DISABILITY AND GENDER IN THE VISUAL FIELD: SEEING THE SUBTERRANEAN LIVES OF MICHAEL FIELD’S WILLIAM RUFUS

By Sharon Bickle

WHEN THE UK’S GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER featured “La Gioconda” as poem of the week in January 2010, the paper’s popular readership discovered what many late-Victorian scholars had known about for some time: the poetic partnership of Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), known as “Michael Field.” The successful recovery of the Fields as significant late-Victorian writers – a project now in its second decade – seems poised to emerge into popular awareness driven as much by interest in their unconventional love affair as by the poetry itself.¹ Scholars too have been seduced by the romance of a transgressive love story, and the critical nexus between sexuality and textuality has produced remarkable scholarship on the Fields’ lyric poetry: those texts in which the personas have a rough equivalence with Bradley and Cooper themselves.² Yopie Prins first noted the complex engagement of multiple voices with lyric structure in Long Ago (74–111), and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Women Poets 175–95), Jill Ehnenn (73–96), and Hilary Fraser (553–56) expanded on this to uncover the transformation of the lyric’s male gaze into a triangulated lesbian vision in Sight and Song (1892). In contrast to the recognition accorded their lyric verse, most critics have overlooked Michael Field’s verse dramas. While there have been attempts to shift attention onto the plays,³ the significance of the Fields’ lesbian vision to the dramas has never been explored. This article seeks to redress this pervasive neglect and begin dismantling the boundaries that have grown up between critical approaches to the lyrics and the plays.

My analysis of Michael Field’s early verse drama William Rufus (1885) builds on Fraser’s work on visuality and visual hermeneutics in Sight and Song. Fraser argues that Sight and Song – a volume of ekphrastic poems inspired by iconic paintings – continues the project of Long Ago, the Fields’ poetic extension of Sappho’s fragments. Fraser highlights the centrality of translation to both texts, and argues convincingly that the lyrics represent “an exploration and articulation of lesbian sexuality in the field of vision” (553). In this article, I contend that the concept of translation found in these lyric volumes is already present in the Fields’ approach to history in William Rufus, and that the translated historical experience

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can similarly be read as an articulation of lesbian experience through the visual field. As with the lyrics, history in William Rufus is multiply mediated: through Michael Field, and through the figure of Beowulf, the blind narrator. Beowulf’s gaze, by which we interpret the world of the play, is both binocular and lesbian in that it is produced by a melding of his body – feminized by its blinding – with the chthonic Earth-mother. It is only through Beowulf’s unique visual field that it is possible to see the subterranean (female) lives that lie beneath the conventional historical surface narrative, to interpret the effects of these powerful forces on King William Rufus and his above-ground world of hegemonic masculinity, and more broadly to understand the Fields’ project of de-naturalizing common English history.

Bradley and Cooper adopted the pseudonym “Michael Field” for their first volume of verse dramas, Callirrhoë/Fair Rosamond in 1884. Under this name they published eight volumes of lyric poetry and seventeen historical verse dramas. Other dramas were authored as Arran and Isla Leigh, anonymously, or published posthumously for a total of twenty-seven. Mary Sturgeon’s original and unchallenged 1922 categorization of the plays as historical tragedies divides them into three rough thematic periods: English, Latin, and Eastern (118). Sturgeon suggests that the first group includes plays on Scottish and English history (written 1881–1890); that the second group (1892–1903) deals with Roman history; and that a third group (1905–1914) shares “an almost Oriental violence of passion” (198). Sturgeon herself acknowledges this loose grouping is problematic (119), but of more concern than the minutiae of written and publication orders is that this thematic grouping encourages a reading of the plays as “static, cumbersome, and ornate closet dramas” (Madden 63); dry historical recounts rather than unique revisionings. Many of Michael Field’s early plays were written, like William Rufus, as Elizabethan five-act dramas in blank verse. I argue that while the choice of archaic genre has tended to damage the reputation of the plays, it can be read as contributing to a more radical project to present a fractured, multi-layered, and multi-visual translation of totalized English history.

The Historical William Rufus: 1066 and just after . . .

