quest.²⁵

The Fields' 'impulsive' response to Mary's possessions and their 'passionate desire for access' suggests a need to experience her first hand and know her intimately, not merely in historical record but through an eager interaction with her materiality and portraiture. Their 'inevitable quest' also led them to draw their 'Mary' from wider

²³ There is a long tradition of female creativity being associated with the production of fabrics, or spinning, a key theme throughout the Fields' earlier plays, see Field, *Callirrhoe*, I.ii.11-15.

²⁴ See Talia Schaffer, "Women's Work: The History of the Victorian Domestic Handicraft," in *Clothing the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth-Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreskim (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 25-42.

²⁵ Michael Field, Preface to *The Tragic Mary* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), v.

sources and the Fields took a number of visits to Scotland and her various residences in the years leading up to the writing and publication of the play.²⁶ A joint trip in the autumn of 1887 was wholly focussed on research: “we were again in Edinburgh, on the track of Queen Mary...[and took] several expeditions to castles and towns connected with [her] life”.²⁷ On an excursion to a London exhibition of portraits of Stuart kings and queens in January 1889, Bradley writes of the ‘Windsor Miniature of Mary Queen of Scots’ that “[t]he background is pure azure; the dress is rose-coloured with pearls, there are pearls in the beechen-brown hair, which is not veiled; the faced is softly pale”, an early indication of the concern with Mary’s dress and appearance which predominates *The Tragic Mary*.²⁸

Mary had been, in the previous years, the subject of much renewed interest. According to Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, “between 1820 and 1892 the Royal Academy alone displayed fifty-six new scenes from Mary’s life. Special exhibitions were mounted from London to Glasgow, and in 1887 the tercentenary of her death was lavishly commemorated at Peterborough”.²⁹ Such intense focus only increased throughout the century, with fourteen stage productions as well as nineteen printed dramas which had Queen Mary as the main character being published up to 1900.³⁰ This fascination is reflected by the sheer number of contemporary historical works consulted by the Fields in their research, including John Hosack’s *Mary Stuart, a Brief*

²⁶ See Ivor Treby, *Binary Star: Leaves from the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846-1914* (Suffolk: De Blackland Press, 2006), 102.

²⁷ Michael Field, “Recollections,” in *Memoir and Remains*, Vol. I., John Miller Gray (Edinburgh: D. Douglas, 1895), 85.

²⁸ See Katharine Bradley, Michael Field, “Works and Days,” January 1889, British Library. Add. Ms.46777. The ‘Preface’ to *Mary* repeats these descriptions almost word for word.

²⁹ Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, *Mary, Queen of Scots: Romance and Nation*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 173.

³⁰ See Marian Gleason, “Mary Stuart on the English and American Stage” (master’s thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1936) *University of Massachusetts Amherst*, accessed June 13, 2015, <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/theses/1555>.

Statement (1888), Charles D. Mackie's *The Castles, Palaces and Prisons of Mary of Scotland* (1864) and Alexander MacNiel Casird's *Mary Stuart, Her Guilt or Innocence* (1866).³¹ Mary was also taken up with enthusiasm by a number of women writers, Agnes Strickland's celebratory historical study *Life of Mary Queen of Scots* (1844), for instance, defended Mary against some of the baser accusations levelled at her and is deeply concerned with an "exhausting campaign to disprove...evidence that its heroine fell...short of [her] female ideal".³² In Charlotte Mary Yonge's 1882 novel, *Unknown to History*, Mary is a particularly transgressive, older figure, still utterly fascinating to men and women alike. The adolescent heroine who, it transpires, is her daughter is seduced and fascinated with "the extraordinary magic of [Mary's] eye and lip" as an erotic mother figure.³³ Many of the close associates and admired figures in the Fields' circle also worked with Mary too, including John Ruskin, Walter Pater (from whose work the title *The Tragic Mary* was taken), John Gray (whose 'guided tours' of Edinburgh and wealth of knowledge were gratefully received by the women) and their contemporary and admirer, Algernon Charles Swinburne.³⁴ Swinburne's series of plays on the subject of Mary began with the publication of *Chastelard* (1865) and over the next two decades he produced four more plays on the subject: *Bothwell: A Tragedy* (1874), which concerns Mary's relationship with her third husband and

³¹ For a more comprehensive list of sources and a discussion of the Fields' engagement with them, see Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Another Renaissance: The Decadent Poetic Drama of A.C. Swinburne and Michael Field," in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. Jason D. Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2013), 131-2.

³² Lewis, *Romance and Nation*, 182.

³³ Charlotte Mary Yonge, *Unknown to History: A Story of the Captivity of Mary of Scotland* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1882), 40-1.

³⁴ In his 1865 essay "Of Queens' Gardens", Ruskin represents Mary as the epitome of the Victorian conservative ideal of womanhood, as passive and domestic, and locates her power firmly within the private sphere and the idealised garden-space. See, John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures*, (Orpington: George Allen, 1889). The phrase, 'The Tragic Mary' originates from 'Appreciations', Pater's 1883 essay on Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Cooper writes, "-afterwards to the Paters. Walter was not at home, wh: was unfortunate, as we wished to ask his permission to use his phrase *The Tragic Mary* as our title." Michael Field, "Works and Days," 24 March 1890, British Library. Add. Ms.46778.

covers the same time territory as the Fields' play, followed by *Mary Stuart: A Tragedy* (1881), *The Character of Mary Queen of Scots* (1882) and *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1883). They certainly consulted Swinburne's dramas throughout the writing of *Mary*, Bradley stating in a letter that "All alone and curled up I studied this afternoon...[s]elections from Swinburne – where I read My Helen of Troy – Mary, the Queen", even mentioning the connection to Browning.³⁵ Bradley wrote: "I had to confess *Queen Mary*. – I alluded to Swinburne but [Browning] said 'Your way of writing would be different from *his long screeds*'".³⁶ Vickie Taft suggests that Mary's multiple representations over time "made her an appealingly enigmatic figure to dramatists"³⁷ indeed, the multiplicity of Mary's character constructions are suggested by the Fields in the 'Preface': "[t]he Mary Stuart who is now in the process of canonisation has not yet been delineated; it is possible to dream of her".³⁸ They are, therefore, 'dreaming' of the woman whom they find within and between the materials of her life and these many depictions in art and print. As Bradley wrote, "I feel that in these...portraits I have seen the real woman, the enchantress [sic]".³⁹ She is also *The Tragic Mary*, here not just Tragic Mary, positioning their version of Mary as the genuine article.

Mary is, most importantly, a conflicting figure, both in her own time and in these many contemporary interpretations and constructions. Images of her as a desirable woman of the court often led to her being perceived as a *femme fatale* and,

³⁵ Reproduced in Michael Field, *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876-1909*, ed. Sharon Bickle (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 197.

³⁶ Katharine Bradley to Edith Cooper, May 1888, reproduced in Michael Field, *The Fowl and the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field, 1876-1909*, ed. Sharon Bickle (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 196.

³⁷ Vickie L. Taft, "The Tragic Mary: A Case Study in Michael Field's Understanding of Sexual Politics," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no. 2 (2001): 263-295; 266.

³⁸ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, vii.

³⁹ Michael Field, "Works and Days," January 1889, British Library. Add. Ms.46777.

in her own time, fuelled suspicions about her Catholic gaiety within the perceived dour protestant Scotland of John Knox.⁴⁰ She was not only French, as opposed to English, a Catholic in a Protestant country, determined to take her right to rule both Scotland and England, but, perhaps most disruptive of all to the late-Victorian dominant thinking on gender, she was a sexually-active woman who had children, who was widowed and remarried, and had a reputation for bewitching men on sight. Doubts that Mary's relationships with the poet Chastelard and David Rizzio (here, Riccio) were adulterous, that she was involved with Bothwell before being widowed and that she was culpable in Darnley's murder, all made her a potentially disruptive individual open to (often negative) interpretation. As described by Bothwell in the Fields' play, she is "Misjudged, ill favoured".⁴¹ Many of the works produced, particularly towards the end of the century, similarly address questions of her identity as a *femme fatale*, innocent political pawn, murderess or victim, in order to make points about the perceived dangers and virtues of womanhood and especially about a woman in a position of power. As John Staines points out it was "the uncertain meaning of the tragedy of the woman Elizabeth called 'the daughter of debate' that made engaging with her endlessly debatable narrative a political necessity."⁴² This was particularly the case, since, as Lewis argues, many nineteenth-century women "read their lives and dreams into Mary's tragic history"; she can certainly be understood as functioning, for middle-class women particularly, as a figure of

⁴⁰ Mary's faith is absolutely present in *Mary*, and often employed to express her distress at Protestant mistrust and intolerance, as well as to Bothwell's insistence she convert on marriage to him. It is not within the remit of this work to go into detail about the Fields' own relationship to Catholicism and its contemporary significance, however this would make for an interesting future study.

⁴¹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.129.

⁴² John D. Staines, *The Tragic Histories of Mary Queen of Scots, 1560-1690: Rhetoric, Passions and Political Literature* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 6.

tragedy, onto whom they can project their own sense of transgression, escapism, sexuality and oppression, and thus enter into (often politicised) debates surrounding the limitations of feminine identities and roles.⁴³ Lewis further specifically identifies the Fields' Mary as divided between "competing models of femininity", including that of queens, suggesting that:

[Mary] thus measures the degree to which the quintessentially Victorian question of who woman is and what she wants is what drove nineteenth-century fantasies about [her]... Michael Field's convincing answer to that question – [is] that woman is many women and that what she wants is multiple versions of herself.⁴⁴

These differences in her presentation and interpretation therefore create a space within which the Fields can experiment with new identities and explore the many potentials (or multiplicity) of her character and tragedy.

The Tragic Mary is set within a very particular time-frame in the history of Queen Mary's life, from the evening of 9 March 1566, to the evening of 15 June, 1567. The events covered by the play begin with the last months of her pregnancy and birth of James, through Darnley's murder at the Kirk o' Fields, her kidnapping by Bothwell and forced marriage, and end with her capture on the battlefield at Carberry Hill. In contrast to many contemporary constructions, Mary is here a peacemaker, not a force of disruption, her intention being to establish and maintain loyalties within her kingdom. When in her 'child-bed sickness' she created peace "[b]y gifts, by

⁴³ Staines, *Mary Queen of Scots, 1560-1690*, 5.

⁴⁴ Lewis, *Romance and Nation*, 195.

reconciling offices, / And frank partition of my gold and jewels / To lull contending hearts” and in fact she follows this path at her own political, physical and emotional expense.⁴⁵ However, despite her clearly expressed desire to rule Scotland and England, “[t]he English crown! It is my dearest hope” she is at best ignorant of the conspiracies against her and is, it seems, blind to her manipulation by Darnley, her brother’s ambition and, initially, Bothwell’s violence.⁴⁶ The Fields re-imagine their Mary as a strikingly complex figure, who is struggling against extreme political and emotional pressure, rather than manipulating or inspiring men to violence and chaos.⁴⁷ Their Mary is also presented as very much a creative figure, weaving tapestries and making her clothes in the arts-and-crafts tradition; embodying the lyric poet by singing the (self-penned) song “She was a royal lady born” and experimenting with not only subversive ‘outsider’ identities such as the gypsy, but also ultimately transgressing sexual and gender boundaries through envious admiration of the weapons and freedoms of men - “would I myself a man...I envy you your swords” – and even cross-dressing as a cavalier.⁴⁸

The Fields position Mary within the play to reflect on the contemporary struggle by many middle-class women to escape or reformulate idealised identities not suitable for their modern needs, nor satisfactory for their capacity. Mary resists her position as mother, wife and ‘woman’, and, like many of their heroines, is a prisoner or captive, both of her marriages and of her sex. Ruthven’s statement in Act One, scene two, crystallises the attitude toward her throughout the play and mirrors

⁴⁵ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.ii.56. See II.vi.86.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II.ii.57.

⁴⁷ This idea, evident in many representations of Mary as a mistress-manipulator - driving men to madness with her sexuality and beauty - is addressed within the play, where Mary characterises the effect she has on men in terms of a flower opening and inadvertently drawing them in. See Mary’s song ‘Ah, I, if I grew sweet to man’, *Ibid.*, III.i.94-5.

⁴⁸ Mary comments “Ay, every morning / I have ta’en counsel with my tapestry”, *Ibid.*, II.iv.71. See *Ibid.*, II.iv.73-4; I.v.34

the oppressive nature of the still-conventional position and expectations experienced by many contemporary middle-class women:

In High-set Stirling

The woman shall be happy; she can rock
Her bairnie's cradle, sing the lullaby,
Or strain her bow-string on the garden plot;
While with their sovereign-king her faithful nobles
Do the man's work and govern.⁴⁹

Here Mary is constructed solely as a nurturer and her prescribed activities as cradle-rocker or lullaby-singer point to the boundaries of the female role and the limitations of female self-worth which are bound up with the responsibilities of motherhood; 'she shall be happy' inferring that such activities are satisfactory for her contentment in her biologically assigned duty. The limits of the 'garden plot' further evoke something of Ruskin's idealised Mary within her domestic role and idealised garden space, but here the language also suggests a frustrated and almost suffocating experience. The limits of where Mary can 'strain her bow string' are the limits of her self-expression, held within this narrow garden 'plot', the boundaries of which are enforced and defined for her. She is, like Rosamund, trapped within an artificial garden and is denied access to 'nature' as much as she is the public sphere.⁵⁰ The language is also forceful and instructive: '[T]he woman shall' presumes male superiority despite her royal status, and suggests the reduction of individuality to a prescribed role based on biological essentialism; it is specifically impersonal, referring to her not as 'Mary' but 'the

⁴⁹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, l.ii.16.

⁵⁰ See, Field, *Fair Rosamund*, l.vi.170.

woman'. This scene also presents an opposition to government by women and preference for Darnley and her 'faithful nobles' to do 'man's work'.⁵¹ The struggle to govern in the face of these disempowering definitions of her place is something Mary reflects on later in private soliloquy: "My father sighed to hear I was a lass, / And felt the land was doomed", a reference to the ongoing political exclusion of most women from positions of power.⁵² It is significant that the Fields are exploring the concerns surrounding the contemporary disempowered political position of middle-class women through the figure of a Queen. Imagery of dress, in fact, saturates the narrative and Mary's Maries frequently comment on which of her dresses they prefer her in, echoing the Fields' visit to the Stuart portrait exhibition. Mary Fleming comments, "Well, I grant her incomparable in her blue Highland mantle" whereas Mary Seton prefers her "in her red camalat, rayed with the broken pearl broidery".⁵³ Relating the multiplicity of Mary's identities to an alteration in her clothed appearance emphasises the materiality and performative nature of feminine identity. It is, in fact, only through clothing, costume and masquerade that Mary achieves any level of empowerment, self-expression and autonomy in *The Tragic Mary*.

In Mary's 'Shepherdess song', a song which is associated with pastoral imagery and the lyric poem, Mary examines her feelings of persecution and her desire for both her lost 'shepherd-lad' lover (Riccio) and freedom outside the suffocating limits of her role as queen and mother. Mary's 'performance' of 'She was a royal lady born',

⁵¹ John Knox's 1558 book *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, was a clear attack on the 'unnatural rule' of women. A highly misogynistic work, which was directed in part against Mary herself, Knox vehemently argues that female rule goes against the God-given mastery of men over women, and associates their unsuitability for power with their 'natural' incompetence, cruelty or foolishness.

⁵² Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.131.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, II.iv.69.

accompanied on her lute within the private company of her Maries, is clearly provoked by Darnley's petulant departure and the murder of Riccio. Ostensibly a song to bring back a "reluctant lover", it actually explores Mary's increasing dissatisfaction with her position, as she 'sickens of sovereignty'.⁵⁴ Her desire for a less oppressive existence is related to her sense of being under attack, identifying with the 'shepherdess' as an individual "[w]hom men had sought to spite" and prioritising the escapism and independence of the role: "For no-one crossed her any more, / Or sought to bend her will".⁵⁵ Her song here challenges a number of conventions of pastoral 'shepherdess poetry' and the lyric mode, opening up a space for Mary (and the Fields) to articulate normally silenced female desire, desire which transgressed the boundaries of middle-class female experience, as well as challenging the heteronormativity present not only in the pastoral tradition, but in wider contemporary culture

The pastoral has its roots in the classical world, but also in a strong, albeit diverse, tradition in English poetry which developed through figures such as Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and Alexander Pope, reaching its 'peak' in the Romantic era within the work of poets such as William Wordsworth and William Blake. In the later nineteenth century, however, it seemed to some an anachronism in a world where industrialisation had all but destroyed an Arcadian vision of country-life and its rustic shepherdesses and writers such as Tennyson, Browning, and later Thomas Hardy, all engaged with its potential to reflect on the issues of the present.⁵⁶ The pastoral is essentially a mode which originates in the city, in the discourses of a sophisticated intellectual and literary environment. This mode looks out or back to often idealised

⁵⁴ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.73. See Lethington's observation, *Ibid.*, II.iv.75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, II.iv.74.

⁵⁶ See Owen Schur, *Victorian Pastoral: Tennyson, Hardy and the Subversion of Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989) for an in-depth assessment of precisely how these writers (and other Victorians) engaged with the pastoral.

visions of lovers, simple country life, the freedoms of nature (or indeed forward to, say, a utopia), which thereby reflect on the restrictions and artificiality of city life and its values through these figures and spaces.⁵⁷ The idea of an idealised pastoral past was certainly re-emerging in the late nineteenth century, particularly in *fin-de-siècle* discourses of the pastoral as an escape from the confines of late-Victorian social strictures. The revival of traditional and hand-crafted clothing, and lifestyles closer to nature or that of the pre-industrialised era, can be found throughout the work of William Morris, the Arts and Crafts movement, the Pre-Raphaelites and many others from mid-century onwards. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, for example, experimented with loose peasant clothing, as did his wife and lovers.⁵⁸ Emphasis in Mary's song is similarly placed on the "delight" of a simpler existence caring for lambs: "It was their cry among the hills / That brought her to her peace".⁵⁹ These 'outside' spaces and roles, and 'dress' of the (literary) pastoral past provided, imaginatively or discursively at least, the opportunity for writers such as the Fields to explore alternative lifestyles, different relationships outside the tight uniformity of heterosexual marriage and identities which were not permitted within the bourgeois drawing-room or wider patriarchal socio-cultural order. As Lisa Tickner points out, "many of the 'simple-lifers' allied themselves with dress reform, vegetarianism....and social and sexual emancipation for women and homosexuals".⁶⁰ The Fields use their literary engagement with the pastoral and its figures to explore their own sense of marginalisation and their silenced, subversive desires.

⁵⁷ John Barrell and John Bull, *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 5-6. A.E. Houseman and Edward Thomas were also drawn to elements of the pastoral.

⁵⁸ See, D.G. Rossetti's sketch *Elizabeth Siddal* (1854), of a dress with a loose-fitting bodice, and "Photograph of Jane Morris, posed by Rossetti" (1865) showing Jane looking dramatic in a loose-backed dress. For reproductions of these images and further descriptions of Rossetti's interest in dress see, Newton, *Health, Art & Reason*, 31-4.

⁵⁹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.74.

⁶⁰ Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2000), 64.

The song itself is striking in its straightforwardness and simplicity. The ‘nursery-rhyme’ quality of the ABCB rhyme scheme and the structure of the poem – eight stanzas with four lines each – combined with Mary’s desire to escape to a protective shepherdess role, overseeing the natural cycles of seasons and birth: “[s]he watched the ewes at lambing-time, / And in the winter chill” invokes a Blake-like pastoralism.⁶¹ The vision here is also heavily idealised and does not reflect the reality of country life; rather it is derived overtly from literature and song. The Shepherdess for example, sings to the sheep with her lute as a way “[t]o keep them from the cold”,⁶² an almost child-like Arcadian fantasy which is reinforced by the subsequent line: “She was a happy innocent”.⁶³ The shepherdess of Mary’s song is definitely not the conventional passive figure of the traditional lyric mode. This form is associated with presenting female excellence, prioritising the masculine gaze and the static and silent female object, with shepherdesses particularly presented as sexualised, idealised constructions of male desire rather than as distinct individuals. In Mary’s song, the shepherdess, far from being an object, is an active figure who intentionally leaves a royal life and challenges her mistreatment and confinement. The shepherdess here looks at the murder weapon “with a queenly eye”, indicating that despite her identity she retains the intelligence and understanding of a royal (or upper-class) woman.⁶⁴ Her reaction - “[a]nd leapt into the mead” - also suggests decisive activity, she ‘leapt’ into this meadow to pursue the ideal life “settled with the lambs”.⁶⁵ The song is full of actions - “She settled”, “She took”, and most pointedly, the action of ‘looking’, “She

⁶¹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.74. See, for example Blake’s poems “The Shepherd” and “The Echoing Green” from *Songs of Innocence*, (1794).

