

Michael Field, Dramatic Poet

Display to accompany the Michael Field Centenary Conference, Institute of English Studies, Senate House, 11-12 July 2014

'Michael Field' was the joint pseudonym of Katharine Harris Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Emma Cooper (1862-1913). Together they wrote eleven volumes of poetry and more than thirty verse dramas. Michael Field's fame rests today with the lyric poetry. The display of books here, taken from the Senate House Library, sheds light on Michael Field's importance as a dramatic poet.

The Father's Tragedy; William Rufus; Loyalty or Love?

Michael Field

London: G. Bell, 1884

[S.L.] II [Field - 1884]

This is Michael Field's second book. In the 'Preface' to the third of the three dramas that comprise the volume, Field writes: 'History and fiction, fact and fable, cross and recross the texture of the plot'. This sentence captures the essence of Michael Field's dramatic theory. The plot of the first play, *The Father's Tragedy*, comes from the poets' childhood love for Sir Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* (1827). The drama is based on two fifteenth-century chronicles, Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* (1447) and Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (c.1406), and recreates the life of Robert III, whose tragedy is his inability to be a real father to his son, Prince David, Duke of Rothsay. The second play is based on Edward Augustus Freeman's *The Reign of William Rufus* (1882) and narrates the death of King William Rufus. The third and last play, *Loyalty or Love?*, is founded on Henry Hart Milman's *History of Latin Christianity* (1840) and dramatises Henry VI of Germany's conquest of Sicily.

Canute the Great; The Cup of Water

Michael Field

London: G. Bell, [1887]

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Dramatically speaking, the two plays that make up this volume – Michael Field's fourth book – are significantly different. The first, *Canute the Great*, is a historical play about the life of King Canute the Great; the second, *The Cup of Water*, is a lyrical drama based on an idea for a poem by D.G. Rossetti. The theory underlying the first is evolution. *Canute the Great* is a dramatic study of a hero caught up in the transition between two ages: he is a Viking with Pagan blood in his veins whose destiny is to become a Christian king. In his review of the play, Oscar Wilde noted that 'its tragic element is to be found in life, not in death; in the hero's psychological development, not in his moral declension or in any physical calamity.' However, Wilde favoured the heightened beauty of *The Cup of Water*, a drama about how love is a higher good than loyalty.

The Tragic Mary

Michael Field

London: G. Bell, 1890

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In an 1883 essay on D. G. Rossetti, Walter Pater wrote that ‘Old Scot history ... is strong in the matter of heroic and vehement hatreds and love, the tragic Mary herself being but the perfect blossom of them.’ The play dramatises the life of Mary, Queen of Scots. The book cover was designed by Selwyn Image, who was given very precise instructions: ‘His business will be difficult – to draw a design imaginatively symbolic of our conception – yet without trite Scottish emblems.’ Two different editions of the book were published, an edition by George Bell, and a privately printed edition bound by Zaehnsdorf in white vellum. This is the Bell edition.

The World at Auction

Michael Field

London: Hacon & Ricketts, 1898

[S.L.] III [Vale Press – 1898]

Michael Field’s Roman trilogy (*The World at Auction*, *The Race of Leaves* and *Julia Domna*) dramatises the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, covering the period AD 180-121. Though published first, *The World at Auction* is in dramatic time the second in the trilogy. Focusing on the reign of Didius Julianus, the play imagines what living in a pseudo-Aesthetic state would be like. Published by the Vale Press of Charles Ricketts, its stunning decorations were designed and cut on wood by Ricketts. Cooper adored the green peacocks of its cover and Bradley believed that the capital ‘A’ in the centre of the page shown was the most beautiful letter in the whole world.

The Race of Leaves

Michael Field

London: Hacon & Ricketts, 1901

[S.L.] III [Vale Press – 1901]

Though published second, *The Race of Leaves* is historically the first in the trilogy and recreates the downfall of Commodus. Cooper and Ricketts agreed that the main adornment for the first page of text (shown) should be the figure of the two-face god Janus. For the cover of this splendid book, Ricketts used the image of leaves in the wind.

Julia Domna

Michael Field

London: Hacon & Ricketts, 1903

Private copy

Julia Domna is a sobering play about power and motherhood. Brothers Caracalla and Geta are joint Emperors who compete for the love of their mother (the Empress Julia Domna) and for the Empire. The play explores their mother’s agony: Julia Domna is unable to avert the killing of Geta by the hand of Caracalla. For the book cover, Ricketts used once again the green peacock.

Noontide Branches: A Small Sylvan Drama Interspersed With Songs and Invocations

Michael Field

Oxford: H. Daniel, 1899

[S.L.] III [Daniel Press - S.C. 2] fol.

This pagan drama, a 'masque' about love, desire, sex and possession, is set in a woodland by a tidal river in the West of England, with satyrs, nymphs, the goddess Artemis Dictynna and the Lady of the Woods as the characters. It was published on handmade paper in this delightfully blue cover by the Daniel Press, a small private press based in Oxford, which also published the work of Lewis Carroll, John Addington Symonds and Edmund Gosse.

Deirdre; A Question of Memory; Ras Byzance

Michael Field

London: Poetry Bookshop, 1918

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After the deaths of Bradley and Cooper, their friend, the poet Thomas Sturge Moore supervised the publication of Michael Field's works. Field disliked the 'incurable jaundice' of the *Yellow Book* but they would have liked the modern design of this yellow cover. Moore chose the Poetry Bookshop, set up by Harold Monro, because it promoted experimental twentieth-century poetry and plays.

Delegates are warmly invited to use the general or special collections at Senate House Library at any time. Membership details and the library catalogue are available on the Senate House Library web pages: http://www.senatehouselibrary.ac.uk .

Senate House Library would like to thank Ana Parejo Vadillo, Birkbeck, for curating this display.