WHILE MOST PEOPLE ARE FAMILIAR with the Norman Conquest of 1066, few are aware of William the Conqueror’s successor, the son who secured the throne of England over the claims of his elder brother, Robert. William II, called the Red or Rufus (probably because of his complexion or red beard) is not an obvious contender for eponymous dramatization. In Edward Freeman’s 1882 study, the Reign of William Rufus and the Accession of Henry I – a key source for Michael Field’s play – the king is described uninspiringly as:

a man of no great stature, of a thick square frame, with a projecting stomach. His bodily strength was great; his eye was restless; his speech was stammering, especially when he was stirred to anger. He lacked the power of speech which had belonged to his father and had even descended to his elder brother; his pent-up wrath or merriment, or whatever the momentary passion might be, broke out in short, sharp sentences, often showing some readiness of wit, but no continued flow of speech. (1: 144)

A brief flurry of scholarly activity on William Rufus in the 1970s and 80s determined that Rufus was a more than adequate (even lucky) warrior and administrator, who given enough
time may have developed into “a king of renown” (Barlow 3), and who successfully managed to hold his father’s territory together long enough to pass it to his younger brother, Henry I.

In summing up the reign of William Rufus, Frank Barlow, author of a major study of the king, offers only qualified praise. He notes that “Even for his detractors [William Rufus] was a prince who, if he could have corrected his moral faults, would have served as a model for all” (3). Barlow identifies these “moral faults” as an irreligious temperament and homosexuality. Writing in the nineteenth century, Freeman is less direct: William Rufus and his companions are accused of effeminacy in dress, mincing, the introduction of curly-toed shoes, “indulgence in the foulest forms of vice,” and extreme irreligion (1: 147). Later, Freeman identifies William Rufus as practicing the “vices of the East, the special sin . . . the habits of the ancient Greek and the modern Turk” (1: 159). Perhaps it is not surprising that the short, portly, stammering king in curly-toed shoes – bringing to mind nothing so much as an enraged Christmas elf – has proved impervious to historical redemption, and is chiefly remembered, if remembered at all, for the manner of his untimely death.

An 1895 drawing recreates the death of William Rufus, struck down by an arrow while hunting in England’s New Forest. A cast iron memorial, the “Rufus Stone”, was erected in 1841 and claims to identify the site of an oak tree from which the fatal arrow rebounded before killing the king (New Forest National Park). Bradley and Cooper saw this monument whilst visiting the New Forest in the early 1880s (Michael Field, Preface to William Rufus). Medieval writers interpreted this death as divine retribution for the king’s flamboyant anti-clericalism, and particularly his expulsion from the kingdom of Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Florence of Worcester expands on this, making it a condemnation of William the Conqueror’s decision to enclose the New Forest:

Doubtless, as common report has it, this was verily the righteous vengeance of God. For in the days of old, that is, in the days of King Edward and other kings of England before him, that land flourished plentifully with country-folk, with worshippers of God and with churches; but at the bidding of King William the elder, men were driven away, their houses thrown down, their churches destroyed, and the land kept as an abiding-place for beasts of the chase: and thence, it is believed, was the cause of the mischance. (qtd. in Parker 27)

This link between Rufus’s death and the crime against the people of the forest – a crime against Nature herself – is central to the Fields’ revisioning.

Michael Field’s William Rufus

In 1885, riding high on the success of their debut volume, Michael Field published a second book of verse dramas, including William Rufus. There have been no critical examinations of the play, and it is not mentioned in David Moriarty’s overview, “‘Michael Field’ and their Male Critics.” The lack of women in the play is almost the sole critical notation upon this much-neglected drama. William Rufus was given several pages in Mary Sturgeon’s 1922 study, in which it is described as “a full-dress drama of five acts . . . without a woman character” (136), and it is briefly mentioned in Emma Donoghue’s We Are Michael Field where, in addition to its lack of women characters, Beowulf’s eloquence and the play’s relationship to the Irish Land Question – contemporary political commentary disguised as historical drama – is noted (41).
In the drama, the final days of Rufus are interpreted by the peasant, Beowulf. Rufus and Beowulf are linked together by disability: Beowulf’s eyes were put out – a symbolic rape – by Rufus, the “young bull” (II.iii.175) whose masculine rage is articulated through his stammer and seizures. Thus while sexual politics appear absent from the text, they are embodied in Rufus and Beowulf through their disabilities.