⁶² *Ibid.*, II.iv.74.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, II.iv.74.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II.iv.73.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II.iv.73.

eyed” and “She watched” drawing the reader’s attention to the individual woman and disrupting the dominance of the poet’s vision.⁶⁶ This exposes the artificiality of both Mary’s role, and that of the traditional lyric shepherdess (who only ever existed in the pen of the male poet) and functions to protest the constraints imposed by the inherently patriarchal ideas evident in the archetypes of these established forms. The purposeful use of the ‘shepherdess’ can be understood as a parodic tool, to make visible to the reader the struggle for a literary ‘form’ or figure to represent or express the multiplicity of (predominantly middle-class) female experiences. The effect is, as Beverly Ann Schlack says of Alice Meynell’s poem “The Shepherdess”, that engagement with this figure allows the female writer(s) to advance “the primacy of the female vision by reversing our stereotypic expectations of male lyric poets who address shepherdesses as the ladies of their delight”.⁶⁷ She is not the ‘lady’ of Mary’s delight rather, the ‘delight’ is the life free from the abuses and limitations suffered by the ‘royal lady’: “Alack no sovereign lady lives / A life of such delight”.⁶⁸ The liberation associated with this pastoral figure is here of course only imaginative for middle-class women like the Fields and Mary: “O God, that I might be like her, / And live among the sheep!”, as such roles in reality would be full of hardships and powerlessness, rather than the ideal often envisaged, something Thomas Hardy repeatedly demonstrates in his novels.⁶⁹ As Sharon Smulders suggests, female writers invoking the lyrical shepherdess are “disclosing the essential limitations of conventional representation of women” and, I would suggest, the limitations of conventional *roles* for women.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.73-4.

⁶⁷ Beverly Ann Schlack, “The ‘Poetess of Poets’: Alice Meynell Rediscovered,” *Womens Studies*, 1980, no. 7, 114.

⁶⁸ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.74.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, II.iv.74. See Sharon Smulders, “Looking “Past Wordsworth and the Rest”: Pretexts for Revision in Alice Meynell’s ‘The Shepherdess’,” *Victorian Poetry* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 35-48.

⁷⁰ Smulders, “Looking “Past Wordsworth and the Rest,” 37.

Through Mary's song, the Fields renegotiate this figure, mode and form to open up a space to examine and express individual desires as well as protest their position and treatment in wider society. This adds to the sense that what a woman wants and indeed is, is multiple, disparate and many, not a singular narrowly-defined identity, and further destabilises the already beleaguered mid-century certainties of binary oppositions, carefully defined spheres, gendered patriarchal hierarchies and stable biologically-founded identities which are shown to impose so heavily on Mary throughout the narrative.

The Fields also deploy the shepherdess to renegotiate Mary's socially and sexually transgressive desires. The first line, "a royal lady born / Who loved a shepherd lad", indicates a relationship which crosses cultural, class and possibly even racial boundaries.⁷¹ Ricco being foreign, a musician and therefore an outsider, ties him very closely to the image of the murdered 'shepherd lad', reinforced by the obvious reference to his death before the play begins: "His murderers brought a bloody crook / To show her of their deed" which recalls Mary's line "the murder of my servant at my feet".⁷² Mary's imaginative embodiment of the shepherdess/poet therefore, can be read as an empowering act of role-play exploring escapism, independence and transgressive relationships which are otherwise inexpressible. As Schur suggests, "Pastoral is a genre that explores rules and boundaries and the ways the individual transgressed them".⁷³ It also has wider implications of creative, artistic and educated middle-class women, 'publicly' renegotiating a legitimate masculine form in order to express their intellectual and emotional subjectivity and individuality. The Fields, furthermore, use the idea of the shepherdess to explore their own relationship and

⁷¹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, II.iv.73.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II.iv.73; I.iii.25.

⁷³ Schur, *Victorian Pastoral*, 5.

desire for each other in their private poetry. They subvert the conventions of the speaker/object dynamic and presumptions of heterosexual desire through literary and literal role-play not only to examine the possibilities of these roles, but also to express same-sex desire and ideas of self-construction or power, particularly in the poem “My Love is like a lovely shepherdess” written in response to Edith adopting this costume.

Bradley transcribed her poem “My Love is like a Lovely Shepherdess”, a poem of empowerment evoked by the eighteenth-century-style shepherdess outfit that Edith had bought – into “Works and Days” in 1889.⁷⁴ Upon seeing the dress Bradley wrote, “Edith’s peach & green embroidered gown...came home this evening; - after seeing her in it, I broke into the 1st. part of the 1st verse of this Song; - then came down &, at my desk, in the evening light, wrote the rest of the verses”.⁷⁵ The first stanza specifically describes and focuses on the nature of this dress:

My Love is like a lovely shepherdess;
She has a dress
Of peach & green
The prettiest was ever seen:
All eyes must bless
The passing of my pretty shepherdess.⁷⁶

This poem, with its short lines, AABBCB rhyming simplicity and adoring ‘worship’ from speaker to shepherdess, “weeping bless”, has an insistent tone, and the traditional possessiveness of the lyric observer is still inherent: ‘My’ love, all eyes ‘must’ bless, ‘my pretty’.⁷⁷ Although the speaker has shifted from male to female, the conventions

⁷⁴ Michael Field, “Works and Days,” British Library. Add. Ms.46777. Fol. 87.

⁷⁵ Ibid., Add. Ms.46777. Fol. 87. Quoted in Vadillo, *Living Art*, 252.

⁷⁶ Ibid., Add. Ms.46777. Fol. 87.

⁷⁷ Michael Field, “Works and Days,” 1889, British Library. Add. Ms. 46777. Fol. 87.

of this mode tend to locate the shepherdess as object rather than individual. This poem, however, might be read as resisting the construction (or objectification) of the woman by the ‘gaze’ of the male poet, or here, the sun: “The sun with his transforming/transfiguring light / Fears to adorn” the “Virgin white” shepherdess.⁷⁸ The ‘pretty shepherdess’ here *has* a dress, she is in possession of her identity or costume, un-adorned by the masculine ‘sun’ she is defining herself. Additionally the Edith/Shepherdess figure’s individuality is foregrounded by the use of the pronoun ‘She’ followed by ‘has’ and ‘gives’ in stanzas one and two respectively, which identify her as an active subject, not passive object of thought and centres the reader's attention on the whole woman. A power-shift from speaker to shepherdess is reinforced by the final line, “[t]he footprints of my...shepherdess”, suggesting the shepherdess is ‘leading’ the speaker who ‘blesses’ her footprints.⁷⁹ According to Vadillo, this poem “shows how dress had become not only an expression of their aestheticism but also an expression of the women’s love”— and, I would add, part of their negotiation of identities, creative and sexual, through textual and artistic experimentation.⁸⁰ These are desires that otherwise must remain ‘muted’ as Bradley’s desire is in the last stanza - “To thee I must be mute” - and find expression only through the renegotiation of an established mode.⁸¹ As Heidi Laudien puts it, “[t]he pastoral tradition, which presumes heterosexual love and female innocence, protects and disguises true feeling, allowing the speaker the liberty to express homoerotic love”.⁸² Furthermore, the Fields can be understood to be ‘naturalising’ same-sex desire by situating it in the natural world. This poem, therefore, like Mary’s self-construction(s) in the play, significantly

⁷⁸ Ibid., Add. Ms. 46777. Fol. 87.

⁷⁹ Ibid., Add. Ms. 46777. Fol. 87.

⁸⁰ Vadillo, *Living Art*, 252.

⁸¹ Field, “Works and Days,” British Library. Add. Ms.46777. Fol. 87.

⁸² Heidi Laudien, “Aphra Behn: Pastoral Poet,” *Women’s Writing*, 12, no. 1 (2005): 52.

disrupts the power-dynamic of the romantic gaze or the static female role and demonstrates the potential of engaging with costume and alternative identities in order to express individuality or to protest wider political or social abuses as well as the limitations of established forms and positions assigned to, or constructed for, middle-class women.

As the narrative progresses, Mary moves further and further outside the conventions of her position, away from the heavily idealised role of Shepherdess to that of the gypsy and the cavalier. The conspiracies to take Mary's power (on the part of Bothwell and Moray) impose upon her more heavily and she is increasingly dissatisfied and oppressed. Bothwell's intentions intensify to the point that he interprets her singing in the garden as 'rousing him up' and she is clearly presented as being at some risk of his intentions to "trouble her, / Until she fade and famish".⁸³ Mary, after all the suffering Darnley has caused, is inclined not to want him as part of her or her son's life: "We must rear him / Wholly apart from you".⁸⁴ She is, however, pressured into maintaining their relationship, and, humiliated by suggestions of divorce: "[t]he shame of ruling with a vacant seat / Beside me, single, an unwidowed queen[.]"⁸⁵ Darnley's return to Kirk o' Fields, ill with smallpox, also means Mary taking on the role of his nurse. Echoing the lament of the 'Shepherdess Song', Mary is also increasingly focussed on escape: "If I could escape, / If I might leave my kingdom!" Realising that marriage is

⁸³ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.124.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, III.i.99.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, III.i.104. Unfortunately, Bothwell takes her desire to be free of Darnley to mean she wants him killed, in an aside he states, "She shakes me and incites", *Ibid.*, III.i.104, and he determines that to further his position with her, "This Darnley shall be put away", *Ibid.*, III.i.106.

a heavy burden on her, and wanting to “rid [her] finger from its hoop of doom” Mary now fantasises about and indeed attempts to embody the role of ‘Gypsy queen’.⁸⁶

Throughout the play Mary is under constant and oppressive observation, as she begs Darnley in the first act: “Remove the watch; Give me some freedom”.⁸⁷ Mary’s increasing frustration with this scrutiny and the pressure to conform to tightly codified roles and behaviours echoes the frustrations of many middle-class women who felt they were similarly tightly watched and controlled both within their families and in wider society.⁸⁸ In the scene where Mary sings under Darnley’s window, itself a challenge to traditional courtly-love postures, we can see she is here “worn with watching Darnley and has need of air”, and is making a clear struggle to escape.⁸⁹ In response to Margaret’s warning to stop Mary asks:

With wifely chaunt,
A soft, assailing ode? Give me my freedom,
My fancies for an hour. Who looks on us?⁹⁰

The limitations imposed on her and her ‘fancies’ are also clearly linked here to the idea of being ‘looked on’, which can be read in terms of Foucauldian ideas of surveillance. Michel Foucault, in his discussion of models of discipline (including panopticism) suggests that, “it is the fact of being constantly seen, or being able always

⁸⁶ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.129; V.ii.207.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, I.i.23.

⁸⁸ Women’s bodies and behaviours came under closer scrutiny with the medicalization of female sexuality and the emergence of the family as the agency of control and surveillance, according to Foucault, “in the name of...the solidity of the family institution, and the safeguarding of society” see Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Vol.1* (London: Penguin, 1998), 146 and 120-1.

⁸⁹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.130.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, III.iv.125. This refers to the knight singing under his lady’s window. Mary’s reversal of this trope, particularly as she is protesting her lack of freedom, highlights the artificiality of conventional femininity and challenges masculine positions.

to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection”.⁹¹ Mary is similarly never alone, she is always accompanied or within a space over which observation is possible. This enforces certain behaviours upon her (such as not singing) and limits her to the boundaries and assigned behaviours or postures of these spaces. As Foucault suggests, discipline is enforced through the positioning of an individual within “complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional, and hierarchical...they mark places and indicate values...they guarantee the obedience of individuals”.⁹² The garden here can be understood as one of these complex spaces. Mary Seton observes that Mary has often longed to escape, “the old, monkish garden”, and the boundaries of her role: “You struggled to get out into the sun, / Transgressing the true limits” she is therefore, by attempting to be ‘free’ or unobserved, in the ‘sun’ and outside her assigned space, transgressing the ‘true’ limits assigned to her - her place in the patriarchal hierarchy as submissive ‘woman’.⁹³ The Fields demonstrate here how costume and masquerade can allow Mary to escape from this position of observed/object, to define herself outside these disciplined spaces and to choose the role of Gypsy as relief from these strictures.

Gypsy women and gypsies more generally in late nineteenth-century culture, Deborah Nord explains, were “associated with a rhetoric of primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness and savagery – with freedom from the repressions, both constraining, and culture building, of western civilisation”.⁹⁴ Gypsies by definition live outside the economic capitalist system of

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Allen Lane, 1977), 187.

⁹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 148.

⁹³ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.i.95. Much as Callirrhoë laments the women ‘escaping to the hills’ after being kept in “household darkness”, see Field, *Callirrhoë*, I.ii.16-17.

⁹⁴ Deborah E. Nord, *Gypsies & the British Imagination: 1807-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

Victorian society where they were seen by some as inhabiting an ideal, traditional way of life that had been lost.⁹⁵ This interest in gypsies was fuelled by a number of late-century ‘back to nature’ movements. According to Jan Marsh, “[a]n increasingly urban population began nostalgically to consume idealised representations of a rural life that ha[d]...been in decline since the 1870s”.⁹⁶ Gypsies and this ‘lifestyle’ also attracted those “for whom the elaborate social system of conventions and proprieties seemed suffocatingly restrictive, preventing the expression of natural feelings and simple pleasures”, something which can be read clearly in Mary’s desires for the unrestricted freedoms of gypsy-life and the simple pleasures of the pastoral shepherdess role.⁹⁷

This figure, however, is also a far more sexually threatening and difficult identity to reconcile with Mary’s position. Nord identifies the gypsy in nineteenth-century literature as a “constant, ubiquitous marker of otherness, of non-Englishness or foreignness” a figure therefore associated with transgression and subversion, existing on the boundaries and borderlines of society and culture.⁹⁸ Their seemingly rootless bloodline and origin-less identity made gypsies ‘other’ to the hierarchies and organising institutions of (medical or historical) knowledge or order and they thereby represent resistance to oppressive categories and definitions. By existing outside this system of social order they represent, to Mary and to many contemporary men and women, potential freedom, adventure and unobserved self-reliance which is otherwise impossible as a respectable middle-class woman confined to her drawing room or child’s nursery in her corsets.

⁹⁵ The Gypsy Lore Society, founded in 1888, was heavily involved with the study and recording of gypsy culture, and with bringing it further into the public consciousness in a more positive way.

⁹⁶ Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England from 1880-1914* (London: Quartet, 1982), 4.

⁹⁷ Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 4.

⁹⁸ Deborah E. Nord, “‘Marks of Race’; Gypsy Figures and Eccentric Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing,” *Victorian Studies* 41, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 189.

The 'gypsy-queen' identity offers Mary a role of some power, independence and freedom as she retains her elevated status in this role-play and prioritises its escapism:

My nurse's cares have been so close and long.
I would I were a gipsy-queen to-night,
And from the brushwood looked upon the stars,
A rover such as they. I love to breathe
The ominous delight of these late hours.⁹⁹

Here the suffocating language used to describe the role of 'nurse' (or expectations of conventional femininity) as 'close' and 'long' is set up in sharp contrast to the language used to describe the gypsy-life, as a 'rover' - an image which evokes ideas of transience, rootlessness and freedom from static or confined spaces and existences. The subversive appeal and potential adventure of this figure is also clearly shown here, with the characterisation of the delight as 'ominous', that is, it offers the potential for menace, danger and even sexual thrill, being enthusiastically 'breathed in' by Mary.¹⁰⁰ By associating herself with the gypsy Mary is not only seeking freedom, but an alignment with a people or figure that is, she imagines, exists outside of the 'true limits' of social order and the patriarchal power structures which prioritise female submission and confinement.

A number of middle-class female writers, such as the Brontës in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) engage with the gypsy figure in their work. According

⁹⁹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, III.iv.127.

¹⁰⁰ See Ruthven's statement Field, *The Tragic Mary*, I.ii.16.

to Nord, “[t]o imagine oneself a Gypsy is to escape, in some sense, from conventional femininity: it is also to claim kinship with those who mirror and explain one’s anomalousness”, and women writers such as the Fields were exploring the opportunities that engaging with the gypsy figure could offer in terms of re-aligning or redefining female identities and roles, and the imaginative or discursive exploration of different spaces.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, as a way to express their dissatisfaction with the strictures of conventional femininity, they “found in the gypsy an image that would express in a self-consciously literary way their feelings of...separateness”.¹⁰² Nord argues that the woman writer often engages with gypsy identity, particularly (as in fact the Fields show Mary doing here) by them or their protagonists ‘imagining’ “a bond with an alien and exotic people that enable her to reinvent feminine identity”.¹⁰³ Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver, for example, seeks out the gypsies as her ‘true kin’ as she is rejected by her family and society for her “unconventionality and rebelliousness”, her refusal to conform to the limitations of conventional femininity.¹⁰⁴ She seeks to legitimise her alternative femininity and, June Szirotny states, “ambition for a wider life forbidden in her patriarchal world” among the gypsies.¹⁰⁵ Mary’s unconventionality and resistance in the Fields’ play provokes the same alignment as Maggie’s; however, as one which is imaginative she does not have to face the reality, as Maggie does, fleeing home motivated by “hunger and fear”.¹⁰⁶ Maggie’s experiences with the gypsies, after all, according to Nancy L. Paxton, “disabuse her of her dreams about becoming their

¹⁰¹ Nord, “Marks of Race,” 192.

¹⁰² Ibid., 190.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁴ Nord, “Marks of Race,” 199.

¹⁰⁵ June Skye Szirotny, *George Eliot’s Feminism: “The Right to Rebellion”* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 57.

¹⁰⁶ Nord, “Marks of Race”, 201.

‘queen’” fearing they will rob, kill, and cook her.¹⁰⁷ Through Mary’s (imaginative) embodiment or gypsy-masquerade, then, the Fields symbolically interrupt and rebel against the limitations of dominant constructions of female identity and consequently reinvent and experiment with the possibilities of alternative femininities.

Such aristocratic role-play as Mary’s can be linked to the continuing appeal of the gypsy as artistic vagabond-exile. Guidebooks on ‘how to be a Gypsy’ remained wildly popular – even up to the First World War - with some upper-middle-class and even aristocratic people who set off in beautifully equipped caravans to go ‘a-gypsying.’¹⁰⁸ Most famously, perhaps, is the (intermittent) adoption of a gypsy life by artist Augustus John who, after coming into contact with the Romany cult in 1901, “modelled his bohemian identity on his gypsy affiliations more literally than most”, taking his wife, lover and many children out into the countryside in a traditional caravan.¹⁰⁹ Gypsy identity, therefore, also increasingly became associated with the image of the ‘bohemian’ artist, the aristocrat-outsider and rebellion against the strictures of late nineteenth-century intellectual society.¹¹⁰ We can further interpret Mary’s declaration of gypsy-hood here as part of wider re-definitions of independent artistic and creative identity for women as ‘aesthetic’ outsiders, performing or aligning with this ‘wild’ subversive identity to comment on the limitations of their current professional position.

¹⁰⁷ Nancy L. Paxton, *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism and the Reconstruction of Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 1991), 78.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Francis Hindes Groome’s *In Gypsy Tents*, (1880), and G.R. Lowndes’ *Gipsy Tents and How to Use Them: A Handbook for Amateur Gipsies*, (1890). Lisa Tickner writes: “Lady Arthur Grosvenor’s sorties to Epsom with a gypsy caravan and a hawkers licence as ‘Syeira Lee’ from 1907 (she ‘allowed visitors to inspect the caravan’ for twopence, explaining ‘how she led the simple life’)”. See Tickner, *Modern Life*, 54-5 and “Lady Arthur Grosvenor’s Goes A-Gipsying” *The Tatler*, June 19, 1907), *Sporting and Country House Supplement*.

¹⁰⁹ Tickner, *Modern Life*, 54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 54.

As the narrative progresses, the Fields interrogate not only the limitations of conventional femininity and its roles but also directly engage with the more complex and inflammatory issues of women in men's clothing and cross-dressing. Mary's adoption of the 'Cavalier' costume in Act Five represents the Fields' engagement with a number of issues relating to gender performance and clothed identities, such as the freedom and empowerment inherent in male attire - physical, social and intellectual - and the exploration of the potentialities and possibilities of disrupting and challenging the meaning and certainties of 'gender' or 'sex' inherent in dominant patriarchal culture.

Mary's desire for autonomy and empowerment throughout *The Tragic Mary* is severely hindered by her feminine appearance and its perceived impact on the men of the court. Now trapped in a forced marriage to the increasingly controlling and unstable Bothwell, who "holds [her] down", and even determines her dress, 'tearing' her "widow-raiment from [her] bosom" and demanding she wear "this dress...[o]f harsh and flaunting scarlet", she is now denied her only means of self-expression and is forced into a completely subservient feminine role of his construction.¹¹¹ Ostensibly, she here seeks 'disguise' and the practical freedoms – both physical and spatial – that only appearing as a male cavalier can provide, to make her escape across the moors undetected, something which aligns her with a number of Victorian women who adopted male dress for wholly practical reasons.¹¹² In these scenes, however the Fields also engage with wider contemporary debates surrounding the reform of women's dress, particularly the anxieties which emerged in response to 'masculine' dress, the perceived dangers - social and personal - of cross dressing, and how cross-

¹¹¹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.iv.225; V.ii.204.

¹¹² See Heilmann, "(Un)Masking Desire," 84.

dressing demonstrates, “the essential performativity of gender” through a disruption of the stability of sexed identities.¹¹³

Cross-dressing in the late nineteenth century was a subject of much interest and anxiety and was engaged with, particularly but not exclusively, by women for the ends of political, creative and personal emancipation, self-expression and, as here, to challenge the practical and ideological limitations of feminine roles and dress.¹¹⁴ As Ann Heilmann argues, in times of social upheaval and change, cross-dressing “enables individual women and politically organised feminists to challenge the patriarchal conflation of biological maleness, socially constructed masculinity and hegemonic power”, and is thus “of central importance to cultural debates about the rights and roles of women”.¹¹⁵ The response of the press, in particular *Punch* and *London Truth* to this “defiance of social order” - especially to the masculinised dress of the ‘New Women’ whose visibility increased in the 1890s - were often negative, and images of ‘mannish women’ and comical role-swapping abounded.¹¹⁶ To appear as a ‘man’ or even a ‘mannish’ woman “who advertised her abandonment of her God-given domestic role by dividing her skirts” was a politically challenging act, an “expression of a philosophical stance about the relationship between the sexes and...woman’s role in worldly affairs”.¹¹⁷ Mary’s cross-dressing represents a similarly direct political engagement by the Fields, with both the limitations inherent in the identity signified by conventional female dress and the premise that male authority is founded in

¹¹³ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁴ Cross-dressing was not solely a female practice. There was a concurrent tradition of male transvestisms, ranging from the fairly minor wearing of stays or undergarments for posture or comfort, to appearing in public as a woman. See Heilmann, “(Un)Masking Desire,” 91.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹¹⁶ Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas*, 101. See “The New Woman,” *Punch*, June 15, 1895. Reproduced in Ledger, *The New Woman*, 98. The imagery associated with the ‘mannish’ appearance of ‘New Women’ is explored in Patricia Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Lexington, KY.: Kentucky U.P., 1990), 167-8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 147; 160.

profound biological difference and its associated capabilities and characteristics. By exposing the motivations and experience of the individual woman-as-cavalier, through Mary, the Fields deflate and disrupt many of the arguments and anxieties which emerged in response not only to the phenomena of female cross-dressing but to the ever-growing number of women who were publicly adopting ‘masculinised’ clothing or bifurcated garments.

Through Bothwell and Mary’s interaction the Fields explore some of the debates surrounding female cross-dressed identity and its associated challenges to patriarchal authority. Bothwell’s concern that in this guise he has lost control over Mary, that she is “mine no more”, and his call to “re-make her into woman once again, / For she is gone from underneath my hand” indicate that she is, as cavalier, a potentially powerful figure.¹¹⁸ Bothwell is similarly anxious that she will “make civil war within our sex, / If once admitted”, and states: “We have no room among our qualities / For wild, exciting pallor, and such gaze”.¹¹⁹ Here ‘masculine qualities’ are identified as a defined set of characteristics which would be disrupted by the introduction of female ‘qualities’, such as ‘wildness’ or ‘exciting/excitability’, and the Fields reference contemporary anxieties that the woman’s ‘nature’ would cause chaos, and disrupt into ‘civil war’ the stability of a male-dominated hierarchical society by transgressing into its domain. As Heilmann argues, by “[e]xploring masquerade as an expression of social and sexual revolt, feminist writers addressed contemporary anxieties about the sexual anarchy that would result from the erosion of fixed gender identities”.¹²⁰ Mary’s cross-dressed identity can therefore be interpreted as a clear disruption of the stability of male/female gender roles.

¹¹⁸ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.235; V.v.238.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, V.v.235; V.v.235.

¹²⁰ Heilmann, “(Un)Masking Desire,” 83.

Mary's adoption of the cavalier costume is immediately preceded by her (brief) symbolic release from her marriage to Bothwell. He tells her, "I will not be your jailor; you are free" and Mary experiences this as a psychological release, stating in language that strongly recalls the 'adamantine gates' of the prologue to *Fair Rosamund* "[w]ithin my head / There is a clang as if great gates of iron / Shook, and then opened to a breeze."¹²¹ The Fields draw further associations here between the act of putting on male clothes and escape from the disempowering role of 'wife':

Out, away,
I go, I go! The wife of Hepburn slips
Into her boyish hose and doughty cloak
To disappear for ever.¹²²

In hose and cloak Mary is no longer identifiable as the wife of 'Hepburn' (Bothwell) and, freed from the submission and custody these traditional married identities foster, she is now "A loosed possession!"¹²³ The description of the cloak as 'doughty' associates male attire – like the 'boyish hose' - with fearlessness, and an intrepid, undaunted (masculine) identity, further suggesting that gender roles are enforced through dress. She takes possession of this identity or costume - *her* 'boyish hose' - to explore her 'self' outside the limitations of conventional femininity and its spaces. This directly mirrors the function of both literary cross-dressing, and Mary's (and the Fields') experimentation with dress as a means of creative self-expression. As she escapes to the "wild, marish country" of Crichton Muir, for example, Mary interacts

¹²¹ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.iv.227; V.iv.227.

¹²² *Ibid.*, V.iv.232.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, V.iv.228.

with her environment freely in a way which she found impossible in the gardens and controlled spaces assigned to her as a woman and queen.¹²⁴ The stage directions state she “throws herself on the grass” as she enters the scene, and that she “puts her hands through the turf”.¹²⁵ Free from observation and surveillance, she cries, “Ah, here is freedom, here is quietness; / Myself’s own mystery closes round my soul...and I am healed”.¹²⁶ This guise liberates her whole self from the constrictions of female roles, duties and dress. Mary is now finally is able to ‘breathe’- “breathe my freedom. I am free as air”.¹²⁷ Rather than being weighed down by female dress or her wifely duties she is “light” and “irresponsible”.¹²⁸ Liberation from female dress here stands for the liberation from limiting roles and suffocating domestic spaces, as well as the attainment of psychological clarity and the freedom to breathe and move without censure. This poses a direct challenge to both the confines of late-century corsetry, and how it functions to reinforce the very roles which many contemporary women are resisting and attempting to escape.

The Fields also clearly foreground the idea that gender is a performative, socially constructed identity through both Mary’s adoption of male costume and how she engages in its behaviours and characteristics. Her language now is more traditionally ‘masculine’ in its imagery: she expresses self-determination - “I stand alone” - and her statement “I will go forth” suggests a presumption of autonomy normally the privilege of men.¹²⁹ She is also “full of great, mounting courage” and her blood “buffets fortune and endures”, evoking ideas of heroism and powerful manhood

¹²⁴ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.233. Here Mary has finally escaped the ‘garden plot’ detailed by Ruthven in Act One

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, V.v.233.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, V.v.233.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, V.iv.232.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, V.iv.232.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, V.iv.232.

which can 'endure' and brave the challenges of public life.¹³⁰ These grand statements make her cross-dressed identity particularly challenging to male authority. Cross-dressing challenges patriarchal essentialism by exploding the category of gender. As Heilmann suggests if, as Mary does here, "women could exchange female and male costumes at will and 'perform' masculinity without being detected, then both masculinity and femininity were socially constructed roles, not inherent biological facts".¹³¹ Her adoption of this dress, in fact, is closely associated with images of performance and theatricality throughout the scene. According to Bothwell, she is "mumming in these clothes" and he tells her "My Thespian, O my buskined love, this stage, / This moor, is not for interludes".¹³² Bothwell's reaction to her dress "[t]his change of vesture almost might / Win manhood to adopt you", further provokes associations between gender and performance.¹³³ If she can 'pass' for a man, then the fallacy of the presumed authority of men, as based on performance, gesture or costume, not biological fact, is exposed. The 'biological fact' of gender as a 'binary relation', according to Judith Butler, "presuppose[s] that the categories of female and male, woman and man, are similarly produced within the binary frame", and is imposed by "the institution of a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality, [which] requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire".¹³⁴ These 'practices' can be understood as relating to, for example, the institution of marriage and the subservient position of women, as

¹³⁰ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.iv.232.

¹³¹ Heilmann, "(Un)Masking Desire," 106.

¹³² Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.235 and V.v.236. 'Mumming' or mummer's play, refers to a type of folk-performance dating back to medieval Britain, usually a tale of good versus evil.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, V.v.235.

¹³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 31; 30.

well as the dress and/or ‘costume’ of femininity and masculinity as imposed by established constructions of the (corseted) standards of beauty and male desire. Butler similarly identifies that “*gender* is not a noun...the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence...[h]ence...gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity that it is purported to be.”¹³⁵ Mary’s experience (and performance) as a cavalier, then, can be understood as disrupting the binary male/female gender model, through her convincing performance or ‘expression’ of ‘masculinity’. As Butler puts it, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”¹³⁶ By exposing the category of gender as an imposed and performative identity that was further reinforcing the submissive position of women the Fields are posing a clear challenge to the presumption of female inferiority and masculine authority, not only through their protagonist’s performance and experience as ‘cavalier’, but further, through their own performance of the masculine as “Michael Field” under which guise they were posing a radical challenge to the presumed intellectual limitations of women and literary male authority.

Throughout this scene, Bothwell is disturbed by the idea that Mary has ‘changed’ - “there is a change beyond / The youngster’s cap about your wrung up hair, / The boots and spurs”.¹³⁷ This ‘change’ is something he associates with a madness or loss of self. He instructs her, “[c]ome, you are not yourself”, claiming that exposure to the elements, and to male costume, have “driven [her] wits into the moon”.¹³⁸ Lisa

¹³⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹³⁷ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.235.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, V.v.236.;V.v.237.

Rado suggests that contemporary (male) responses to cross-dressing tended to “negatively associate the potentially subversive androgynes [or cross-dressers]...with the genetically [and sexually] degenerate”, or as here, the mentally disturbed, and this is reinforced by wider anxieties that wearing men’s clothes could potentially damage or influence the individual.¹³⁹ Mary herself, however, is essentially ‘unchanged’ - “nothing is altered”- by this change of attire, which suggests that the individual is defined socially by dress, but it is not representative of the identity (sexual or otherwise) of the wearer.¹⁴⁰ As Virginia Woolf comments in *Orlando*, “it is clothes that wear us and not we them...they moulded our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking”, as Mary’s do here.¹⁴¹ Woolf goes on to suggest that, “[i]n every human being a vacillation from one to the other takes place, and often is only the clothes that keep this male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above”, undermining, as Mary does, the idea that woman is singular and discrete from man, and introducing the idea of (gender) multiplicity, or vacillation.¹⁴² As Alison Winch suggests, Woolf demonstrates through *Orlando* how “dress performs and naturalises our sexed identity” particularly where *Orlando* comments on the effect of gendered clothing; “[h]ad they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same”.¹⁴³ It is not *Orlando*’s ‘self’ that is altered by a change of biological sex from male to female, but dress and society and Woolf, like the Fields, recognises the strictly delineated gender roles of the nineteenth century as oppressive, suffocating and concerned with enforcing heterosexuality and binary

¹³⁹ Lisa Rado, *The Modern Androgyne Imagination: A Failed Sublime* (Charlottesville and London: Virginia University Press, 2000), 11.

¹⁴⁰ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.iv.227.

¹⁴¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Penguin, 1993), 132.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 132-3.

¹⁴³ Alison Winch, “‘in plain English, stark naked’: *Orlando*, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Reclaiming Sapphic Connections,” *Critical Survey* 19, no.1 (2007): 56. See Woolf, *Orlando*, 132.

sexual identities. Orlando struggles to retain his/her autonomy, to “pretend...that one could still say what one liked and wear knee-breeches or skirts when the fancy took one”, becoming preoccupied with marriage, eventually conceding to being “dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted” when s/he lives in this era.¹⁴⁴ Bothwell’s similar coercion of Mary to return to feminine dress, which ultimately leads to her imprisonment and capture at the end of the play, represents a comment on the underlying power these heteronormative binary values have to prevent true self-definition and emancipation for intellectual middle-class women, cross-dressed or otherwise.

Finally, Mary and Bothwell’s interaction obliquely engages with issues of homosexual desire and the stability of sexual identities. According to Heilmann, cross dressing (particularly in literature), destabilises the category of sexuality, “by drawing attention to the homoerotic aspects...[of relationships] between ostensibly heterosexual men and transvestite women”.¹⁴⁵ Bothwell is certainly disturbed by Mary’s cross-dressed appearance and his excitement and response is to its ‘illicit’ nature: “And yet the deepness of your eyes affrights, / And is unlawful”.¹⁴⁶ His swearing not to kiss Mary thus attired further foregrounds these ideas: “On oath, / I will not plague your lips...[t]ill you have altered guise”.¹⁴⁷ To do so would certainly raise difficult questions about same-sex desire, especially when taken with the sexual undertones of the preceding lines, ‘such gaze’, ‘exciting’ and “entice my sinews into work”, and this is despite the fact he recognises her immediately, “Marie! – What, /

¹⁴⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, 159; 168.

¹⁴⁵ Heilmann, “(Un)Masking Desire,” 106.

¹⁴⁶ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.236.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, V.v.237.

You wanton!”¹⁴⁸ His demand that she pay her ‘wifely dues’ once back at her *husband’s* castle, brings these ‘homosexual’ disruptions back under control by reinforcing the male sexual dominance inherent in marriage: she must fortify his heterosexuality by proving him a man (and her a woman) through ‘sweet embraces’.¹⁴⁹ The Fields here expose how the contemporary construction of feminine roles and dress act to reinforce heterosexual norms and enforce masculine primacy, as well as intricately associating marriage (and by extension other female roles) with imprisonment and sexual slavery.

Mary is never able to achieve her dream of independence, freedom or power fully. Rather, she ends her scenes in the Fields’ play as a distressed and exhausted figure in a simple countrywoman’s dress, sacrificing all her freedoms as she is taken into custody at Carberry Hill for the final time.¹⁵⁰ Provoked by the abuse of the crowd who shout “the murderess”, “burn her – the witch, the harlot!” Mary launches into what might be perceived as a ‘frenzied’ speech. Calling her marriage to Bothwell, “[t]he ritual...the rape”, and choked with “wrath”, Mary determines to rise to power once more.¹⁵¹ Stating she has “the whole earth...to gain, when I have repossessed my soul” “when I am a queen...again”.¹⁵² Although history tells us she never achieved this in her lifetime, this statement can be read as a defiant claim to self-determination and as a strong statement of future possibilities for female empowerment of which their earlier sacrificial virgins could not dream.

¹⁴⁸ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.v.236; V.v.234-5.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, V.v.237.

¹⁵⁰ Mary is “dazed”, “confused as in a swoon.” Field, *The Tragic Mary*, V.vii.243, and “tired and anxious” *Ibid.*, V.vii.247. She is also longing for her son, whom she’s not seen since Bothwell kidnapped her, see, *Ibid.*, V.vii.247; 257.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, V.vii.259.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, V.vii.260.

The Tragic Mary therefore abounds with experimental role-play, offering wide ranging and imaginative engagements with political and cultural discourses surrounding gendered identities, and introducing complexity and multiplicity to the traditionally narrow roles and spaces assigned to middle-class women. By revelling in the enduring ‘uncertainty’ surrounding the complex individual Mary - as a ‘jewel’ that will ‘flash’ its “laugh at time” – and the many successive constructions or ‘dreams’ of her (and by her), the Fields make wider comments on the multiplicity or multiple nature of the independent, creative and potentially transgressive public woman of the 1890s: as female artist, writer, aesthete, political activist, gypsy rover, mother or indeed woman who desires other women.¹⁵³ The Fields, like so many other middle-class women at this time, are experimenting with new identities, negotiating new professional and emotional spaces, and attempting to find legitimate forms of expression for female experience through their writing and through their dress. The Fields’ employment of dress and masquerade in the play, both as a form of self-definition and expression and as a sophisticated means of intervening in any number of challenging political debates surrounding the position of women, socially, culturally and ideologically, as I have demonstrated here, was and became something which they pursued in their own lives. This play certainly represents a defining stage in their development of their public/personal literary identities, but it also evidences their growing fascination with aesthetic ‘art-for-arts-sake’ philosophies and their flourishing relationships with figures such as Oscar Wilde. Conceived as an art object in and of itself, with a cover and frontispiece design by Selwyn Image of embossed hearts, thistles and Mary’s motto, “en ma fin est mon commencement” – ‘in my end is my beginning’ – the text of the play was exhibited in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition

¹⁵³ Field, *The Tragic Mary*, viii.

of 1890. Certainly, the Fields were not to be disappointed by Wilde's response as noted by Vadillo, he "was so impressed that he told them that their *Tragic Mary* and D. G. Rossetti's *Poems* (1870) were the two most beautiful books in appearance of the nineteenth-century".¹⁵⁴ This play certainly demonstrates that despite their increasing interest in the aesthetic movement and not being so obviously publically involved with political activism as they had been at Bristol, the Fields' work is no less politically challenging and no less engaged in contemporary debates surrounding female identity and creativity.

It was a review of *The Tragic Mary* that finally revealed to the wider world, and not just the much smaller literary elite already aware of the fact, that the identity of "Michael Field" was in reality Bradley and Cooper. Furthermore, as Vadillo informs us "[a]s the public learned that "Michael Field" was two women, their appearance became more gender transgressive".¹⁵⁵ Not only did their appearance become more challenging post-*Mary*, but their work too began to venture into far murkier creative waters and engage with much more sexually transgressive and challenging protagonists and ideas. The next play that I analyse is *Stephania, a Trialogue* (1892) in which the Fields take these ideas of art, degeneration and decadence in terms of the changing city-scape of the 1890s and deal with much more challenging ideas of female revenge and sexual violence through Stephania who, from her position as prostitute and courtesan, overthrows the invaders who sexually enslave her.

¹⁵⁴ Vadillo, *Another Renaissance*, 135.

¹⁵⁵ Vadillo, *Living Art*, 252.

Chapter Four

Stephania: A Trialogue (1892): Murder, Revenge and Sex at the *Fin de Siècle*.

Stephania: A Trialogue (1892) is perhaps the most fascinating of Michael Field's dramas to emerge in the new decade of the 1890s. Furthermore, it is one which seems to have commanded the least attention both in its own time and in critical work since. *Stephania* is set in Rome over three days in 1002 A.D. and, in contrast to many of the Fields' over-populated plays, has only three participating characters - Otho, the Holy Roman Emperor; Gerbert, his Tutor and Pope; and Stephania, the widow of Crescentius, former leader of Rome, who was tricked out of his besieged city and murdered by Otho.¹ Stephania is not simply a scorned widow, however. After his successful invasion, it is revealed Otho had carelessly tossed her to the common soldiers on passing her – "I was borne away...to degradation" – and as the play opens she awaits the Pope and Emperor within the palace on Mt. Aventine as a fully-fledged courtesan.² The action of the narrative focusses on Stephania's calculation and successful exertion of revenge against the German invaders who have taken possession of her land, her people and her body. The sexualised and empowered Stephania marks a clear departure from the earlier virginal and resistant heroines,

¹ These three individuals are, as are many of Michael Field's dramatic characters discussed in this study, based on historical figures and the narrative is (somewhat more loosely here) centred on events which are a matter of historical record. The emperor they refer to is Otto III, here named 'Otho', a change which, although as far as available evidence suggests is of no particular significance to their dramatic intent, much of the critical writing on this play ignores the Fields' choice, referring to him instead as Otto. In the interests of textual accuracy, and for the purposes of academic rigour, here their character is referred to as Otho throughout.

² See Stephania's description, Michael Field, *Stephania: a Trialogue* (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1892), l.i.3.

Rosamund and Callirrhoë. Even Mary, for all her struggle for autonomy and self-determination, could not be considered to possess the same level of empowerment or display, or anything approaching Stephania's challenging behaviour and identity. Stephania, therefore, sits in sharp contrast to the Fields' earlier eponymous heroines. She is after all, their first heroine that genuinely 'speaks out'. Positioning herself as an omnipotent agent of justice and revenge, she becomes elevated above emperors and popes in her design to watch them "dying of an infinite fatigue" entirely by her own effort.³ Stephania represents a figure of emerging modernity, a new kind of heroine for a new era, for the new century even. Even a brief description such as this indicates that, with this play, the Fields were entering into far more challenging literary territory than ever before. But then, as I demonstrate in this chapter, Stephania is the product of – and a reflection on – the re-constructions and re-positionings of female sexual identity in what was a swiftly changing artistic, literary and socio-cultural environment.