While this paper argues that the play is most fruitfully read by attending to what lies beneath the surface of the narrative – the subterranean lives that do not appear in the *dramatis personae* – nevertheless, given the obscurity of the play, and its subject matter, a brief summary of the storyline is justified. The narrative of the play traces the major historical themes of the life of William Rufus: his amorous relationship with his favourite, Flambard; his campaign to wrest Normandy from Robert; Rufus’s controversial relationship with Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury; and his death in the forest. These major historical events are played out alongside, and inflected through, the lives of the Saxon peasants of the New Forest: Beowulf the blind peasant, father to Purkis the charcoal-burner, himself father to Harold the poacher, Leofric the sculptor, and Wilfrith the cleric.

The play opens in the New Forest with the body of the king’s nephew, Prince Richard, killed whilst hunting and discovered by Purkis and his sons. Subsequently, the Saxon Godric is displaced from the church at Twynham in favour of the Norman Flambard, who finds it insufficiently grand. News of the attendant uprising against Flambard, and rebellious poaching in the New Forest sends Rufus into an enraged seizure. Thus, the first act sets up societal tensions between Norman and Saxon, and between the peasants who live in the New Forest and the nobles who hunt there. Further, the New Forest is established as a liminal site between the material and supernatural realms as ghosts are seen moving through the forest, and strange, hunting-related deaths subsequently mount. The only nexus between these worlds and interpreter of their interactions is Beowulf himself.

The second act begins with Beowulf mourning the death of his grandson, Harold, executed for poaching. It then turns to the relationship of Rufus and Anselm. Rufus, on his sickbed, promises Anselm to mend his ways, and in turn desires the Italian priest to stay in England and fill the vacant See of Canterbury. Anselm resists but reluctantly agrees, and Rufus on returning to health reneges on his promises. Anselm angers the king by refusing to extort more gold from his peasants and again unsuccessfully seeks to reform the king by exploiting his need for a fortuitous wind to take his fleet to Normandy.

In the third act, Rufus’s horse is killed while hunting in the New Forest. He meets Beowulf in the forest and is directed out by Purkis. The king plans to buy Normandy from his brother who wants gold to lead a crusade, and this plan relies upon a significant sum flowing from the Canterbury revenues. Anselm defies the king, rejecting both Rufus and the other corrupt bishops and affirming his allegiance to the Pope. This conflict is extended further in the fourth act, culminating in Anselm’s (self-selected) banishment from England.

The final act revolves around Rufus’s death in the New Forest. Bad dreams and prophesies portend the death, and the Fields draw from several historical narratives for the events surrounding the fatal hunt: Rufus’s reluctance to start early, the banqueting-feast, and the gift of two new arrows to Walter Tirel. In the forest, Tirel shoots the king and flees, as do the king’s favourites, Fitz-Hamon and Laigle. The play ends with Purkis and Beowulf taking the body to Winchester in a lowly cart.
Embodying Disability and Gender I: The Feminization of Beowulf

From the first moment of the rimless dark
In which I wake, slumber and feel the sun,
A hope struck root, I felt it in the soil
Of my blocked brain, where thought went burrowing –
A tedious mole – and sense writhed underground.
The fibres of this hope took hold of me,
Pierced, ramified my subterranean life;
Now it has heaved out to the upper light
And spreads I know not whither. – I am blind. (I.i.34–43)

In the opening scene of the play, Beowulf declares his blindness. Later, Purkis reveals the cause: “Old dad, they gouged yours out . . .” (I.i.115), and when Rufus meets Beowulf in the forest, at first taking him for a spectre, he recognizes Beowulf’s blinding as an “ancient treason that hath cost thy sight” (III.i.91). Thus, it becomes clear that the blinding of Beowulf was punishment for having broken Norman law. The gouging out of Beowulf’s eyes with a hot iron is a penetrative act that feminizes him, a reading that is confirmed by his grandson, Leofric, who describes him as “overgrown/with sorrow, all the faculties shrunk down/to pollard” (I.i.92–93) – a pollard is a deer or other horned animal who has cast his antlers (OED). The perpetrator is never named, and is irrelevant as treason is punished by royal authority: Beowulf’s rapist is Rufus. In the forest, the king clearly declares his sovereignty: “I punish here” (I.iv.55).

Beowulf’s blinding also ties him to the fate of the forest: not only does Leofric describe his grandfather as “overgrown” but Purkis muses on “the once pleasant uplands of his face” (I.i.212). Through the use of organic imagery, the Fields indicate that the ravaging of Beowulf’s body reflects the destruction wrought on the New Forest by the Normans.