Their most experimental work in terms of structure, subject and female character construction, *Stephania* emerged at a time of great change and progression for Bradley and Cooper, and at a time when they were increasingly experimenting with - and re-configuring through their poetry, correspondence and life writing - ideas of gender, power and sexuality. Stephania is certainly a potent figure of genuine female agency, sexual power and marked autonomy, who, I argue here, is representative of the Fields' direct engagement with the specific cultural environment. *Stephania* emerged at a time when the literature and art of the *fin-de-siècle* was beginning to turn its attention to reassessing and reformulating gender roles and sexualities. This was a culture already fixated on categorising psychological, medical

³ See Field, *Stephania*, II.i.36; I.i.2.

and social definitions of sexuality and sexual difference as potentially disruptive deviations from legitimate married heterosexuality.⁴ The numerous late-century representations (and ‘iconisations’) in the work of a number of ‘decadent’ artists and writers of some of the more violent and challenging historical or mythical female figures (such as Salomé), can be understood as a response, in part, to the wide-ranging, and often horrified contemporary fascination with empowered female sexuality as a malign and murderous threat to social and imperial stability. As a prostitute-murderess then, Stephania represents the Fields’ direct engagement with this *fin-de-siècle* ‘iconography’ of female sexual danger. Ostensibly a typical *femme fatale*, she is here a complex individual, motivated by terrible suffering rather than a mænadic figure of mindless destruction.⁵ This chapter offers a sustained analysis of the positioning, construction, representation and function of Stephania’s character within the play and within the wider context of the contemporary fixation with categorising and defining ever more specific sexual ‘types’ and identities.⁶ I argue here that *Stephania* represents the Fields’ remarkably challenging and confident engagement with issues of sexual violence and bodily ownership. Furthermore, by making her an eponymous heroine, they are negotiating a legitimate platform from which the prostitute-murderess can define herself, and introducing far greater complexity to exploitative and disempowering categorisations and archetypal figures of dangerous sexualised womanhood. This play represents a response to the contemporaneous intensification of anxieties and discursive conflicts which focussed on female sexuality. Stephania’s performance and utilisation of “strange arts” and “method...imperceptible” - normally

⁴ See Michel Foucault’s study of the era: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, The Will To Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 75-115.

⁵ A stereotype the Fields challenge throughout their writing, but perhaps most specifically in *Callirrhoë* (1884), see Chapter One of this study.

⁶ See Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 103-106.

the territory of the prostitute, or courtesan - are here turned to bring down empires and to avenge the invasion of her body and her city.⁷ This chapter examines the particular ways Stephania can be understood as a figure of female sexual and social empowerment. Rapid cultural and ideological shifts and crises mark the 1890s out as a period of change and re-configuration - both looking back on the 'Victorian era' and forward into the new century and its potential freedoms. As "Michael Field", Bradley and Cooper are symbolically taking back Rome from the patriarchy of Christianity and the decadence of late-century Victorian Britain for themselves and redefining this intensely sexual female figure.

Given the overtly challenging and potentially subversive protagonist and subject matter, the lack of critical attention this play has received is startling. Mary Sturgeon dismisses the work as "dealing not very convincingly" with Stephania's vengeance, stating that it has "no dramatic conviction", but suggests it has "much interest and not a little beauty" noting particularly that its frontispiece was designed by Selwyn Image.⁸ Emma Donoghue offers a more positive reading, describing it as "one of their best plays".⁹ She notes that the use of only three "strong characters", combined with "a clear, painful plot", is extremely powerful and "keeps the reader gripped and moved throughout".¹⁰ Ana Parejo Vadillo's 2015 article on Michael Field's poetic dramas post-1895 discusses the play briefly, identifying it as part of their turn toward Roman themes in their dramas and describing it as "experimental", but considers it ultimately

⁷ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.4; l.i.5.

⁸ Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co., 1922), 193-4, and 116-7. The frontispiece arrangement positions Stephania, her name on a banner entwined with a crown, at the top and centre of the cover, and specifically draws attention to the dominance she achieves through her revenge.

⁹ Emma Donoghue, *We are Michael Field* (London: Bello, 2014), 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

a “flop”.¹¹ There is little other critical work to be found on *Stephania*, and certainly no sustained analysis to date.

Stephania is one of a number of the Fields’ dramas to have a Roman setting. Although the earlier *Brutus Ultor* (1886) may be considered the earliest example of their use of Roman characters, *Stephania* is the first of these plays to centre wholly on an eponymous heroine.¹² The Fields use here, yet again, the lens of historical distance to address a sexually challenging (and potentially disruptive) female figure. Ana Parejo Vadillo argues that Bradley and Cooper were “[r]elishing in the spiritual and moral perversity of their characters” and that these works “acted on the intensity of those histories, clothing them with the intoxicating tragic element of life...[they] were intensely self-conscious and meta-dramatic, full of morbid plots and luxuriant details”.¹³ The Fields directly engage in decadent debates and constructions of dangerous female sexuality outside marriage and social morality, another threat to empire and masculinity and, as the analysis in this chapter reveals, it can further be understood as an intensely powerful engagement with the idea of female sexuality as a force for justice and revenge.

Stephania, also represents a highly experimental piece of dramatic writing. This play marks their progression from the less public, intimate, closet form used previously. Through its sustained analysis of *Stephania*, this chapter provides crucial new insights into the trajectory and development of the Fields-as-dramatist(s), at the very moment they were entering into far more challenging literary territory than ever before. This chapter, therefore, aims to open up wider understandings of how the

¹¹ Ana Parejo Vadillo, “This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 198; 200.

¹² These later Roman dramas include *Attila, My Attila!* (1896) - the focus of the final chapter of this thesis – and the later ‘Roman Trilogy’.

¹³ Vadillo, “Hot-House,” 199.

Fields (as middle-class female writers) engaged with these contextual anxieties surrounding dangerous female sexuality and its literary, artistic and cultural manifestations.

The two years between the publication of *The Tragic Mary* (1890) and *Stephania* were marked in the lives of Bradley and Cooper by tragedy and upheaval. Cooper's mother, never in good health, died in late August 1889, and they were to be bereaved only a short time later by the death of their beloved Robert Browning in Venice on 12 December that same year.¹⁴ In a letter to Browning after her mother's death, Cooper described the embrace of her "glorious spirit" at the moment of her passing as having "made me stronger than death" and that the look in her eyes "will live in me like a Second birth".¹⁵ Indeed, her death was in some ways a 'second birth' for Cooper (and possibly Bradley, too). A diary entry early in 1892 reveals some of Cooper's ambivalent feelings toward her mother: "She did not understand my need of freedom...Field – his confession".¹⁶ She is here 'liberated' from a struggle to 'be understood', to express herself by this loss. Like many young middle-class women at the time, she recognises this death as a release from familial duty, and therefore a potential for self-fashioning outside its conventions.¹⁷ Cooper felt she had greater freedoms of travel of self-expression, and was now able to address and experiment

¹⁴ Michael Field, "Works and Days," August 1889, British Library. Add.MS.46778. The Fields' intellectual and literary relationship with Browning is discussed in Chapter One of this study.

¹⁵ Edith Cooper to Robert Browning 20 August 1889, quoted in Michael Field, *Binary Star: Leaves from the Journal and Letters of Michael Field 1846-1914*, ed. Ivor C. Treby (Suffolk: De Blackland Press, 2006), 13.

¹⁶ Cooper was writing in January 1892, see Michael Field, "Works and Days," January 1892, British Library. Add.MS.46781. Fol.13.

¹⁷ Many women who engaged with the slightly later figure of the 'New Woman' explored the limited experiences open to middle-class unmarried women as 'possessions' of their families. This is discussed at some length in Chapter Five of this study.

more openly with potentially transgressive sexual identities, both in her relationship with Bradley, and in wider social and literary contexts.¹⁸ Certainly this time in their lives is taken up with much foreign travel together. June 1890, for example, finds the Fields first in Paris, where they visit Arthur Symonds, (and a morgue), later visiting Switzerland, before embarking on a month-long tour of the major centres and art-galleries in Italy.¹⁹

Their home life, already dramatically altered by the death of her mother, was uprooted once again when Edith's father, James Cooper, purchased "Durdans" in Reigate, Surrey at the close of 1890. The family, including Bradley and Cooper moved in on 3 March 1891.²⁰ From this point on, with greater personal freedoms and access to the capital, the women begin to spend more time in London. They took numerous excursions to visit galleries, museums, talks and theatrical performances, and were engaging more enthusiastically than ever before in the London literary and artistic 'scene' and its circles.²¹ Increasingly experimental and confident public figures, they were now, in Martha Vicinus' phrasing, "a rising star in the literary firmament".²² They had established themselves within literary and artistic circles and had developed relationships with some of the most well-known (and later, notorious) figures of the age, including Arthur Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Berenson and George Meredith. I suggest that this new-found confidence, a partial result of their increasing

¹⁸ Such as in *Stephania*, in the triangular platonic friendship formed by Ferencz, Elizabeth and Stanislaus in Act IV of *A Question of Memory* (1893) and, as is discussed below, with the art critic Bernard Berenson.

¹⁹ See Ivor C. Treby, *The Michael Field Catalogue: a Book of Lists* (Suffolk: De Blacklands Press, 1998), 31.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ Their diaries between 1890 and 1892 (and beyond) are saturated with their impressions and descriptions of literary and artistic figures, works and their personal responses. Not all particularly flattering. A sustained study of their life writing at this time would make for a fascinating and timely contribution to *fin-de-siècle* (as well as Michael Field) studies at a later date.

²² Martha Vicinus, "Faun Love: Michael Field and Bernard Berenson," *Women's History Review* 18, no. 5 (November 2009): 753.

professional visibility and their immersion in the culture of *fin-de-siècle* London, is key to locating *Stephania* as a challenging and experimental intervention into specific contemporary debates.

Bradley and Cooper embarked on their characteristic process of research for *Stephania* as early as 1890. A diary entry from 5 June records that they were “[a]t work on OTHO”, which was later renamed *Stephania*.²³ They also visited the British Museum in the autumn to do further research. On 6 August 1891, Bradley and Cooper embarked on a trip to Germany, first to Aachen to research *Otho* then on to Dresden to see the Art Gallery as research for *Sight and Song* published just a few months before *Stephania* in the spring of 1892.²⁴ This research trip proved to be far from uneventful. While in Dresden, in August 1891, Edith Cooper was taken ill with scarlet fever. During her convalescence, she drew the attentions of her German nurse Schwester Christiane who pursued her with “a terrible, fleshy love” which Cooper understood compassionately but did not reciprocate.²⁵ After her hair had to be cut short, like a boy’s, the nurse referred to her as ‘der sanfte Heinrich’, and, anglicised by Bradley, she now became known affectionately as Henry.²⁶ Their range of names for each other, ‘Henry’, ‘Michael’, ‘Husband’ were commonplace in their written and conversational exchanges at this time. The Fields become more experimental with gender roles and

²³ Michael Field, “Works and Days,” 5 June, 1890, British Library. Add. Ms. 46778.

²⁴ *Stephania* was published by Elkin Mathews in November 1892, and *Sight and Song* between May and June the same year. See Michael Field, “Works and Days,” May/June, 1892, British Library. Add. Ms. 46780. (This collection of poetic interpretations and engagements with thirty-one paintings from galleries across Europe. Much of the ideas of staging and visual power (of the female gaze) in this play have resonances with these poems. This is not a comparative study, however, although such an angle would make for an interesting study.)

²⁵ See Treby, *Catalogue*, 32.

²⁶ The events of this period of convalescence are extensively detailed in Michael Field, *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 44-65, and in their diaries, see Michael Field, “Works and Days,” August, 1891, British Library. Add. Ms. 46780.

sexual identities, particularly through their new relationship with Bernard Berenson the art critic. Martha Vicinus makes the observation that the Fields' close friendship with Berenson, "reveals a forgotten experiment in fashioning a rebellious femininity that worked with and against masculinity".²⁷ She goes on to argue that within the intense "gender play of their erotic friendship [with Berenson]" played out in their poems letters and diaries.²⁸ As they both fell in love with him, Vicinus suggests, "the three could create a wide range of both gendered and gender-free positions, they felt imaginatively free – and aesthetically sexual".²⁹ Within this triangular erotic friendship, Vicinus identifies that all three "played with conventional understandings of gender, art and sexual identities", describing it as a "queer triangle" of a youthful male aesthete and "two lesbian poets".³⁰ Her suggestion that they "revised a literary cliché of the aesthetic movement by transforming a beautiful man, rather than a woman, into an erotic object" is an idea which also plays out here through Stephania's location within the 'trialogue' of Otho and Gerbert.³¹ The tensions which emerge later in the play between Stephania and Gerbert over Otho's love and actions are preempted by another pre-existing triangular relationship; with the hermit and ascetic monk Romuald of Saint-Emmeran. There is deep opposition between Romuald and Gerbert as both offer Otho the spiritual peace and absolution of sin, promising to alleviate the "agony" of his guilt at the impatient killing of Crescentius which he believes has damned him, but in fact both exacerbate his crisis.³² Otho is torn between Gerbert's reassurances and his policy of accruing ever more spectacular relics, and

²⁷ Vicinus, "Faun Love," 753. This experiment being 'forgotten' by, Vicinus suggests, critical work on the Fields, Berenson, as well as on their relationship with each other.

²⁸ Ibid., 753.

²⁹ Ibid., 753.

³⁰ Ibid., 754.

³¹ Ibid., 754.

³² Field, *Stephania*, l.i.9; l.i.10.

Romuald's demand of absolute poverty. This is further complicated by the homosexual overtones of Romuald's affection for Otho, he tells Gerbert: "...as we kissed / I knew my mother's love was further off / Than this old man's from God. Beneath his passion / Almost I yielded".³³ The Fields' playfulness within their own relationship, then, with the names they used to refer to each other, can be understood as a form of self-fashioning, but also as indicative of the conflicts and experimentations emerging at the fin de siècle with its continual challenges to sex and gender roles as well as moral ideas surrounding art. The Fields here experiment with a sexualised figure, Stephania, who defines herself as an agent empowered by oppression and sexual slavery – she speaks out about those acts which silence her autonomy.

The Fields at this time, and in this drama particularly, are looking forward and taking their work into new and 'dangerous', or at least sexualised literary territory by the foregrounding of Stephania. As they wrote in 1892 in "Works and Days", as if to confirm their new found commitment:

[I]t is for us, England's living and yet unspent poets to make all things new. We are for the morning – the nineteenth century thinks it has no poets – nothing to lose - verily it has nothing: for we are not of it – we shake the dust off our feet from it and pass on into the twentieth century.³⁴

³³ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.12.

³⁴ Michael Field, "Works and Days," 1892. Quoted in Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo, "Introduction: *Fin-de-Siècle* Renaissance: Diversity, History, Modernity," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 2 (2006): 389.

Although they are speaking as poets here, this can be understood to apply equally to their other work. This quotation reveals that they are ‘unspent’ when the century itself is nearly spent; they are on the threshold of the modern and, physically rejecting it, ‘shak[ing] the dust’ off their feet, they now see themselves in the vanguard of the new.

Even though Cooper confessed in the journal for 1892, to loving “fads and causes not at all” their drama nevertheless continues to examine the position, role and treatment of women, but now with a greater interest in the experimental potential of language and art.³⁵ Engaged with new ideas and approaches to their dramatic work, they were beginning to consider their plays for performance for the first time, taking advice from Richard Garnett, who acted as the technical adviser on the dramatic works from *Stephania* to *Borgia* (1905).³⁶ They were also influenced by the suggestions made by George Moore, an expert in stagecraft. According to Donoghue “[h]e urged them to think about entrances and exits and to avoid the ‘haphazard development of plot’; he was convinced that they could write for the stage”.³⁷

This time finds the Fields determined to further their career as playwrights and to continue to engage with the potential expression and prioritisation of their female protagonist and her voice. *Stephania* is a distinctly modern woman of the new decade, even the new century, in her autonomous, self-determined revenge and recognition of the power of her sexuality. Her ‘success’, however, is still framed (and marred) by the ideas of military as well as bodily invasion, of sexual exploitation and female disempowerment as imposed by the patriarchal institutions and the representatives of the (new) monotheistic Christian religion (Pope) and imperial power (Emperor).

³⁵ Edith Cooper, Michael Field, “Works and Days,” 1892, quoted in Field, *Binary Star*, 57.

³⁶ *A Question of Memory* (1893) is their only play to have been performed. As ‘technical adviser’ he offered suggestions on the practicalities of staging and the limitations of space or scene changes available.

³⁷ Donoghue, *Field*, 47.

Stephania is another of their heroines to be found battling against the overwhelming institutional structures which authorise her abuse as a figure without agency.

Stephania is a highly sexually charged play, full of strange and sensuous sexualities and jealousies. It is also saturated by crises of spirit and of imperial power. This can be understood as part of a wider shift at the end of the century. The cultural landscape from which *Stephania* (1892) emerged was one crowded with iconic (literary, real or otherwise) figures of sexual transgression and erotic danger such as the New Woman, the ‘Dandy’ and various manifestations of the ‘Femme Fatale’ such as Salome. This “sexually charged atmosphere” as Richard Kaye describes it, was one in which sexual identity was being challenged, and reformulated by “a complex and sometimes contradictory constellation of differing movements and comprehensions of sexuality”, in ways which were previously impossible only a few decades before.³⁸ Writers such as Olive Schreiner, Havelock Ellis and the Fields’ friend Arthur Symonds, to name but a few, were experimentally and explicitly engaging with ideas of ‘modern marriage’, with sexual or experiential deprivation and “erotic longing”.³⁹ Although most sexual visionaries stopped short of endorsing a completely individualistic sexual freedom, concerned still with the “societal consequences of erotic acts”.⁴⁰ Campaigners and activists for female suffrage and rights also turned their attention to issues of increased sexual autonomy for women particularly, and movements such as those for Free Union or birth control – whose notable supporters included Annie Besant – gained momentum and brought such discussions into the public

³⁸ Richard A. Kaye, “Sexual identity at the fin de siècle,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin De Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2007), 54.

³⁹ See *Ibid.*, 53, these are all ideas which are central to *Stephania*.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

consciousness as political and socio-economic as well as medical realities, rather than simply as literary abstractions. The cultural and discursive impact of a late-century intensification of legal and medical theorising of sexuality, and its consequential rigid institutionally-defined categorisation of perverse sexological ‘types’ has been extensively analysed and theorised by writers such as Michel Foucault.⁴¹ The ‘incitement to discourse’ he presents as the incitement to discuss (one’s own) sexuality however, is only legitimised by the presence of the informed professional, the doctor or psychologist as confessor.⁴² Outside this carefully controlled, non-erotic ‘scientific’ space, the discussion of unconventional desires or non-productive sexuality (particularly that of unmarried women, lesbians and homosexuals) remained at best shockingly transgressive or titivating, and at worst ran the risk of prosecution and public humiliation. Dominated by controversies surrounding the potential social impact or disruption these newly diagnosed and identified sexual identities might bring about (such as a decline in birth rate or the rejection of traditional marriage), in the few years leading up to *Stephania*’s publication, several highly publicised sex scandals had hardened attitudes and cast suspicion on those activists, writers or other figures who appeared to advocate ‘unconventional’ and ‘perverse’ sexualities.⁴³ The discovery of a male brothel in Cleveland Street in July 1889, for example, where telegraph boys rented themselves out to upper-class men, and the subsequent trial, scandalised the nation.

What this shows, then, is that in their presentation of a prostitute-murderess protagonist in *Stephania*, the Fields were absolutely engaging with the possibilities of dramatic experimental representation and form as a means to interrogate these

⁴¹ See Michel Foucault’s model of sexual confession and containment in Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 75-114.

⁴² See Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 17-35.

⁴³ Kaye, *Sexual Identity at the Fin de Siècle*, 53.

contemporary constructions and anxieties surrounding female sexuality and its potentially destructive power. The Fields also intentionally locate *Stephania* in reference to the work of contemporary decadent figures, something which can be understood as their intervention into the literary and cultural trends of the time. The play is closely identified with Gustave Flaubert's novel of 1876, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, a work which Edith purchased in 1889 while visiting Berenson in Paris and which appears on the Fields' list of 'books read' in *Works and Days* the next year. In the absence of a preface or chorus, there is a quote from Flaubert in the form of the words of "La Mort" (death) and "La Luxure" (Lust) who feature in *Saint Anthony*. Ideas relating Lust, Death and female identity were circulating in some writing and works by both French and English 'decadent' or *fin-de-siècle* creative figures, often taking the form of ill-intentioned seductresses such as Salomé in Wilde's *Salomé* (1891). This alternation between lust and death as the act-titles in *Stephania* belies not only the carefully conceived structure of Stephania's execution of her revenge, but also draws attention to the Fields' conscious effort to impose authorial control over the shape of their dramas, rather than allowing them to develop organically as Meredith suggested they had before. This is a play in conception, execution and narrative that reflects upon the idea of female empowerment and autonomy, of bringing about change and action in the political and literary world, both through the fiercely determined heroine and for "Michael Field" an established poet and dramatist in his own right. *Stephania* is very much then, the product of the final decade of the nineteenth century. Stephania is a figure of the intensifying *fin-de-siècle* crises and sensuous experimentation which abounded in the literary, cultural and artistic works produced at the time.