Throughout the play, Beowulf has privileged insight into exactly what is to come and why: in his opening monologue, he declares “Nature will never bear it: the fierce earth/Will rend the foreign, sacrilegious hands/As a great mastiff, humble to his lord,/ Is fatal to the fondling wayfarer” (I.i.1–5).3 Again at the close of the play, Beowulf, acting as Greek chorus, reframes historical events specifically in terms of the all-powerful Earth-mother’s revenge upon the Normans for their act of desecration: the enclosure of the New Forest:

    Earth, Earth, O Earth! the tyrant is struck down,
    Thou drew’st the arrow from Fate’s sluggish hand;
    Thou sped’st it mortally. Though thy blind sons
    Dishonour thee, seeking the younger love
    Of Country, swayed by her caprice, to strive
    For law or liberty, while thou art bond,
    Far off thou hearest Freedom’s yeanling cry,
    Orphaned, necessitous; thy motherhood,
    O Earth, is prophecy! Thou wilt prevail. (V.vi.175–83)

Beowulf’s recognition of the Earth-mother’s primary role in directing human affairs is also accorded paratextual authority by a quotation from Æschylus’s Eumenides that prefaces the
play: “Proton men euxei teide presbeuo theon/ ten protomantin Gaian,” [“First among the Gods in this prayer I honour/the first prophet, Earth.”] (Æschylus 9). The significance of this quotation was underlined when Edith Cooper, in a letter to Katharine Bradley, wrote: “the Greek motto must be in large type – it is the kernel of the whole matter” (Michael Field, *Fowl and Pussycat* 134).

However, Beowulf’s relationship with the feminine and with Nature is more than mere metaphor. In the first moments of his blindness, Beowulf states he was pierced by a burrowing organic “hope” that “took hold of me,” and that binds him to an older, darker, subterranean female power. It is this link that produces the lesbian visuality that has been noted in the Fields’ lyric poetry.

**Vision and Visuality: Beowulf’s Lesbian “Field of Vision”**

Fraser’s critique of Michael Field’s *Sight and Song* (1892) identifies a “binocular” gaze at the center of the lyrics. Following Norman Bryson, Fraser notes that there is a distinct difference between vision and visuality: vision being an unmediated experience and visuality an act of translation. Fraser comments that in *Sight and Song*:

> If a screen of signs intervenes between the ‘pure’ gaze of the observer and the art object . . . then for the reader who approaches these paintings by way of Michael Field’s ‘translations’ of them into verse, the field of vision is, as it were, doubly mediated. (556)

*Sight and Song* is “doubly mediated” through the process by which vision becomes an interpretative visuality – Art History, the spaces of galleries and exhibitions, and the institutions of Art – interpose and construct meaning, as does the binocular gaze of the Fields’ lesbian-collaborative partnership. Fraser argues that this unique way of looking creates a space that enables “creative translations between art forms and the juxtaposition of subjectivities” and “a decentring of the observing subject and a radical destabilization of the gender binary.”

In the lyrics, it is the collaborative structure of the field/Fields that is credited with producing its transformative visuality. In *William Rufus*, Bradley and Cooper produce in Beowulf a triangulated gaze created from melding the darkly verdant Earth-mother to Beowulf’s feminized and disabled body. The unified vision of the Earth-mother/Beowulf imposes a double mediation upon events as known from the historical chronicles. The unique organically-melded gaze is, in both senses, the “root” of the play. This binocular gaze is not unlike the Fields’ own. Like the intimate approach to the works of art in *Sight and Song*, the “doubly mediated” vision of the Earth-mother-Beowulf – a body which is itself a metaphorical extension of the Fields’ lesbian collaborative gaze – inscribes lesbian sexuality at the site of authorized history.

**Embodying Disability and Gender II: The Hyper-Masculinization of Rufus**

If Beowulf’s feminized body can be clearly linked to Bradley and Cooper’s larger writing project of creating a unique body of writing with Michael Field’s distinctive female/lesbian visuality, it is perhaps less obvious why they site the play at such a seemingly inauspicious
moment in history. Freeman’s historical narrative, the Fields’ primary source, covers the events surrounding the death of a flawed king: a figure in which villainy, disability, and homosexuality sit unproblematically side by side. The historical sources are uniform in their condemnation of Rufus not only as a king that made bad political decisions but because of his moral failures. For the Fields, I suggest, it is Rufus’s flaws – particularly his stammer and his rage – that make him the natural culmination of an exclusively masculine hegemonic state rather than an incongruous mishap. He is the perfect embodiment of his masculinist culture.

In Freeman’s account of the life of William Rufus, disability functions in the manner identified by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

Western tradition posits the visible world as the index of a coherent and just invisible world, encouraging us to read the material body as a sign invested with transcendent meaning. (11)

For Freeman, Rufus’s speech impediment and his homosexuality are the visible signs of his deformed nature. While Freeman attempts to bring some disciplinary objectivity to the king’s death, disavowing the notion that Rufus “was smitten by a higher judgement than that of Popes and Councils” (2: 316) in favour of a verdict of accidental homicide or “chance-medley” (2: 325), there is no doubt Rufus is an aberration. That Rufus is at odds with his historical time and culture can be inferred from Freeman’s comment that “the real wonder is, not that the shaft struck him in the thirteenth year of his reign, but that no hand had stricken him long before” (2: 327).

Following Freeman, Michael Field’s William Rufus stammers in moments of anger and passion; and that stammer itself is given further prominence by being written into the text of the play. Thus, when Rufus hears of the revolt against Flambard he declares:

Art wet, storm-frosted, naked and despoiled?
The murderers! Had they extinguish’d you,
My fire-brand to the foxes, my gay flame,
My t – t – t – or – ch, my –. (I.v.69–72)

In moments of anger such as at the end of act I, when it is reported that Harold has been killing deer in the Forest, Rufus stammers, fits and lapses into speechlessness. Flambard responds to this outburst with “Stop that stuttering, my liege” (I.v.73). Later in the scene, Flambard notes, “Name but a forest-treason to this House/ It foam i’ the mouth half-lunatic” (I.v.177–78).6

If Rufus’s stammer is associated with his rage, the effect of rage on his body is consistently defined in terms of tumescence, aggression, and rapine masculinity. At the end of act I, the king becomes “stiff and speechless” in rage (I.v.175–78), and images of redness and erection are repeatedly associated with the king throughout the play. In act II, scene 4, Gundulf describes the king:

Once more the blood
Swells through the kingly veins with shining red;
But in its triumph grace is overthrown.
The king is hard and healthy, and his strength,
In another reference to aggressive masculinity, Anselm refers to the king as a “young bull untameable and fierce” (II.iii.175). Notably it is precisely at these moments of tumescent anger that the king’s stammer is evident.

Although Rufus does not personally put out Beowulf’s eyes, there are several instances in the play where he responds to being thwarted in exactly this way. Rufus’s first reaction to the news of Harold’s treason is to call for hot irons and torture (I.v.170). Later, the king threatens to “uneye and mutilate” (II.iv.4) his brother’s supporters in France and in act IV, scene ii, to rend the eyes of a Jew. Rufus’s anger, and his stammer, are expressed through and defined by aggressive and excessive masculinity, rather than effeminacy.

Indeed, there is little of the effeminate about Michael Field’s William Rufus: no mincing, and neither elaborately-curled hair nor slippers. In act II, when the king wants Anselm’s blessing to ensure a good crossing to France, Anselm declares:

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\text{We will denounce the sins effeminate} \\
\text{That spread corruption on this English ground;} \\
\text{And scourge with spiritual whips the slaves} \\
\text{Bartering their manhood’s birthright – liberty.} \\
\text{Help me to stay this curse; and for your soul –. (II.v.49–53)}
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If Freeman’s Rufus is effeminate, effeminacy is more diffuse in Michael Field, referring to national sins and not bodies. This stands in direct contrast to Rufus’s preferred mode of punishment, which is both particularized (the penetrative hot irons) and personalized. This does not mean that homosexuality is absent. The king’s manner of speaking with his favourite, Flambard – “Sweet Ralf” (I.v.97), “my pretty publican” (I.v.135), “my rosy Ralf” (I.v.146) – and Flambard’s forwardness in addressing the king suggest physical intimacy between the two. It takes very little imagination to read Rufus and Flambard as lovers, but Michael Field’s William Rufus is no sissy. Rather, the model of homosexuality represented here is closely related to the homoerotic subtext found in Walter Pater’s writings, the enjoyment of the muscular beauty of the male body. Contemporary homosexual readers such as André Raffalovich and connoisseurs of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* would have read Rufus’s hyper-masculinity in accord with a recognized model of male same-sex love. As Alan Sinfield notes, “in the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea of same-sex love as the exclusion of the feminine . . . was the ground upon which same-sex passion was most likely to be mooted” (115). Thus, in *William Rufus*, the king can be read both as homosexual and rampantly masculinist. His heightened masculinity is also inextricably linked to disability in that his stammer and his seizures occur specifically in moments of anger which are continually depicted as excessive forms of masculine arousal. In this way, Rufus’s flaws do not mark him out as an exception or aberration, but rather place him as the natural head of a male-centric English Norman society blind to the provocation they offer unseen female forces.
England: Above and Below