Positioned and represented in sharp contrast to the two other male characters, Stephania represents a fascinating example of the Fields' emerging concern with not only 'speaking out' but with structural development and stagecraft and with contemporary issues of sexuality. At the opening of Act One, for example, Stephania "stands forth" alone on the stage in white robes, emphasising both her centrality to the action which is to follow and challenging stereotypical associations between her role as courtesan and her purity of spirit, if not of body, through this almost 'virginal' dress.⁴⁴ In the preceding plays examined here, the protagonist's first appearance is mediated by a scene which foreshadows and/or foregrounds their oppressed or vulnerable positioning as subject to lusty priests, possessive kings or violent political conspiracy. Her subsequent expressions and actions are therefore perceived in terms of this looming design, of which she is, initially at least, ignorant. *Stephania* exemplifies the Fields' new approach to their female protagonists, as those before (Callirrhoë, Rosamund and Queen Mary) were all (in varying ways, and to varying extents) very much presented as – at least initially – unwitting victims of malignant manipulation and isolated ignorance, unable to identify much less surmount their positions of silenced, imprisoned, or embattled womanhood. Despite their struggles for autonomy, sexual expression or to 'speak out', the monolithic, all-pervasive patriarchal power structure and its institutions and agents, to a greater or lesser extent, conspire to silence and imprison these earlier heroines in a multiplicity of ways.⁴⁵ *Stephania's* 'trialogue' of the three characters and the clear three-act structure situates the voice of the prostitute-murderess at the forefront of the narrative. As Sturgeon writes of their dramas in this period, their sense of form now produced "a finer balance,

⁴⁴ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.1.

⁴⁵ See *Callirrhoë* (1884), *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Tragic Mary* (1890).

a sharper definition, and a greater simplicity of structure” and “[t]he cumbrous Elizabethan machinery has been scrapped”.⁴⁶ She notes that now three acts are “the rule” with each “flowing uninterrupted” without the scene subdivisions which filled their earlier dramas. These formal structures ensure that the heroine’s voice is not at risk of being lost in this mass that occupies many of the Fields’ other plays. Stephania’s prominent positioning can be understood as yet another example of the Fields’ ongoing concern with how to legitimise and negotiate a public platform for female voices and their subjective experience of womanhood. Furthermore this is the first of these tragedies specifically conceived and designed to be performed, therefore ensuring Stephania should have not only a literary voice but also an actual public platform, the stage, from which to ‘speak out’, albeit through ventriloquized theatrical performance. The Fields are here providing a wider validation of the woman’s right to define reality (as fictional heroine and as female dramatists), as it is through Stephania’s asides and soliloquy, where she is addressing the audience directly, that events of the play are defined and experienced by the reader/audience, man and woman alike. Stephania opens the play by speaking directly to the reader (or intended audience) about her experience of sexual violence - a statement of ownership over the act which took away her sexual autonomy - and her plan to take her revenge on Otho: bringing “honour back to...Crescentius’ name...[a]nd glory to [her] womanhood”.⁴⁷ Her will, and her voice, are from the first moment the central focus of the drama which unfolds.

In the first Act, Stephania clearly identifies the source or cause of all her suffering as being Otho and his almost casual attitude to her degradation. Upon having

⁴⁶ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 165.

⁴⁷ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.4.

her pointed out to him, for example, she recalls that Otho “carelessly” stated, ““Ay, take her to the camp””, before turning to speak to Gerbert as she was “borne away to degradation”.⁴⁸ His power to dictate life and death, to ‘carelessly’ impose degradation and suffering on her is set up in sharp contrast to Stephania’s powerlessness, as she is forced to passively ‘yield’ to the common soldiers, her “ravishers”, initially at least.⁴⁹ Her response is, to an extent, a calculated survival technique –she cannot possibly fight off a whole regiment – nor does she condemn their actions, it is to her, “nothing”, “[a] void / I pass through”.⁵⁰ Only after she is used and discarded does she fall to ‘musing her revenge’, leaving the city-space, within which she no longer has any position of agency as a result of both her husband’s murder and her sexual degradation, to embark on a solitary journey of self-recognition and empowerment.⁵¹ This experience is characterised as an ‘apprehension’ of the ‘mysteries’ (or potential power) of the “knowledge forced / Upon [her]”.⁵² Stephania’s empowerment is founded in the recognition that she can bring about retribution through her body, by being in possession of this knowledge of non-married sexuality and having the arts and role of the ‘courtesan’ forced upon her. By re-defining, in isolated freedom from the oppressive new regime, her “agony”, “shame” and “beauty” as “sacred”, she is effectively taking ownership of her new (forced) identity and re-characterising it as a re-invigoration, a ‘re-birth’ and a return to youthful ‘hardiness’.⁵³ She later identifies how she is now liberated from the powerlessness imposed by the sexual morality inherent in legitimate female roles such as that of a middle-class wife, as she has

⁴⁸ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, l.i.3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, l.i.23-4.

⁵¹ See *Ibid.*, l.i.3-4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, l.i.4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, l.i.4.

“survived her purity, / And others have divorced her from her faith”.⁵⁴ Stephania therefore is shown not to be inherently sexually dangerous, rather, that she comes to embody this identity for the ends of revenge as a direct result of the sexual ‘knowledge’ forced upon her. What is perhaps most striking here is how the Fields present this re-formulation of sexual violence within Stephania in almost military terms: Stephania states her body grew “bright in exultation as a shield”, indicating her new-found resilience to the power of her abusers.⁵⁵ The tools and method of her revenge, however, being of “imperceptible” influence and “arresting touches”, represent a clear acknowledgement that empowerment and agency must be achieved not through masculine action, such as invasion or physical abuse, but through the performance of distinctly ‘feminine’ arts, such as seduction, the ‘dangerous’ arts of the courtesan, “to make vice syllibine”.⁵⁶ In this way, the Fields can be understood to be taking possession of contemporary constructions of female sexual danger and, through Stephania’s re-definition of her experiences and knowledge of sexual abuse, re-configuring potentially disempowering presumptions surrounding the ‘prostitute’ or fallen woman to avenge the very abuses such sexualised archetypes function to perpetuate.

Stephania is empowered by this act of speaking out, by re-defining her suffering and revenge in her own terms. At the opening of Act Two, she again appears first, alone, and characterises the events that follow in terms of her revenge.⁵⁷ Speech then, is absolutely central to this drama. The power to speak out, to define and express oneself is clearly identified here with autonomy and agency in the wider world. It is after all

⁵⁴ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, l.i.4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, l.i.1.

⁵⁷ See *Ibid.*, ll.i.35.

Stephania's ability to vocalise her suffering and define her revenge that makes her triumph possible. The Fields' earlier heroines, as I have consistently proved, are 'silenced' by the functioning of patriarchal authority, in many cases being re-defined by a male voice. In the last Act, the Fields present a striking reversal of this male/female silencing, when Gerbert is actually made speechless by Stephania. At this stage, Stephania has successfully seduced Otho, and he has now "yielded to her all his state, and thrown himself at her feet" asking her to sit "[t]hus firm above me" and to wear his crown" but to exact her plan, she must also dominate Gerbert.⁵⁸ Stephania achieves Gerbert's silence, and thus her power over him, through poison – "He has drunk / But once of my elixir" – and not seduction as with Otho. By doing so, she denies him the ability to define or condemn her, effectively silencing the moral authority of institutional religion by silencing its male representative, a Pope. Challenging him to accuse her and to thus take away her new position - "I will keep my sovereign place until / You have declared my crimes" - she redefines his silence as evidence of her innocence, "must we not conclude / That I am guiltless since he has no speech."⁵⁹ The idea that the courtesan can speak for herself and impose her will on not only a man, but a Pope, in his silence is a fascinating and subversive one. The Fields' clear reversal of this male speech/female silence model, against which so many of their previous heroines protest, and denying the *male* voice its presumed authority, can therefore be understood as a highly provocative interrogation of silence as disempowerment, as an appropriation of identity and agency and as a means of

⁵⁸ Field, *Stephania*, III.i.83; 84 and 85.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, III.i.86; 87.

disrupting both the continuing resistance to female self-definition, and wider imposed (masculine) constructions of dangerously sexualised womanhood.⁶⁰

Stephania's prominence as a protagonist who defines the reality of the narrative for the reader extends to her voice actually framing the narrative, having both the first and last word. This is an idea the Fields specifically foreground through a subtle but sophisticated repetition of imagery. At the beginning of Act One, Stephania invokes the image of the sun's uninterrupted daily cycle, as a sign of nature's (or God's) indifference to Crescentius' murder, and as what motivates her to take the action she does. She observes that the cycle of the sun remains similarly uninterrupted in her final speech at the end of Act Three, as she wonders at her successful execution of revenge.⁶¹ Although Stephania awaits "the earthquake's shock / To rend the palace" and "for death / To strike the German Otho unawares", Otho's killing of Crescentius and her rape provoke no divine retribution or miracle.⁶² This framing of events functions to justify (to an extent) the fact she remains unpunished for her seduction of Otho and a double murder. There is no sense of moral judgement nor does she bring a tragic fate upon herself, simply indifference. Like much of Thomas Hardy's work, there is a sense here that the world goes on indifferent to what has happened, however horrific for the individual.⁶³ Stephania's function, then, is almost elevated beyond that of mere character, especially as the Fields' authorial identity and voice is here notably

⁶⁰ This model of masculine speech / feminine silence can be understood in terms of Helene Cixous' theoretical set of socio-cultural gendered binary oppositions which she identifies as the foundation of female disempowerment in western culture, See Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 63-69. This is discussed in terms of *Callirrhoe* (1884) in Chapter One of this study.

⁶¹ The imagery of the heedless uninterrupted rising and setting of the sun, casting shadows on the roofs and on the sundial which inspires her to take her own revenge in Field, *Stephania*, I.i.3, is repeated in III.i.100 as she bows in "awe of the great triumph" of exacting her revenge.

⁶² Field, *Stephania*, I.i.3.

⁶³ See, for example, the death of Jude's children in Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

absent. Abandoning their usual employment of a Chorus or preface which directly informs the reader of authorial intent and the play's possible meaning, the Fields here explicitly give Stephania's character this power, normally the preserve of the 'creator' and the dramatist as the 'hand of fate', to dictate the characters' experience and identity.⁶⁴ This positioning of her as a kind of omnipotent narrator represents the Fields' experimental negotiation of the limits of female expression. Such a clear prioritisation of the prostitute-murderess' vocal authority, to define her (and our) experience of reality, can be therefore understood, by extension to be testing the limitations of what the female dramatist can achieve within the public space of the theatre through a fictional female protagonist. The Fields are here, as I have repeatedly shown them to do throughout this study, specifically employing the dramatic form and a challenging female protagonist to challenge ideas of who may speak out, where and on what subjects.⁶⁵

As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, it is common to find the Fields addressing highly charged issues such as sexual violence, the exploitation of innocence or virginity by male authority figures, even of prostitution in their dramas.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The quotes from Flaubert which precede the play are the voices of two extreme female embodiments of Lust (a dazzling beautiful bare breasted young woman) and Death (a wizened old woman, almost a skeleton, wrapped in a shroud). Stephania manifests both of these identities and powers in her revenge, and this consolidation of lust and death, the two key anxieties surrounding female sexuality, within her is demonstrated through the invocation of this imagery at the close of the play, as Stephania reveals to Otho, under her "harlot's ornaments" she always 'clads' herself "secretly in grave clothes". See Field, *Stephania*, III.i.92.

⁶⁵ See particularly, Callirrhoë's struggle to 'speak out', addressed in Chapter One, and Mary's ongoing desire for self-expression, discussed in Chapter Three. Honoria, in *Attila, My Attila!* is severely affected by the denial of a voice for her sexual and emotional needs, see Chapter Five. Although many novels from this period successfully and artfully present realistic and outspoken female points of view or voices, such as Olive Schreiner and Sarah Grand, many 'sensation' novels reinforced negative stereotypes and played on anxieties surrounding dangerous female sexuality.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Margery's seduction and abandonment by the Knight Wilfred, *Fair Rosamund* (1884) Nephele's experience at the Bacchic revel in *Callirrhoë* (1884) and Mary's marital rape by Lord Bothwell in *The Tragic Mary* (1890). See Chapters Two, One and Three respectively.

What makes *Stephania* so exciting then, and why it stands out from previous dramas, is its almost defiantly direct treatment and discussion of a woman's experience of horrifying sexual abuses. It is not merely their willingness to give a voice to a victim of forced rape and prostitution that is so startling and challenging, but that *Stephania* can define these experiences in her own terms, rather than being defined or silenced by the brutal acts committed against her. She is neither 'fallen' or broken, but quite the reverse; her battle to self-empowerment and to regain ownership or 'glory' for her 'womanhood' is founded on employing the very weapon used against her, sex, her experiences giving her the tools to enact revenge for Otho's crime. Recognising the "power of retribution" as within herself, she describes the 'sacred' tools of her revenge, as "the strange arts I found myself endowed with, as the child / Of great craftsmen is endowed with skill / To handle unfamiliar instruments".⁶⁷ The language here draws a powerful comparison between the skill to use the 'tools' of male crafts or power (such as that of dramatist or writer) 'unfamiliar' to a woman, with the courtesan's learned skill in handling the penis, the 'unfamiliar' instrument of both female sexual degradation and the very symbol of the phallogentric patriarchal system which authorises such abuse. The Fields draw a startling alignment here, between the struggle of the female dramatist to negotiate the 'skills' and 'instruments' of literary or theatrical self-expression (still very much the domain of educated upper-class and, increasingly middle-class men) and that of the female victim of sexual violence or abuse to take possession of (and overcome) the instruments of her exploitation and suffering. This mirrors the rhetoric of many political agitations and campaigns by middle-class women, who, by identifying and aligning themselves with victims of abuse, found a means to protest their own sense of powerlessness as subject to an

⁶⁷ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.4.

oppressive patriarchal system. This can be understood, therefore, as the Fields once again employing their protagonist as a means to both re-characterise and protest the positioning and construction of female sexuality, as well as to legitimise female self-expression and self-definition. Next, I discuss how Stephania can also be understood as an intervention into ideas and figures of sexual danger in decadent literature and art, as a performative figure of self-constructed sexual danger – a genuine threat to empire.

The authority to define reality and one's own experiences, as I have discussed above, is strongly characterised here as profoundly empowering and the root of agency and autonomy. The Fields leave us in no doubt, however, that speech alone cannot bring about Stephania's revenge. At the opening of Act Three, as Otho and Stephania emerge from the bedchamber, Otho proudly boasts, "I was not slack / In service, prompted to my task by all/ The mystical alacrity of love".⁶⁸ It is this act alone which ultimately gives her the influence over Otho she needs, telling Gerbert, "Old Pope, the prostitute / Is mistress of the palace".⁶⁹ The Fields clearly foreground how Stephania's seduction of Otho is dependent on a particular kind of performance and sexual display – her intentional sexualisation of her appearance and the employment of the 'courtesans' arts'. This is particularly demonstrated at the end of Act Two, in Otho's response to her adoption of the costume and role of the courtesan:

You stand supreme,
...with glittering robe, and roses fallen
Red-coloured down your hair: I see in you

⁶⁸ Field, *Stephania*, III.i.70.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, III.i.78.

All that I want.⁷⁰

This idea is what opens the play. She characterises her role as that of a courtesan, “To the invaders, who / can offer welcome save the courtesan?”⁷¹ Her ‘role’ or “office” is to “breed he smiles / Men love on joyless faces” an image that strongly invokes ideas of performance and the power of this role lies in its knowledge of how to bring them joy and pleasure.⁷² This is reinforced by the stage direction, the pose she adopts directly after asking, “Am I not fitted?” for the role of courtesan, “She stretches herself languorously at the foot of the throne, and clasps her censor”.⁷³ The specifically artificial performance she displays here can be understood as the Fields making a wider defence to other writers whose work was engaging with these ideas of ‘false’ womanhood, or sexual performance at the time. There are a number of *fin-de-siècle* examples of the allure of the courtesan, or actress, over that of ‘real’ womanhood. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) for example, Dorian can only love Sybil Vane, a working-class actress with whom he becomes fixated, when she is performing as Juliet, or any of the heroines of Shakespeare. Once she has knowledge of real love and no longer has to imagine it in her performance, he rejects her and all his desire is lost.⁷⁴ This discomfort with the ‘real’ woman, as opposed to the performed identity, is interrogated here by the Fields (as it is in *The Tragic Mary*). They reflect here on how artistic or literary construction of female sexual identity (by predominantly male artists and writers), far from empowering individual women with

⁷⁰ Field, *Stephania*, II.i.61.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I.i.1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, I.i.1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I.i.1.

⁷⁴ See Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 2008), 79-90. Here Dorian recognises that he was in love with her ‘as’ Shakespeare’s heroines, not her true self.

these models of lustful revenge or sexual rapaciousness, or indeed romance in the case of Dorian and Sybil, actually serve to contain and silence true female identity. These archetypes are presented here then, as not representative of female sexuality but, as Stephania puts it, as a “monument, / Contending hosts have clashed against, that stands / Erect amid the carnage of the plains”.⁷⁵ The Fields here are directly identifying the female body and sexuality as a site of contest and conflict, a battleground of male power struggles, and subject to the will and whims of men. Only through this performed sexuality, only by knowledge of how to satisfy and therefore control male desire, how to manipulate their expectations, can Stephania and, by extension, the Fields as female dramatists, hope to avenge and expose violent sexual abuses and exploitation. By re-configuring the sexual identity of the prostitute here, the Fields introduce complexity to constructions of dangerous female sexuality, and reverse the patriarchal authority inherent in these constructions. The demand for female sexual performance for male pleasure, is here what makes Otho vulnerable. As Otho is warned by Gerbert, early in the play that “the baffled devil lurks / About [Otho’s sin] to tempt you in Crescentius’ wife.”⁷⁶ Female sexuality therefore is not inherently dangerous, rather the masculine fixation with exploiting women for sexual satisfaction as a means of dominance is founded in male sexual desire as a source of weakness and vulnerability to manipulation.

Stephania’s performed sexuality and its power over Otho resonates with the figure of Salomé, the object of much literary and artistic attention at the time, most prominently perhaps in the work of both Wilde and J. K. Huysmans. Huysmans’ 1884 novel *À Rebours* or *Against Nature*, depicts Des Esseintes, a self-indulgent and

⁷⁵ Field, *Stephania*, l.i.26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, l.i.29.

reclusive Parisian aesthete who collects around him all manner of arcane sensuous objects, the description of which take up the bulk of the narrative. This work was key to the emerging ideas of decadence and sensual materialism in literature, as Robert Baldick states, it was “the keystone of the so called Decadence”, and was received with enthusiasm by writers such as Arthur Symonds, who called it the “breviary of the Decadence”.⁷⁷ Baldick notes that many devotees “made it their bedside book...it mirrored their ‘decadent’ ideas and aspirations...[and] revealed and consecrated a new and exciting literature”.⁷⁸ *Des Esseintes* is also often cited as a prototype for Dorian, and *Against Nature* is often taken to be the notorious book which provokes Dorian’s fascination with sexual and sensual experiences and pleasures.⁷⁹ In Chapter Five, *Des Esseintes* contrasts the two paintings of Salomé by Gustave Moreau, the French Symbolist painter: *Salomé Dancing before Herod* (1876) and *The Apparition* (1876). His description is useful for interpreting the sexualised nature of Stephania in terms of the figure of Salomé in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature.

Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs. She had become...the symbolic incarnation of underlying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty...the monstrous beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Robert Baldick, introduction to J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin; 1959), 13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁹ See Baldick, introduction to *Against Nature*, 5.

⁸⁰ J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin; 1959), 67.

Stephania's actions and performance of seducing Otho closely mirror this description as she observes "each time I heave / My bosom something of his manhood falls".⁸¹ Like the Salomé of Huysmans' novel, physical performance and sexual display are strongly associated with ideas of female revenge, manipulation of patriarchal authority and danger. The Fields, therefore, can be understood to be invoking and intervening into the contemporary 'decadent' constructions and representations of female sexual empowerment as both profoundly alluring, and dangerously powerful and destructive. In *Stephania*, the Fields' are still engaging with and intervening into highly charged cultural, social and institutional discourses and conflicts which surrounded contemporary figures of sexualised and autonomous womanhood.

Stephania, unlike any of the other eponymous heroines of this study, achieves genuine agency, sexual autonomy and avenges sexual exploitation: Donoghue describes it as "a revelation of women's anger".⁸² Stephania is also the last character to speak (or the last figure who is able to) and, having successfully rid Rome of "the usurper"⁸³ (Otho), she addresses her dead husband and makes a powerful statement which defines her actions in almost military terms:

I will...bow my heart
In awe of the great triumph I have won
For Italy, my womanhood, and thee.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Field, *Stephania*, II.i.50.

⁸² Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 62.

⁸³ Field, *Stephania*, III.i.100.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, III.i.100.