The Lord! Oh, he’s above!
There’s something lying at the roots of things
I burrow for. (IV.i.104–06)

Not only are there no women in the *dramatis personae* of *William Rufus*, there are no women in the above-ground world of Norman England – women belong only to the subterranean world of the Earth-mother. In act V, Leofric the architect comes across an old man seeking the unmarked grave of his daughter in the new Norman Church, and offers to make him a headstone. The old man replies:

> My little lass was shy of strangers, hid
> Behind the chair, if they but looked at her.
> I’ll keep her to myself. (V.ii.39–41)

This represents an absolute division between genders in the play: even the little space occupied by a headstone does not obtrude into the above-ground world. The only living woman mentioned in the play is Flambard’s mother who writes to him in hiding from her “dark covert” in France (IV.ii.9). Flambard presents her as a witch, not unlike Tullia in Michael Field’s *Brutus Ultor* (1886). Women in the play, like the dead girl in her unmarked grave and Flambard’s mother with her evil eye, have no place in Norman England, and are relegated to the supernatural world.

These gendered divisions also apply to the religion of the play. The medieval story surrounding the death of William Rufus is a Christian morality tale in which a monarch is brought low by his failure to respect the laws of God. For Bradley and Cooper, Christianity itself is the late-comer who usurps the land and fails to respect the ancient laws. Beowulf describes the Christian God unflatteringly:

> He’s God of Battle Abbey; . . . on the beach
> He let them huddle up King Harold’s bones,
> He’s strewn our prayers as ashes to the wind,
> Suffered such resurrection of men’s bones
> As modest Death cries shame of. – He repents,
> His past is not prophetic of today; (I.i.54–59)

In the above-ground world of men, there is little difference between the secular and the clerical, and this becomes apparent through the Fields’ critique of the materialism of Norman society. Those who wield power in the play, especially the English lords and bishops are invariably self-serving if not also avaricious and materialistic. Vadillo has argued that “Michael Field’s use of history responded to a very clear rejection of Materialism” (“Outmoded Dramas” 238), and this is particularly true in the case of *William Rufus*. Rufus’s unbridled lust for possession sets the tone:

> I will have every inch of earth; – the half
> My realm in hands of priests, and my fair woods,
My noble deer!... I will be absolute
While there is any breath
Left in my body: no competitor
Shall rival me. (I.v.182–87)

Again, Rufus is no exception to the rules and values of Norman society, but rather the very pinnacle of it.

Relations between Church and State are overtly commodified – the Church is merely a lucrative means for gaining possessions, gold, power and self-aggrandizement. In act IV, Rufus and Flambard gloat over how easily it is to convince the bishops to extort money from their own churches:

Sire, it exceeds belief how priests will rob
The churches, melt the consecrated gold,
Expose the saint a shamèd penitent
Striped to the shirt, and from the skeleton
Pluck the loose, dusty ring: they have no awe,
And the revenue waxes. (IV.ii.63–68)

Later, when Rufus fails in his attempt to use the bishops to leverage Anselm’s allegiance, the bishops buy off Rufus’s ill-humour with gold, and Rufus attempts to buy the Papal legate’s support against Anselm. Indeed, Rufus displays his complete mastery over this commodified world, and his greater claim to its rule, when he declares, “I covet; and defy the great command/To earth’s horizon: my rapacity/Knocks at the very gates of Rome itself (III.i.40–42).

The relationship between Rufus and Flambard is also explicitly materialist. Rufus gives Flambard the Priory at Twynham, and Flambard “with a proud and dancing eye,/That inventories all it looks upon” (I.ii.56–57) destroys the ancient priory constructed by the labour of a metaphysical Stranger who sought no payment, in order to replace it with another to modern tastes.