The three beneficiaries of her triumph, most obviously her husband in avenging his murder and her recompense for her sexual abuse, are given a wider contemporary context by the triumph she wins for Italy by her expulsion of the oppressive invaders.⁸⁵

Ultimately, the outcome is successful for Stephania, but she is not crisis free; she is not as confident in her triumph as she may state, and this insecurity adds complexity to both her character and the conclusion of the play. This humanising of her at the end further resists oppressive stereotyping of the kind discussed above. She does not take pleasure in her act as such, but does it for the love of, and to avenge, her husband and her people. The Fields, for all of the experimental and challenging identities in this play, draw it to its end by reinforcing the bond of love and sacrifice in heterosexual marriage, albeit one which was suggested to be based on fairly even terms. Writers engaging with the New Woman figure can draw attention to a range of issues and can offer subversive and challenging female protagonists, but very often the texts end somewhat conservatively with marriage or death (or a reading of marriage *as* death). It is partly because it is hard to envisage what a truly independent woman might be able to do or where she might go in an oppressive patriarchal society. This can be seen particularly in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) - a play which the Fields attended. Nora might leave the doll's house, but Ibsen can't envisage what happens to her after she slams the door.

What this play demonstrates is a new confidence not only with what the Fields can present but also with new experimental ideas and figures. They are engaging

⁸⁵ During the nineteenth century Italy was pushing for unification. Much of the northern part had been ruled by Austria and many women writers – particularly Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her expatriate group in Florence – linked the push for Italian unification (called the *Risorgimento*) with their own push for women's liberties. See for example, M. Schwegman. "Amazons in Italy: Josephine Butler and the Transformation of Italian Female Militancy," *Women's History Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 173-78. Maria Zeraschi, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Italian Unification" (doctoral thesis, University of Wales, Lampeter, 2005).

specifically with the ideas of reception, performance and with figures and imagery which would resonate with the contemporary audience. Stephania is a figure of this ‘future’, of the scorned and oppressed Victorian woman and her sexuality fighting back, taking revenge, and achieving the autonomy and dignity denied by the ‘invasion’ and colonisation by the patriarchal order of mid-Victorian culture – ideas and drives which are characteristic of the work of many writers and artists in the fin de siècle.

The Fields, according to Donoghue “knew just how outrageous they were being in their attack on corruption, in making a heroine of a prostitute murderess”.⁸⁶ This led to some rather ‘gloomy’ meetings with their publisher where they questioned if he “feared” or “sickens over” their ‘morality’.⁸⁷ Indeed, Stephania was not liked by many, “literary men did not get the point” and the reviews were late, few and mostly took Meredith’s view that Otho was a more sympathetic character than Stephania.⁸⁸ Lionel Johnson’s review for *The Academy* calls it “elusive...unsatisfactory” and “a little confused, monotonous, vague and perplexing”.⁸⁹ Bradley appealed to a friend to help her get Stephania reviewed:

It is a woman’s book, & women must defend it. Except a few dusty old cousins, all my women friends rejoice in Stephania...Men of course don’t like this.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 63.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁸ A view which Cooper considered ‘curious’. See Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 63.

⁸⁹ Lionel Johnson, “Review of *Stephania: A Trialogue*, By Michael Field (Elkin Mathews and John Lane),” *The Academy*, April 22, 1893, 342-3.

⁹⁰ Katharine Bradley, quoted in Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 64.

Apart from her striking description of the play as being for women, perhaps as dramatization of successful revenge for male abuses, she also clearly identifies here their (ongoing) struggle to speak out or write as women in the face of male disapproval. Their concern with political agency and the stage continued after this time, with their play *A Question of Memory* (1893) Taking as its source a relatively modern story from a newspaper article on the Hungarian Rising of 1848, this drama centres around the unbearable choice faced by Ferencz Rényi – whether to betray the whereabouts of his regiment or see his family shot. He loses his memory and descends into madness after his family are shot anyway. This drama, according to Donoghue, “is a hard-hitting investigation into heroism and the influence – for good or bad – women could have on men.”⁹¹ The play draws to a radical conclusion in the Fourth Act, where, after many betrayals, the mad Ferencz, Elizabeth who loves him and his friend Stanislaus who loves Elizabeth form a triangle of platonic friendship and domesticity.

Despite the disastrous reception of *Memory*, the Fields were not deterred from writing for the theatre and, determined to achieve ‘modernity’ began work on a number of contemporary prose plays. These plays engaged with many key themes taken up by late-century drama such as feminism, living through ones children and hereditary madness. Few of these plays reached completion however, although *Attila, My Attila!* is strikingly ‘modern’ in its themes of female sexual emancipation and the figure of the ‘New Woman’.

The next chapter focusses on the Fields’ 1896 drama *Attila, My Attila!* A play which represents a direct engagement with the emerging and contested figure of the

⁹¹ Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 67.

‘New Woman’, *Attila* concerns the struggle of Honoria to explore and express her sexuality and desires for wider experience against the suffocating demands of family and state which conspire to deny her any sexual or social agency. This play, coming after their disastrous attempt to stage *Memory*, emerges from a social and cultural environment that was increasingly hostile to not only representations of empowered female sexuality, but to the work of the Fields themselves. Sitting in stark contrast to the sexually-charged *Stephania* this next chapter explores how the Fields contended with their failures, lack of interest from publishers and lack of enthusiasm from critics and engaged with the newly emerging-figures of female social, sexual and political agency such as the New Woman.

Chapter Five

Attila! My Attila! (1896) and the New Woman: Sexual Oppression, Silence and Perverse Desires

Attila, My Attila! (1896) was Michael Field's twelfth drama to be published, and is the fifth to be centred on an historical or classical female protagonist. This play concerns Honoria, a determined young woman from the fifth century, the sister of Valentinian III, Emperor of the Western Roman Empire. Honoria's frustrated desire to escape the imposition of her role of administrative maidenhood as an 'Augusta' - an unmarried (but politically powerless) ambassador in service to her ruling family - causes her to embark on first an affair with her slave, Eugenius - which results in an illegitimate son - and then to pursue the attentions of the violent king of the Huns, Attila. The narrative traces how Honoria's attempts for sexual autonomy, knowledge and experience of life (and her own womanhood), even to 'be herself' are repeatedly thwarted and punished by her family. Her lover Eugenius is exiled, her child is murdered and she is sent to isolation with her nun-like cousins: all abuses which fuel her increasingly desperate and misguided fixation with Attila. This fixation comes to consume her to the extent that she directly appeals to him (by messenger) to release her from oppression and marry her, later fantasising that he will bring about the annihilation of her family, her whole country even. Honoria's efforts, however, are ultimately fruitless, as her family successfully avert Attila's two attempts to invade and claim his bride through diplomatic bribery. At the end of the play, her sanity shattered by both news of Attila's death and the stark reality that her idol was a brutal rapist, she collapses, senseless, her grim future now as a hidden prisoner of her family.

Honoriam is differentiated from the previous eponymous heroines of this study by the absence of her name from the title. In its place is an exclamation she repeats frequently throughout the play in moments of crisis or aroused sexual fantasy. It was originally called “*Honoriam*”, and is, like those before, fundamentally concerned with, and centred on, the individual experience of a female protagonist.¹ The Fields’ recovery and re-negotiation of the figure of Honoriam here represents a wider engagement on their part with a multiplicity of contemporary concerns provoked by the emerging challenges to narrow definitions of legitimate female sexuality, particularly by a burgeoning number of educated, politically engaged and electively unmarried middle-class women. In *Attila* the Fields explore these ideas by specifically foregrounding the struggle of an individual (upper)middle-class woman to find some form of expression for her sexual identity or ‘womanhood’ outside the oppressive patriarchal institutions of marriage (productive sexuality) or spinsterhood (lifelong virginity). They are here interrogating how the distortion and frustration of the development of ‘natural’ womanhood and desire potentially causes its “perversion”.² This play and protagonist are clearly located by the Fields in terms of the “New Woman”, stating in the preface that “Honoriam is the *New Woman* of the fifth century”.³ This chapter reads *Attila* in terms of the emerging and contested figure of the ‘New Woman’, and analyses to what extent Bradley and Cooper as “Michael Field” are engaging with, intervening in, or challenging these contemporary constructions of ‘new’ womanhood. It is the argument of this chapter that, by focussing specifically on Honoriam in this the Fields once more re-negotiate the identity of a female individual

¹Interestingly *Stephaniam* was originally conceived as *Otho*. See Ivor C. Treby, *The Michael Field Catalogue: a Book of Lists* (Suffolk: De Blacklands Press, 1998), 32.

² Michael Field, *Attila, My Attila!* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1896), ii.

³ *Ibid.*, ii.

whose representation in past or contemporary culture, like the New Woman's, is as yet undefined or contested, in order to interrogate contextual issues and conflicts surrounding the (oppressive) positioning of unmarried women and their sexuality. The Fields trace and construct Honoria's struggle toward sexual identity and autonomy to interrogate the ways in which intersecting patriarchal socio-political ideologies and power structures function to impose a set of limiting binary female roles on unmarried women, locating them in direct opposition to legitimate female sexuality: wife/girl, mother/spinster, sexual/sexless. I argue that in *Attila*, the Fields explore, through the complex "New Woman" figure of Honoria and how she [mis]identifies or channels her 'natural impulses' to tragically 'perverse' ends, the potentialities and possibilities for the individual's unique expression of female sexual autonomy and desire outside of, and in resistance to, these oppressive oppositions.

Many of the Fields' later dramatic works, as is discussed in Chapter Four, have remained almost invisible to academic criticism, despite the ongoing recovery project of Michael Field's work, and *Attila, My Attila!* is no exception. Mary Sturgeon is the only critic to actually discuss *Attila* at any great length. Identifying Honoria as the Fields' attempt to give "a woman's presentation of a woman's right to love and motherhood", something which she observes, the time was not 'ripe' for.⁴ Highly critical of their invocation of the 'New Woman' she likes Honoria - "a creature of great vitality who wins our affection and our pity" - but is more concerned with the idea the Fields had unintentionally presented, "an almost pathological study of

⁴ Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co, 1922), 195.

suppressed instinct”.⁵ She concludes that its chief value lies in its psychology, and not in “its dramatic power”.⁶ Emma Donoghue, in contrast, gives it only a small paragraph. She states that *Attila* “is a play about sexual repression”, coming to the conclusion that, “[d]espite the melodramatic plot, Honoria’s growing madness is credible, and the play has a certain desolate power”.⁷ This dearth of criticism on *Attila* is perhaps somewhat surprising given the upsurge of critical interest in the “New Woman” as a figure of literary and cultural significance from the mid-1990s onwards.⁸ In the last few years, however, there has been some effort to engage more closely with this period of their dramatic writing. At the Michael Field Centenary Conference in 2014 Joseph Bristow’s Keynote speech focussed on locating *Attila, My Attila!* in its historical and literary context. Bristow’s paper discussed in particular the Fields’ handling of challenging subjects such as rape, female sexual desire and sexual autonomy within the play.⁹ Last year, Ana Parejo Vadillo published an article on Field’s later ‘Roman Trilogy’ of plays produced post-1895 – *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901), and *Julia Domna* (1903) - entitled “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama” (2015), which, although not specifically about *Attila*, locates it within the identification made by ‘most’ decadents (including the Fields) between the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and that of the British Empire.¹⁰ This chapter, therefore, recovers perhaps the most frequently overlooked and least understood of their dramatic works. Although

⁵ Sturgeon, *Michael Field*, 195-196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 195; 196.

⁷ Emma Donoghue, *We Are Michael Field* (Bello: London, 2014), 76.

⁸ See Sally Ledger’s ground-breaking study, Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

⁹ Joseph Bristow, “‘Unwomanly Audacities’: Michael Field, *Attila, My Attila!* and Sexual Modernity” (keynote address, Michael Field Centenary Conference: New Directions in Fin-de-Siècle Studies, Institute of English Studies, University of London, London, 2014).

¹⁰ Ana Parejo Vadillo, “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 195-220.

written for performance, I take a here a text-based approach which, while it acknowledges the intent and impact of staging and setting, aims to produce new understandings of the Fields' interventions into contemporary debates concerning the 'New Woman' at this stage in their dramatic writing. The analysis of *Attila* here then, represents a timely and sorely-needed contribution to not only the ongoing recovery of Michael Field's dramas, but also to wider critical understandings of how middle-class female dramatists (as opposed to the more extensively researched 'New Woman' female novelists) were engaging with these issues of sexual agency and familial authority for unmarried middle-class women.

In the three years between *Stephania: A Trialogue* (1892) and *Attila, My Attila!* (1895), Bradley and Cooper published their third collection of poetry, *Underneath the Bough* (1893), and took their drama, *A Question of Memory* (1893), to the stage. *Memory* was given a single performance for the Independent Theatre Society, a group which, according to Bette London, was "founded to present plays that would appeal to an intellectual audience unsatisfied by the conventional offerings of the commercial theatre."¹¹ Bradley and Cooper's close associate, Arthur Symonds, had a play accepted in November 1891, which Ivor Treby suggests inspired the women to "try the same tactic" for *Attila*.¹² Initially, friends and associates were enthusiastic, Oscar Wilde, for example, in a letter from September 1893 offered his support, and some rather interesting staging suggestions: "I look forward to listening to your lovely play recited on a rush-strewn platform, before a tapestry, by gracious things in antique robes, and,

¹¹ Bette Lynn London, *Writing Double: Women's Literary Partnerships* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 99. For their experiences with this company, see, Jan McDonald, "'Disillusioned Bards and Despised Bohemians': Michael Field's *A Question of Memory* at the Independent Theatre Society," *Theatre Notebook* 31, no. 2 (1977): 18-29.

¹² See Treby, *Catalogue*, 32.

if you can manage it, in gilded masks”.¹³ Cooper writes in their borrowed rooms at Grays Inn in October, “I so love rehearsal...it is wonderful to see ones words graving pictures, movements, persons – to watch a play being secretly fashioned down in the earth”, describing her experience upon entering the theatre as one of “triumph”, “I triumph”, and the actors as “a few puppets – men and women in whom I take an interest – second only to that I take in the creations of my brain.”¹⁴ Although Bradley and Cooper initially relished the rehearsals, relationships within the company soured, much was changed and cut, and the pressure severely affected them.¹⁵ The play in the end was not a success, rather a disaster. In their diary Cooper records, “[i]t seems more natural to be dead than alive. We wake to the surprise of finding every morning paper against us” but resolves, “though everything is against us, we are strong”.¹⁶ William Archer writing in *The Theatrical ‘World’* in 1893 described the play as “quite interesting enough to merit production, for once in a way”, calling it a “singular piece of work”, and a “dramatic curiosity”, but stating “a good play it...certainly is not”.¹⁷ His lengthy critique particularly highlights the ‘mistaken fashion’ with which he suggests they attempt to earn the “better title of playwright”, and the “copious effusion of highly figurative rhetoric”.¹⁸ He also attacks the “appropriateness of speech to character” accusing them of taking “little thought” as all the characters “without

¹³ Oscar Wilde, “Letter from Oscar Wilde to ‘Michael Field’ September 1893,” reproduced in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd., 1962), 345. His ideas are a little bizarre, given that the play is far from classical in setting and subject, concerning, as it does, the Hungarian peasant uprising of 1848.

¹⁴ Edith Cooper, Michael Field, “Works and Days,” 13 October, 1893, reproduced in Michael Field, *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 173-4; 174. The rooms were lent by their friend Albert Fleming.

¹⁵ Cooper visited a doctor on 19 October 1893, “ill, the colour of uncooked pastry, my inside like an angry wasps’ nest” See Field, *Works and Days*, 177.

¹⁶ See Field, *Works and Days*, 181; 182.

¹⁷ William Archer, “XXXIX: A Question of Memory – *LE Pater* – *The orient express* – *Don Juan*,” *The Theatrical ‘World’ for 1893*, November 1, 1893, (London: Walter Scott, 1893), 251-2; 252.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

distinction spoke the same archaic dialect, tense with imagery”.¹⁹ According to Joseph Bristow these accusations of dramatic ineptitude and criticisms regarding their work’s formal qualities frequently employed the rhetoric of gendered inadequacies. Nowhere is this more clear than, after pointing out their gender, “[t]he ladies who choose to be known as ‘Michael Field’”, Archer goes on to associate their dramas with a reproductive ‘failure’, as the “most melancholy result” of an “infinite mass of still-born literature”.²⁰ A consequence of their increasing prominence in literary circles, their identity under “Michael Field” no longer provided the shelter of anonymity it once had. Their “valiant power to recover”, however, that Meredith identifies, is most clear in Cooper’s statement that she would “go through the whole experience again, now I knew how it would end”.²¹ Responding to the reply that “a man would not”, Cooper stated, “I am a woman, and to bring out a play is experience of life – just what women feel so crushingly that they need. You men get it like breathing”.²² Indeed, they were not deterred and *Attila* was written with the express intention of its being performed. When Bradley and Cooper visited Meredith at Flint Cottage in 1895, their defence of *Attila* reveals a steely determination:

We say firmly that we know the play would act well, that the full animation would come with the players’ voices – we calculated their part. Honoria was conceived with Sarah Bernhardt before us all the while.²³

¹⁹ Archer, “XXXIX: A Question of Memory – LE Pater – The orient express – Don Juan,” 252.

²⁰ Ibid., 252-3.

²¹ George Meredith, “Letter from George Meredith to Michael Field, August 19 1895,” reproduced in Field, *Works and Days*, 90-1, 90. Edith Cooper, quoted in Field, *Works and Days*, 184.

²² Edith Cooper, reproduced in Field, *Works and Days*, 184.

²³ Field, *Works and Days*, 91.

This demonstrates an ongoing commitment to performance and of taking their place in the theatre once again. They are at this time still attempting to establish themselves as playwrights and still believing – even while failing to make success of their work - that drama is the key means to discuss precisely what they want, to speak out and to explore complex and challenging issues from multiple perspectives. This multiplicity of voices in drama, enables issues to be debated within scenes that present conflicting and intersecting points of view. It therefore means they can explore wider impacts not personal issues to make a point about the position of women.

In *Attila, My Attila!*, as is discussed above, Honoria is specifically identified with the figure of the ‘New Woman’. The term ‘New Woman’, although its origin is disputed, seems to have entered common usage through two essays published by Sarah Grand and ‘Ouida’ (Maria Louise Ramé), in the *North American Review* in 1894.²⁴ Grand’s ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’ and Ouida’s ‘The New Woman’. The “New Woman” as a literary and cultural figure has been the subject of much critical and academic writing since the mid-nineteen-nineties, and the various aspects of her positioning, construction and identity have been extensively covered in the work of critics such as Sally Ledger.²⁵

The ‘New Woman’ was a complex and contested site of discursive interactions concerning the positioning and construction of late nineteenth-century, particularly middle-class, womanhood. Associated with, and growing out of, the emancipatory and suffragist campaigns of the previous decades - such as those for higher education,

²⁴ Sara Grand, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” *North American Review* 158, no. 448 (March 1894): 270-276. Ouida, “The New Woman,” *North American Review* 158, no. 448 (March 1894): 610-619.

²⁵ See Ledger, *New Woman*.

Repeal and women's rights in society and marriage - this figure and her proponents endured similar criticisms and unflattering representations, the discourse of which heavily employed the rhetoric of gender transgression, sexual inversion (or perversion) and social or moral disruption.²⁶

The figure of the New Woman was, furthermore, very much developed through novels and short stories, what is often loosely termed 'New Woman fiction'. The novel, as a new and increasingly popular form, was embraced by many women writers. One of the earliest fictional examples of this figure is Lyndall, the heroine of Olive Schreiner's 1883 novel *Story of an African Farm*, who is, according to Ledger, "unmistakably a prototype New Woman".²⁷ The novel was considered by many to be *the* form through which to negotiate and disseminate these ideas and identities, especially as it was accessible, 'modern' and appealing and to a wide readership which crossed gender and class lines. It was free of the conventions and limitations of more elite forms such as lyric poetry and tragedy, as it developed outside the control of elite patriarchal literary institutions and questions of authorial legitimacy. New Woman novelists embraced the developing mass print culture as a means of giving them and their protagonists a voice and a space within which to express and explore the idea of 'new-womanhood' as well as to engage with the anxieties and concerns which intersected on this figure. The New Woman novelist, or indeed those who entered into the discursive process of constructing or contesting the "New Woman", were actually fairly disparate in their approaches, and frequently contradict the assumptions and punitive associations made by those who opposed this figure - that she is anti-

²⁶ For a broad analysis of the sexual politics surrounding female activists or (proto)feminist thought and the 'New Woman' at this time see Lucy Bland, "The Married Woman, the 'New Woman' and the Feminist: Sexual Politics of the 1890s," in *Equal or Different: Women's Politics 1800-1914*, ed. Jane Rendall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 141-164.

²⁷ Ledger, *New Woman*, 2.

marriage, socially transgressive or disruptive, and sexually ‘inverted’ or indeed heterosexually rapacious.²⁸

The “New Woman” was also to be found on the contemporary stage albeit in the hands of predominantly male dramatists - both Henrik Ibsen and Oscar Wilde explored the new phenomenon and figure of womanhood in their plays of the era. Such representations however, as in the novels, were overwhelmingly realist in form, openly addressing the contemporary situation. Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* for example explores the frustrations and limitations of Nora’s middle-class frustrated domesticity, and her motivation to life freely and independently, as a “New Woman”. Bradley and Cooper were keen theatre-goers in these years and were certainly well versed in these various theatrical constructions. I argue that their choice to engage with these debates as “Michael Field”, in the form of an historically located tragic drama, can be understood as their intentional intervention into the predominantly male dominated theatrical representations of the “New Woman”.²⁹ Joseph Bristow describes their dramatic identity as that of a “Theatrical Tyro” as they stand outside the current of dramatic evolution. I would suggest, however, that certainly in *Stephania* and *Attila*, they were actually engaging with aspects of the new theatre in their candid representations of sexual violence and female desire, and in their invocation of the “New Woman”. The Fields, as this thesis has consistently revealed, continued therefore to consider this form as providing an equal level of legitimacy and authority to their work.

²⁸ Something which can be seen in *Attila*, see below.

²⁹ This idea of finding a legitimate literary voice is discussed extensively in Chapter One.

What is perhaps the most significant aspect of the “New Woman” for the Fields (and others) was that she was specifically ‘New’ – associated with the new world of technologies, of new ideas and new possibilities. Bradley and Cooper, perhaps a little surprisingly given their affection for all things Dionysian and Elizabethan, enthusiastically embraced these new technologies, the changing social landscape and its possibilities. Cooper writes on 1 June 1896, “As Michael [Bradley] stays with father in Italy & the Incandescent Light in the study we are not backward in Modernism”.³⁰ Such an engagement with this new figure of (potential) intellectual, political, sexual and social emancipation and freedom can be understood, in part, as an intervention into the future positioning of (middle-class) women, as writers, and as lovers. Honoria’s very modernity puts her in conflict with the society from which she was emerging. By embracing the technological advancements that increasingly created jobs for women and improved travel and safer movement within the urban space – through the development of the underground system and improved lighting – the New Woman became a “passenger of modernity”, but also a figure out of (or before) her time, a figure of a new century.³¹ The identification of Honoria as the “New Woman” of an antique century functions to locate this figure as one in conflict with a world which has not yet become enlightened enough for her to express herself and her ‘womanhood’ without chaos or punishment. This way of understanding Honoria is useful for interpreting precisely how the Fields are engaging with this New Woman figure. The Fields are intervening into to ongoing political, social and individual resistances to (and experiences of) women who attempt to ‘speak out’ or in Honoria’s

³⁰ Edith Cooper, “Works and Days,” 1 June 1896, British Library. Add. Ms. 46785.

³¹ See Ana Parejo Vadillo, *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). There is a chapter on Michael Field.

case, give “freedom to her womanhood” without incurring the wrath of family, moral condemnation, and exclusion from wider society.³²

Given Bradley and Cooper’s new ‘push’ for modernity, it seems surprising perhaps to find them once again employing a Roman setting and protagonist. This is, in fact, founded on their perception of this as an era through which to reflect upon their own. As Cooper writes in 1895, it is ‘curious’, “how close the resemblance between Imperial Rome & London of Today...in tendencies due to laxity – wealth – degeneration! It is a mirror – a review of our times”.³³ The Fields certainly engaged very closely with the wider contemporary and historical representations of Honoria. In the preface, they directly quote Edward Gibbon’s 1776 work, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, identifying its sympathetic account of Honoria’s life and her distinctly “unwomanly audacities”.³⁴ As the preface puts it: “Honorina, whose yielding “to the impulse of nature” Gibbon chronicles with such sympathy”.³⁵ In 1894 the British Museum had mounted a huge exhibition in recognition of Gibbon’s centenary, putting his work in the public consciousness. *Attila*, therefore, was certainly written with a concern to engage with an historical era and figures that were familiar to the contemporary audience and caught its imagination.

The title, ‘*Attila, My Attila!*’ also had a wider significance, as it is drawn from the work of their contemporary and friend George Meredith’s poem, “The Nuptials of

³² Michael Field, *Attila, My Attila!* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1896), ii.

³³ Edith Cooper, “Works and Days,” 1895, British Library.Add. Ms. 46784, fol. 24v. Vadillo discusses these ideas and associations in detail, see particularly Ana Parejo Vadillo, “‘This Hot-House of Decadent Chronicle’: Michael Field, Nietzsche and the Dance of Modern Poetic Drama,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 197-199.

³⁴ Field, *Attila*, ii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ii.

Attila” published in the collection *Ballads and Poems of Tragic Life* (1887). His poem focusses on the rape of Ildico, Attila’s last ‘wife’, and his death on their wedding night. Attila’s death is commonly ascribed to a colossal nasal haemorrhage as he gorged at the wedding feast. Later historians and writers, however, have come to question the validity of this account, and instead suggest that he was killed by Ildico after he had raped her on their wedding night. Meredith takes this approach and suggests Attila’s death was in fact the result of Ildico’s revenge. She is not punished however, but saved by the lack of will (among Attila’s soldiers) to believe such a ‘small’ woman could bring down the mighty warlord: “Could a little fist as big / As the southern summer fig, / Push a Dagger’s point to pierce / Ribs like these?”³⁶

Honorina and her ‘tale’ stand out as potentially disruptive in contemporary Victorian historical scholarship and culture, particularly her sexual ‘yielding’ which produces an illegitimate child with a slave, and her ‘proposal’ to a barbaric rapist, who is in turn murdered by his last victim. As with many of their earlier dramas, the Fields use the preface to locate their particular approach to the protagonist and their actions, no more so carefully than here, where Honorina's *motivations* are understandable, but her *enactment* of them is clearly not condoned:

[She] sought to give freedom to her womanhood by unwomanly audacities; and although the importunate desire *to be herself* was fair and natural, its perversion was revenged by the blight with which nature curses.³⁷

³⁶ George Meredith, “The Nuptials of Attila,” *Poems and Ballads of Tragic Life* (London: Macmillan, 1887), 96-7.

³⁷ Field, *Attila*, ii.

The Fields carefully utilise the preface here to make a very clear distinction between the harmless natural impulse to freedom and expression of self – which is fundamental to the legitimacy of their identity as women writers – and the way Honoria (and by extension any contemporaries aligned with New Woman ideas) enacts or pursues these impulses with “unwomanly audacities”, going “blindly on the way of death”.³⁸ Meredith’s concern for ‘poor Honoria’ and Gibbon’s sympathy defeat the object of presenting her tale in this way. Here her tale is “not remote”, but introduces complexity to New Woman debates by demonstrating how the functioning of patriarchal institutions such as the state and family, which focus on the destruction or disavowal of female sexual ‘impulse’, can provoke “unwomanly” or “perverse” behaviour. What this shows, then, is that Fields’ historical work can be understood to be a key means of engaging with contemporary (*fin-de-siècle*) debates and anxieties.

The Fields present, in Honoria, a candidly sexual young woman, struggling to consolidate and characterise her own impulses and desires within the demands of politics, family and morality. Honoria’s open expressions of desire for sexual experience and her actions in taking a lower-class lover, having an illegitimate child, and ‘proposing’ to Attila, would have resonated with a contemporary (reading) audience as being in direct reference to the New Woman and her (potential) sexual emancipation. This chapter addresses three key ideas surrounding the ‘New Woman’ figure and her identity, which emerge from this analysis of *Attila, My Attila!* I discuss firstly, how her relationship with her family, and the conflicts caused by their insistence on her sexual containment, as a political imperative, can be linked to the perceived risk of the New Woman to society and empire. Secondly I consider

³⁸ Field, *Attila*, ii.

Honorias acts of resistance to her oppression, such as her relationship with a slave and her desire for knowledge within a wider socio-cultural context. I particularly focus on how the excessive punishment she endures as a result of her resistance drives her to the more dangerous ‘perceived solution’ Attila seems to represent, and what this imagined relationship means to her is addressed. The analysis of the play concludes with a consideration of how, at the close of the play, Honorias can be understood as the very clear product of a twisted and perverse institutionally authorised system which oppresses female sexuality and identity and destroys emotional and familial relationships.

Honorias impulse to ‘be herself’ and to enact her sexuality as she sees fit, is, from the very opening of the play, presented as being in direct opposition to her position both within her family and the expectations of her pre-determined ‘function’ in wider society as the Augusta; a living deity of maidenhood sacrificed to familial and political duty. Honorias positioning is used by the Fields to critique how the relationship between family and state perpetuates the oppression and control of female sexuality. Issues relating to the struggle for independence and autonomy by (upper) middle-class women, in the face of social and familial scorn, and against the imposition of repressive roles and dutiful identities, were key to many of the discourses surrounding the “New Woman”, and as a woman who seeks to live, work and educate herself independently. Escape from the family as a means of achieving agency was a key concern, addressed in literature and journalism, such as B.A. Crackanthorpe 1894 article ‘The Revolt of the Daughters’.³⁹

³⁹ B.A. Crackanthorpe, “The Revolt of the Daughters,” *The Nineteenth Century* XXXV, no. CCIII (January 1894): 23-31.

The play opens on the day of Honoria's sixteenth birthday. At this point, no longer a 'child' with no presumed sexual agency, she is presented to the audience at the very moment she becomes perceived as a potentially disruptive figure to her family and to the political stability of the empire. The urgent insistence of both Placida and Valentinian that Honoria should now obediently accept her role as a maiden Augusta, directly associates the culturally determined definition of female sexual maturity with the motivation to impose strictly delineated roles and identities. These are identities which both contain female sexuality, or channel it into productive purpose, such as through marriage.⁴⁰ The demands of both family and political stability intersect upon Honoria's burgeoning 'womanhood', with the express intention of securing its containment, and that it remains undiscovered and non-functional (both to potential suitors and Honoria herself).

The Fields specifically identify Placida and Valentinian as the source of Honoria's oppression, presenting how they conspire to impose upon her the title and role of Augusta as a means of securing Valentinian's continued sole rule of the empire. As an Augusta, Honoria must remain unmarried and a virgin, and her duties extend to being a smiling presence at the arrival and departure of ambassadors and accepting "rich gifts" which her mother assures her will make her the envy of other women: "That is a woman's goal – to be envied dear".⁴¹ Presented to her as "the great future I have wrought for you", it is little more than "a farce!" a "mock title", which Pulcheria (Honoria's cousin and another Augusta) later reveals to be utterly powerless: "Nothing comes to pass / That I desire; I have no force to rule".⁴² The purpose of this role is to

⁴⁰ This idea of arbitrarily defined measures of female sexual maturity leading to the exploitation or containment of unmarried women here closely mirrors the experience of Rosamund in *Fair Rosamund*. See Chapter 2 of this study.

⁴¹ Field, *Attila*, I.i.18.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I.i.21; I.i.5; I.i.21; III.i.73.

contain Honoria's sexuality, preserve her virginity and isolate her from any "intimate connection".⁴³ As Satyrus observes, she must be 'content' with the "perfect homage of the stiffened back...lowered eye and more than stiffened tongue".⁴⁴ This containment is driven by specifically political demands, as Valentinian explains, she is made Augusta, "To keep you always inaccessible / To any suitor...Not one of them shall plague you – *me*, I mean", as he doesn't want "a fellow / To share my throne".⁴⁵ Her position ensures - there is "no suitor / Whom she could wed without humiliation/ Or weakening the empire" – denying her the realisation of her 'womanhood', her sexuality and its desires, any hope of marriage and children.⁴⁶ This can be understood in terms of contextual anxieties which surrounded the potential political or social disruption unmarried (and therefore uncontained) female sexuality could pose, and is very much associated with the responses to the New Woman figure's perceived sexual liberty. The representation of the strictly virginal role of an Augusta, despite its empty 'glory' of "knowing you are a goddess", can further be understood as a powerful critique of the narrowness of legitimate contemporary roles and sexual identities which impose strict limitations on the agency of 'daughters' and by extension, other unmarried middle-class women.⁴⁷

It is the demands of family and state which conspire to deny Honoria any agency not only over her sexuality, but also her future. Placidia's determines that Honoria should have 'no future', have "None at all".⁴⁸ Valentinian displays similar self-interest: "Why should you trouble, mother, with the girl? / I will take care she

⁴³ Field, *Attila*, l.i.5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, l.i.6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, l.i.19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, l.i.20.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, l.i.21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, l.i.14.

does not spoil my life”.⁴⁹ Valentinian’s assertion that “this has all been settled by the state / Without your intervention: women’s business / Has to be settled so”, clearly identifies the middle class woman’s identity or role as one which is dictated and imposed upon her in deeply patriarchal and politically partisan terms.⁵⁰ Honoria’s exclusion from ‘intervening’ in the ‘business’ of her future, she tells her mother, “this misery is something that you choose / To settle on me”.⁵¹ Just as Placida determines in the first scene: “I live...for the glory of our house, / The Theodorian House; Honoria too / Must live for it” the Fields here reflect on concurrent struggles by some (upper)middle-class women with the limitations and demands of a family life which denies them agency.⁵²

Honoria’s wish to be severed from her family in Act Two - “I should like to be so much. / Much further off from anyone who owns me, / Or who has ever called me by my name” - identifies them, and the society they represent, as the source of her now extreme oppression. Her expression of this desire for escape, comes in response to her fourteen-year subjection to a nun-like existence with Pulcheria and her cousins in the Eastern Empire, and after Placidia has murdered her illegitimate child.⁵³ The imagery of ‘calling her name’, further indicates that her role is set and determined by the authority of her family and her freedoms are subject to the discretion of those who ‘own’ her. Exclaiming that to be without relatives is “fortunate” Honoria laments, “If earth were free of them and one might start / Quite fresh among the strangers, making friends / Just as one could!”⁵⁴ Through Honoria’s fantasy of ‘starting afresh’, where she is free to express herself, develop her own sense of identity, and move

⁴⁹ Field, *Attila*, l.i.14.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, l.i.19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, l.i.21.

⁵² *Ibid.*, l.i.13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, III.i.63.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, III.i.63.

unencumbered by considerations of duty (or gender) ‘among the strangers’ the Fields are reflecting on some of the contemporary concerns surrounding the positioning of unmarried middle-class women and their wider (disparate) struggles to secure or achieve ‘New Woman’ goals of independence and free expression, even access to higher education or a profession. As an unmarried daughter, Honoria’s agency is under the control and scrutiny of her family and there is no possible position for her as an independent autonomous woman in this rigidly patriarchal social environment (sexually or otherwise). This represents yet another example of the Fields’ ongoing concern with characterising and foregrounding the individual woman’s experience of oppression and her struggle for agency. Concerns with interrogating and exposing the patriarchal ideologies and institutions of church and state which authorise familial oppression and indeed familial abuse against (particularly) daughters saturate the Fields’ earlier dramas addressed in this study. These issues are absolutely central to Callirrhoë’s tragic fate, as well as those of Nephele and Dione in *Callirrhoë*.⁵⁵

In *Attila*, then, the Fields directly engage with the relationship between familial oppression and wider efforts to sustain the stability of a patriarchal political system or empire, as that which intersects upon the (sexual) body of unmarried middle-class women.⁵⁶ After all, it is ultimately this familial oppression that drives Honoria’s later crazed fantasises of Attila laying waste to Rome, and avenging her by annihilating her family. As I now discuss, in *Attila*, the Fields demonstrate that such oppression actually serves to provoke and exacerbate ever greater extremes of resistance and rebellion.

⁵⁵ Something which is discussed at length in Chapter One of this thesis.

⁵⁶ See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Virago Press, 1992) where this is examined at length.

Honorina is, unlike many of the preceding eponymous heroines of this study such as Callirrhoë and Rosamund, a figure of determined resistance: she does not meekly acquiesce to the demands of virginity and isolated familial duty. Honorina's determination for agency and exertion of self does also chime with that of the two older, more experienced and previously married figures of Queen Mary and Stephania.⁵⁷ Her motivations, however, as the preface states, are founded in a powerful 'impulse' for self-expression, to give freedom to her 'womanhood', and to experience love and sexuality for herself, not, as in the preceding dramas, to escape sexual exploitation or marital violence.

At the end of Act One, in response to hearing her virgin fate as Augusta and in a desperate effort to experience sex for herself before it is denied her forever, Honorina seduces Eugenius, her slave. Telling him that the elevated 'adoration' given to the Augusta denies her true nature, she re-characterises sexual experience as an "honour" men give to those women they love, before passionately crying out:

While really I am just a maiden-girl
Who would be loved, who would not be left out
By April, who . . .
*(She suddenly kisses him)*⁵⁸

This seduction can be understood as a powerful act of resistance, a defiant act of autonomy and sexual agency. She not only takes possession of her 'womanhood', but does so from a position of power, as she seduces an underling, a slave. There is no

⁵⁷ Mary, throughout *The Tragic Mary*, attempts to exert her will as a Queen, and Stephania is a figure of successful revenge against male violent oppression. See Chapters Three and Four respectively.

⁵⁸ Field, *Attila*, l.i.27.

suggestion that she acts out of anything other than the desire for sexual experience and her determination to be true to her 'nature', as she tells her mother, "[y]ou cannot change my nature with the burthen / Of your mock title."⁵⁹ This is further reinforced by her determination to protect him through marriage once their child is born.⁶⁰ Their unequal and doomed relationship specifically resists simplistic and reductive presumptions such as that she takes a slave as her lover to undermine her family's political position or elite racial purity. Instead, she is very obviously in a state of extreme sexual excitement. Describing her feelings for another exiled suitor, Evander – "It brings a burning rapture to my body / To think of him" - her highly sexualised language identifies her desires as remarkably physical, bordering on a religious experience.⁶¹

Honorius's 'resistance' to her family's demands does not solely manifest in the achievement of physical sexual experience, it is also carefully characterised as a struggle for knowledge of female sexuality, and an acknowledgement of her own 'womanhood'. Her containment as an Augusta, as Placidia reveals in Act One, specifically relies on keeping her ignorant - "Nothing deep, / No prying into mysteries!"⁶² - as well as isolated from experience of any kind. Desperate to know what, as she is destined not to marry, she is missing, she appeals to her (married) attendant, Marsa, to tell her, but receives only a tight lipped response "I cannot!, There is no modesty in such discourse".⁶³ Female sexuality is clearly located here as expressible only within marriage and between the initiates of this socially and theologically authorised institution. As Marsa tells her, if she could be married to

⁵⁹ Field, *Attila* l.i.21.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.*, ll.i.35-42.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l.i.29.

⁶² *Ibid.*, l.i.15.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, l.i.15.

“some subject king” then she “would understand...for [she] would be a bride” a state which she considers ‘everything’.⁶⁴ This denial of female sexuality – even its discussion - outside the context of marriage can be read as the Fields’ referring to wider contemporary agitations for, and resistances to, attempts by some New Women writers to negotiate and find a form of expression for unmarried female sexuality. Honoria is severed from sexual or biological womanhood by the stark oppositional binary opposition of the two available female identities - “the girl and wife” – who are “strangers”, something which mirrors the stark binaries of Calydon in *Callirrhoe*.⁶⁵ This opposition can be understood as severing and undermining the role of the unmarried woman as ‘unwomanly’ and in conflict with the institutions of the church and state.

The Fields’ focus on this struggle for middle-class women to take possession of their own womanhood, is revealing the impact this silent state of ignorance can potentially have on an individual’s perception and purpose of their own ‘nature’. This is demonstrated through the tragic consequences that befall Honoria, as this ‘silence’ and exclusion is what ultimately leads to her pregnancy, and then the murder of her child. Reflecting on Marsa’s silence she laments:

If there were no need
To learn the secrets of my womanhood
From matrons and from mothers; if this way
The roses take to open to the sun
And to enjoy were right!⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ibid., l.i.25. Note the lack of capitalisation on King emphasising her power, Ibid., l.i.25

⁶⁵ Ibid., l.i.23.

⁶⁶ Field, *Attila*, l.i.26.

This is a challenging recognition of the nature of female sexuality, and she clearly characterises her ‘womanhood’ as a natural possession of her own which exists outside these married roles of mother or matron. Honoria once again, struggles to identify and express her ‘womanhood’ she states anxiously: “Only the courage seems impiety / For just a girl to dare to be herself.”⁶⁷ She is “just a girl”, an indication of her position or identity as insignificant or powerless, who “dares to be herself”, presenting the idea that self-determination or autonomy as a woman is still a struggle not only against familial disapproval, but also against a whole set of social and ideological constructions, demands and denials. As she determines to take her ‘bold course’ of seducing Eugenius, she releases herself from these bonds, “all / The church has taught me seems to slip away” closely associating female self-expression and sexual autonomy with a release from the ‘teachings’ of patriarchal institutions, that is, the doctrines which dictate this binary model of virginity and married sexuality.⁶⁸

Honoria’s appeal for experience and knowledge (or her resistance to silent isolation) clearly echoes that of Callirrhoë and even Rosamund. Like them she is confined and denied wider experience and sexual agency, ultimately becoming a victim of oppression and exploitation. The punishment for all of these eponymous heroines (except Stephania) is madness, death and confinement, at their own hands or at the hands of others. All are subject to terrible suffering or abuse as a result of their disempowered or silenced positioning within their respective cultures. The Fields utilise drama, as this study has continually shown, to hold up a mirror to their

⁶⁷ Field, *Attila*, l.i.26.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, l.i.26.

contemporary society, and to reflect upon the contested identity and positioning of the middle-class woman.

It is in fact a combination of both the threat of enforced virginity and Marsa's refusal to discuss sex with an unmarried woman which initiate Honoria's obsession with Attila. Realising she will never know sexual experience, in a frenzied voice she cries:

Unless, indeed, some mighty conqueror
Should take me captive. Ah, how glorious
If such a thing could be! If Attila
Could lay siege to Ravenna!...
And bear me off and take me to the tents,
The filthy tents.⁶⁹

The language of this statement, like others pertaining to her desire for Attila, is both highly sexually charged and focussed on the 'difference' of this experience from her tightly controlled environment. The elevated position of her 'maidenhood', for example, is sharply contrasted by her fascination with the 'filth' – the danger and the threat of sexual exploitation - which she interprets as a better option than frustrated ignorance and unsatisfied or unrequited desire.

To Honoria, Attila is a figure of agency, power and resistance, the very antithesis of her position and an enemy to her family's political power. He is also very much her 'last hope' and she is appealing to him in desperation, in a final attempt to resist her lack of agency. Appealing for Satyrus' help, she explains,

I cannot of myself fulfil my passion,

⁶⁹ Field, *Attila*, l.i.23-4.

I cannot reach the freedom I desire,
I cannot carry suffering to its end.⁷⁰

The powerful triple repetition of 'I cannot' foregrounds the utter hopelessness she now feels, believing that without his betrothal, she is condemned to "a life that is not failure, but a blank".⁷¹ This, furthermore, foregrounds how the need for agency and to avenge her suffering is at this point inexorably entwined with her fixation on him. As she tells Satyrus: "He conquers by sheer willing: so I purpose / To win my place beside him in the world."⁷²

This longing for, and fascination with, Attila is sustained throughout the play. Her child murdered, and locked away for fourteen years with her nun-like cousins, Honoria's determination to free herself or to be set free by marriage to Attila, only becomes more set. Initially an impulsive oppositional reaction against a sexless future - a wild fantasy of adventure and extreme sexual experience - develops over her years of incarceration into a fantasy of destruction and annihilation of her family and empire.⁷³ Her passion for Attila is carefully presented as not only misguided, but founded in a deep-seated lack of sexual or indeed social autonomy. Yet again, the Fields are re-characterising challenging and misrepresented female identities and behaviours through their heroine.

In the final scene, it is revealed to Honoria that Attila is "[not] merely dead, but *murdered*" by his new bride, Ildico.⁷⁴ Honoria's discovery of his death rests on the

⁷⁰ Field, *Attila*, II.i.67.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, II.i.67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, II.i.65.

⁷³ See her cry to be avenged at the close of Act Two, Field, *Attila*, II.i.87.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, IV.i.107.

stark reality that the man she desired and pinned her hopes of freedom on, was a rapist. Anthemius tells her it was common knowledge “the girl was forced”, that is, she was a victim of forced marriage and then rape, and he goes on to recount its horrors.⁷⁵ Her mounting distress as she hears the stark reality of her idol, cumulates in her re-enactment of Ildico’s murder of Attila, with a “jeering laugh”, the stage directions state “she catches hold of her own veil and wrings it round her head, while her right hand is clenched as if it held a knife”.⁷⁶ Honoria’s attempt to take over Ildico’s act for herself is a final attempt to achieve agency, not through Attila, but through a woman who was also suffering from sexual oppression.

Honoria’s alignment with Ildico in this last scene functions to explode the myth that she is fixated with being sexually dominated by Attila. It is in fact far more complex and is the distillation of her oppressed desires: the success of her escape, the destruction of her family’s empire and with the power to determine her sexuality. It is only at the very end of the play, when Attila’s true nature is revealed to Honoria, that her cry of ‘Attila, My Attila’ subsides. Now she cries “Ildico” repeatedly shrieking this name, before descending into a “senseless heap”.⁷⁷ It is the abused Ildico, therefore, who ultimately becomes the heroine, for Honoria at least, ending the play declaring her sisterhood and calling her name. Reading Ildico as her sister in sexual oppression, as a fellow victim of the violent removal of sexual autonomy, produces a challenging set of ideas. It is Honoria’s desire throughout the play to achieve agency, to have a meaningful impact on the wider world, to achieve an autonomous act, even the power to bring down empires. It is Ildico, however, the victim of very real and horrifying abuse, who takes possession of her womanhood, striking the fatal blow to

⁷⁵ Field, *Attila* IV.i.106; IV.i.105-6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.i.107.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, IV.i.107.

the violator of countless women and bringing his rule to an end. What the Fields draw attention to here, as they do in *Stephania*, is that it is possible to avenge the extremes of oppression or exploitation such as rape, when perpetuated by an individual, such as Attila or Otho, but that for the majority of middle-class women, their experience of sexual oppression is far more complex and cannot be resisted so simply or decisively. It is in fact, as Field shows, imposed in a multiplicity of ways by the functioning of a wider patriarchal system, one founded on the concerns, constructions and necessities of perpetuating masculine authority.

Ildico endures what countless women (as victims of the Hun or as contemporary women) have and continue to suffer at the hands of both male individuals, and reveals a culture of men who do nothing to prevent it. The politicised and pro-active aspects of the New Woman's role were precisely focussed for some (such as Grand) on protecting and speaking out for victims of sexual and physical violence; on using their superior moral and intellectual capacities for the benefit of all those oppressed by male dominance. Just as earlier activists such as Bradley and Cooper aligned their struggle against silenced or oppressed middle-class womanhood with the silenced suffering and injustices experienced by those less capable to speak out, such as prostitutes or animals, Honoria here can be understood to find a 'sister' who strikes a fatal blow against an agent of female suffering and against, symbolically at least, the denial of autonomous 'womanhood' or sexual agency through force which both women experience. Ildico's agency ultimately gives Honoria what she has been seeking, a way to contextualise, and recognise her suffering and her impulses.

The New Woman offers potentially a new role, a new purpose and space for exploration and participation, new freedoms and a rapidly expanding 'new world'

which promise independence and self-sustaining existences outside the suffocating morality and social politics of the Victorian family. The New Woman is, therefore, an experimental and modern but also as yet undefined identity. The Fields are, in *Attila*, entering into the multiplicity of contemporary political, social, medical and moral discursive constructions and contestations which were intersecting on this 'new' figure of womanhood. This play can be understood as representing not only the Fields' specific intervention into the negotiation and definition of what a "New Woman" can and may be, but as participation in wider debates surrounding the established positioning and perception of unmarried middle-class women. Honoria shares her impulse to "be herself" and her exclusion from 'womanhood' with the New Women of both fiction and fact. In her disastrously destructive actions and focus, however, she is very much a 'victim', or more accurately a 'product' of the distorted and rigid roles, demands and punishments which intersect upon her sexuality. If the New Woman is to have a productive future, rather than self-destruct or pervert natural drives in the pursuit of sexual experience whatever the cost or circumstances, what Ouida calls "the harem", then the focus must be not on avenging matters of thwarted personal desire, but on exposing the mechanism of oppression.⁷⁸ The Fields, throughout these dramas, are resisting, by means of literary interrogation, the established roles which deny unmarried women sexual autonomy and experience and perpetuate their suffering.

Honoria's position at the close of the play one of utter helplessness. It is Placidia who ends the play, defining Honoria's 'future' as she did at the start, instructing the guard, "Take [Honoria] to her cell; / She must be hidden."⁷⁹ Honoria is ultimately denied all

⁷⁸ See Ouida, "The New Woman," 610-19.

⁷⁹ Field, *Attila*, IV.i.107.

autonomy, sexual experience - with the exception of her “single hour” with Eugenius – and to make her life more than a ‘blank’ or absence.⁸⁰ Brought back into her ‘cell’, and the position of sexual and social containment which she has resisted so desperately, she is now back under familial control. Lacking what Joseph Bristow termed the “feminist energy” of their earlier dramas, *Attila* offers no concluding scene of mortal retribution, nor does Honoria achieve any sense of autonomy, her intentions and desires come to nothing.”⁸¹ She is ultimately an agent of her own destruction. I suggest therefore, that the irony of Honoria’s tale (suggested in the preface) lies in the fact that although her desires to “to be herself” are “fair and natural” they become ‘perverse’ in response to definitions of womanhood that cripple, deny, and distort her understanding of her own sexuality through silence and censure.⁸² Desperate, ignorant and powerless, Honoria obeys her natural urges blindly, unthinkingly and ultimately tragically. Honoria lacks even the agency to take possession of her body through suicide, like Callirrhoë and Rosamund, precisely because her impulse to resist becomes perversely fixated on securing her agency through sexual submission to a male ‘hero’. Just as Rosamund’s experience of Henry’s romantic fantasies reveal the falseness and powerlessness of this ‘knight in shining armour’ and ‘embowered lady’ dynamic, so Honoria’s fantasies of being ‘carried off’ to the camp of an uncivilised warlord, are presented as even more destructive, she actually, therefore, exacerbates, rather than overcomes, her oppression.

⁸⁰ Field, *Attila* II.i.39.

⁸¹ Bristow, “Unwomanly Audacities.” In contrast to Callirrhoë and Rosamund who take possession of their fates through self-sacrifice, and Stephania who exacts revenge and justice for her suffering.

⁸² *Ibid.*, ii.

Attila, My Attila! was, and remains, perhaps one of Michael Field's most maligned and overlooked dramas. There was at this time an increasing hostility toward and lack of interest in their work - Vadillo notes that their struggle to find a publisher for *Attila* was due to their last Roman play, *Stephania* being a "flop", and this was something they found particularly challenging.⁸³ In April 1895 while in Florence, they received news of yet another rejection, Cooper writes: "No-one wants our work & we can't make our work sing against the world as we did".⁸⁴ She further reveals her fear of not being able to 'speak out' - central to their earlier dramas - was coming to pass: "Such absolute lack of response nearly kills us-we wonder if we have voices at all, or whether we are only mad & dream we can be heard".⁸⁵ *Attila* was eventually taken up by Elkin Mathews in in late November 1895 and published early the next year. There was some praise: Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon loved it and the *Athenaeum* "suggested the Independent Theatre should stage it".⁸⁶ This enthusiasm, however, was not enough to save *Attila* from the doldrums of critical obscurity. The play was certainly not well received, either by critics or those in the Fields' circle: as Treby notes "the reviews were disastrous".⁸⁷ Bradley and Cooper were particularly wounded when Bernard Berenson and Mary Costelloe read it "with jeers and uncontrollable laughter", Cooper writing "[m]y womanhood is dying" and moving Bradley to break ties with them, "...our friendship closes".⁸⁸ George Meredith also expressed his dislike for the play, albeit in far kinder terms. He wrote to Michael Field in August 1895, stating he had

⁸³ Vadillo, "Hot-House," 200.

⁸⁴ Edith Cooper, "Works and Days," April 1895, British Library. Add. Ms. 46783, fol. 60v-61.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Add. Ms. 46783, fol. 60v-61.

⁸⁶ See Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 76.

⁸⁷ Treby, *Catalogue*, 34.

⁸⁸ Michael Field, "Works and Days," 29 November 1895, British Library. Add. Ms. 46784, fol. 28.

“little praise for the line or the characters of your *Attila*”.⁸⁹ Meredith also expressed distaste for the sexual nature of their subject matter, what he interprets as an attempt to reflect “grim light on the sex mania current”, and dismisses it as satire, and as “quite enough to kill your poetry”.⁹⁰ The worst of these reviews, as Vadillo identifies, was that in the *Daily Chronicle* which Cooper would describe in their diary as defamation.⁹¹ The reviewer, like Meredith, takes particular issue with the play’s highly sexual nature, calling it an “excursus against chastity”, a “Byzantine corruption”, then undermining and mocking its “lusts” and “lechery”, as the work of sexually ignorant “harmless and well behaved ladies” with as much knowledge of sex as a “schoolgirl”.⁹² Vadillo contextualises this extreme reaction in terms of a contemporary climate of hostility toward unconventional sexuality, new gender roles such as the New Woman and “this eternal sex problem”, which emerged “[i]n the wake of the Oscar Wilde trials”, explaining that “the reviewer used the play to launch a personal attack on the very nature of Michael Field (and on the modernity of New Woman literature)”.⁹³ What Vadillo overlooks in her assessment, however, is that this review represents precisely the oppression of unmarried female sexuality and denial of a voice for this sexuality - characterising the Fields as “harmless” and excluding them from sexual knowledge (and therefore the right to discuss it) - that Honoria is subjected to, and which they directly conflate in the play with contemporary attitudes to the figure of the New Woman.

⁸⁹ George Meredith, “Letter from George Meredith to Michael Field, 19 August 1895,” reproduced in Field, *Works and Days*, 90.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹¹ For Cooper’s full reaction, see “Works and Days,” 20 November 1895, British Library, Add. Ms. 46784, fol.55. The review referred to is “The New Woman- And The Old,” *Daily Chronicle*, November 20, 1895, 5. For a discussion of this article in context see Vadillo, “Hot-House,” 201-2.

⁹² “The New Woman- And The Old,” *Daily Chronicle*, November 20, 1895, 5.

⁹³ Vadillo, “Hot-House,” 202, and “The New Woman- And The Old,” 5.

Bradley and Cooper were not unaware of this increasing hostility. As their diary reveals, they were most disturbed by the trial and conviction of their friend Wilde, particularly so by his treatment, “the trial & condemnation of Oscar has been the horror”, later commenting, it was “the foolish punishment for an odious offence”.⁹⁴ In the aftermath of the trials, this new backlash against ‘effeminate’ male identities or behaviours acted to draw hostile attention to indicators of gender or sexual transgression in writing, speech, manner or appearance - in both men and women - as indicative of personal perversity. Such dramatic shifts in contemporary attitudes, and an increasingly delineated spectrum of sexuality meant that the environment which received this play was more unreceptive and resistant to the Fields’ representation of an individual woman’s struggle for sexual autonomy and expression in *Attila*, and all the more so now that the gender and duality of “Michael Field” was more widely known.

Among this overwhelming negativity however, there was some hope. Bradley and Cooper had found, in their new (and what was to become lifelong) friendship with the artists and lovers Ricketts and Shannon (‘the painters’) whom they met in early January 1894, a deep sympathy and understanding they had previously lacked in their relationships with male friends.⁹⁵ Bradley writes in October 1894, “Ricketts adores Shannon as I adore Henry”, and, in the relationship between these committed but private gay men, Bradley and Cooper saw a reflection of their own unconventional but loving union.⁹⁶ They were, however, keenly aware of the greater risks, as homosexual men, faced by the ‘brother artists’ and as early as July 1894, Bradley cryptically writes

⁹⁴ Add.MS.46784, (1895) p.55a. See Add.MS.46789 pp.162-8. ; Quoted in Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 74.

⁹⁵ See Correspondence with John Miller Gray (Part II), *Michael Field Papers Vol IV ff 235 (1890-1894) Letters from Michael Field*, British Library, Add.MS.45854.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Treby, *Catalogue*, 33.

of Ricketts and Shannon, “the brother-artists both adore Oscar – one hopes they don't imitate their idol in more than conversation”, a warning perhaps of the negative attention such a flamboyant disregard for masculine convention could draw.⁹⁷ The Fields' career as dramatists, from this point continued to decline in terms of public visibility and serious critical attention. They remained, however, defiant and continued writing and publishing dramas right up to their deaths. They saw twelve more dramas published in their lifetime after *Attila*, many through Ricketts' Vale Press and resorting, when a publisher could not be found, to publishing their work themselves. They remained committed to expressing themselves, to 'speaking out' as dramatists, and using the medium of drama as a means to re-define or negotiate the positioning and construction of contemporary women. As the twentieth century dawned, however, the move toward Modernism in literature had no place for the 'archaic' settings and verse-drama form to which they remained faithful. They once more found themselves, as they had at the very beginning of their career as 'dramatists', as outsiders, no longer simply as women (although modernism was notoriously fixated with primal masculine energy and power as a source of creativity) but as figures of a past age.

⁹⁷ Field, “Works and Days,” 9 July 1894, quoted in Donoghue, *Michael Field*, 77. Indicating an awareness of the risks and public condemnation of sexual non-conformity, all the more intensified by New Woman debates surrounding gender and sexual disruption.

Conclusion

“Michael Field has greatly enriched the world's knowledge of womanhood”

Mary Sturgeon¹

Michael Field’s eponymous heroines slipped into a critical wasteland only a short time after their creation. Bringing these dramatic works back into the light, and subjecting them to a sustained and rigorous analysis, has resulted in a body of academic work which makes a timely and weighty contribution to the field of Michael Field Studies. Moreover, by focussing solely on the dramas-as-texts, as opposed to engaging with them only in reference to their poetry or life-writing (as much previous critical work has) this thesis has exponentially expanded understandings of the Fields-as-dramatists. In fact, as highly politically engaged and fundamentally concerned with the experience of womanhood as subject to a repressive patriarchal system.

Whilst I do not want to impose an easy developmental or chronological model onto their dramatic writing in this period and beyond, what this thesis has demonstrated is that by the second half of the 1890s, the Fields’ dramas were significantly sharper, more focussed, and less rambling or amorphous than those produced at the beginning of their career. Their earlier confused protests against monolithic and draconian systems of patriarchal abuse and female silence, and heroines whose only escape is death, as in *Callirrhoë* (1884) and *Fair Rosamund* (1884), by this point, had become more pointed, confident and challenging. Plays such as *Stephania* (1890) and *Attila, My Attila!* (1896) particularly, have a much stronger sense of technique and staging,

¹ Mary Sturgeon, *Michael Field* (London: George Harrap & Co, 1922).

as well as dealing with scandalising issues of rape, prostitution and familial abuse. There were, as I have shown, a number of contributing factors to this change, far beyond the mere passing of time. The Fields, as these analyses repeatedly demonstrate, engaged very specifically with their contemporary environment, and were highly responsive and sophisticated in their intervention into issues concerning the positioning and construction of middle-class women. Furthermore, they were utterly immersed at this time in the literary and artistic circles of *fin-de-siècle* London and were inspired by the new kinds of dramatic models and forms employed by their contemporaries. What this thesis ultimately reveals, however, is that alongside these concerns, the Fields' were exploring and negotiating their own position and identity as female dramatists, as unmarried women with sexual desires, even middle-class women, through their eponymous heroines and their tragedies.

Although the Fields perhaps would be somewhat scandalised by some of my interpretations and readings of their heroines and dramatic writing, and would most certainly take me to task over any inaccuracies, I think they would be delighted that two of their greatest ambitions were finally being fulfilled. This thesis has given their writing the kind of "real criticism, such as man gives man" (or in this case as woman gives women) they so desperately craved, but rarely received, by establishing their dramatic work as a legitimate subject for academic study.² As a result, there will be many more of us who are ready to listen to what Michael Field: Dramatist has to say.

For a nearly a century, the Fields' lives and work languished in almost complete obscurity, and even since the first 'recovery' efforts of critics such as Angela Leighton, they have remained absent from the public consciousness in general.

² Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884, repro. *Works and Days; From the Journal of Michael Field*, ed. T & D. C. Sturge Moore (London: John Murray, 1933), 6.

Bradley and Cooper never ceased to work in the dramatic form, despite receiving very little (if any) attention from critics and, as the century turned, slipping out of the cultural landscape almost completely. There are a significant number of unfinished and unpublished works, particularly post-*A Question of Memory* (1893) with intriguing titles such as *Tyrannicide* a ‘modern play’ (started 1893), *William Said* (worked on 1893-4) which concerns “heritable insanity”, and *The Witch Wife* (started 1895).³ These mainly incomplete works would make for a fascinating future study, and would potentially open up new avenues of investigation and create wider understandings of both the Fields’ drama writing process at this time, and how they engaged with the new modern theatre of the 1890s. Any study like this inevitably leaves one with the sense that the surface has but been scratched, and several lifetimes could be given over to creating a comprehensive account of their dramatic work. In the last year however, Bradley and Cooper as ‘Michael Field’ have been recovered to modern culture, and their collaboration, relationship and their ‘queer’ identity has been included in an exhibition at Tate Britain titled “Queer British Art: 1861 – 1967” the first exhibition devoted to queer British art. It is their jewellery, designed by Charles Ricketts, which is exhibited alongside the portraits of and by Ricketts and Shannon, a fitting legacy for the Fields given their life-long passion for costume and adornment. Although their precise positioning within the category of ‘queer’ is not fully addressed. Finally, their dramatic identity too has been included in a radio documentary on Radio Four, in which the actor Simon Callow explores the lives and works of artists who would not have identified themselves as ‘gay’, but nonetheless explored coded desire within their work. Despite critical and cultural readings continuing to approach Michael Field through the lens of their sexuality and relationship, it is a joy to see their

³ Ivor C. Treby, *The Michael Field Catalogue: A Book of Lists* (Suffolk: De Blackland Press, 1998), 79.

name reinstated to the late-Victorian literary landscape from which it so ungraciously slipped.

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