Even the historic disagreement between Rufus and Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, is tainted by commerce. Rufus can buy his brother’s lands in Normandy only “if Canterbury yield/Her due revenues” (III.ii.40–41). While Anselm, the saintly Archbishop of Canterbury, who “would take no further from his lacking churls” (II.iv.32) initially seems above the avarice of King, nobles and bishops, he quickly caves to self-interest and abandons the suffering English peasants. Anselm’s desire to return to Italy is consistently represented in terms of his own pleasure: “where comfort, rest./And light would fall as summer on my grief” (IV.ii.102–23). A citizen comments, “most of us townsfolk [are] in a wonder one of so gentle a disposition as our Lord of Canterbury should grow restless for his pleasure, while people endure the bitter onslaughts of calamity” (IV.iii.16–20). Anselm’s comfortable and civilized Italy, a short wander to the halls of Heaven where angels harvest and children are fed a “silver-bleach`ed morsel” (II.ii.21) is a betrayal of the New Forest where men are executed for killing deer. Anselm is ultimately reduced to little more than a saintly dilettante.

In the play, the Normans and their Christian church are tied up in their own corruption or narcissism, and completely disinterested in what is happening to the peasants and to
England. In contrast to the materialism of the male Christian world is the pagan maternalism of England below, the Earth-mother’s realm:

But at the breaking-places of the wave
All keepeth constant to its habitude;
There is no change of custom in the air;
Yon oak drops acorns; I am comforted.
The earth is English still. (I.i.54–59)

While the men of the Church betray or exploit the peasants of England, the pagan earth is constant and nurturing.

The Earth-mother, as with all women in the drama, is explicitly chthonic – dwelling in or beneath the earth. Men are suckled within the earth (I.i.63) and this idea is repeated and emphasized in act II as Beowulf ponders Harold’s executed corpse:

For now he’s dead the Earth will think on him
As she unweaves his body bit by bit.
She’ll have time like the women-folk at work
To turn all over in her mind, and get
His wrongs by heart. He never trusted her;
He thought her slow . . . she’s old,
It’s true; and no ambition for herself:
When the corpse lies where she has given suck
The lusty days stir in her. (II.i.3–11)

As a chthonic goddess, the Earth-mother is closely related to Demeter. She is a fertility goddess in the preface, which describes the narrative as: “Nature’s anger at the destruction of her food-bearing fields for the insolence of pleasure.” The significance of Nature in terms of the fertility of the earth, and the slight offered her by enclosing the New Forest, is then repeated in the first line of the play: “They turn our bread-lands to a pleasant ground” (I.i.1).

Bradley and Cooper’s practice of what Camille Cauti has called “a loose neoclassical paganism” (181) is well known. This paganism is predominantly Dionysian in its aspect – the backyard of Bradley and Cooper’s house in Richmond, The Paragon, featured a Bacchic altar – and as Yopie Prins has convincingly argued, in their early verse, Michael Field “are interested in reviving the Bacchant in the present” (59). In William Rufus, this paganism is no less fierce, but is articulated in Eleusian terms as a critique of Christianity.

Margot Louis in her excellent book Persphone Rises, 1860–1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality (2009) considers the late Victorian shift from Olympian gods to the chthonic goddesses Demeter and Persephone. Louis traces this shift through the writings of Walter Pater, whose work the Fields were intimately familiar with, and Jane Harrison, who attended Girton college alongside Bradley. Louis argues that implicit in the late-Victorian rejection of the Olympian gods and a corresponding rise in interest in the Eleusian Mysteries is a critique of the transcendent Christian God:

As this sensibility and anger are slowly turned against Christianity itself, the Olympians are attacked for their separateness from humanity, their lack of sympathetic feeling, their indifference or cruelty,
While the Mysteries are increasingly seen as expressions of human anguish, hunger, or desire – revelations of the sacral within the swift, bloody, and beautiful cycles of natural life. (24)

When the materialism and corruption of England above is revealed by Beowulf’s doubly mediated field of vision and contrasted to the pagan underworld of England below, it is not difficult to see the play broadly in the terms described by Louis.

Field and Forest: History and Visuality

If Beowulf’s binocular vision is an extension of the Fields’ lesbian collaborative gaze, it is tempting to speculate to what extent the spatial metaphors within the play – the untamed pagan forest underlying the enclosed hunting-ground – might be suggestively extended to encompass the “Field” of the joint pseudonym. Is “Michael Field” not only a collaborator but a double agent who is only outwardly confined within the effacing boundary of male singular authorship? Beowulf’s unique visuality not only functions within the narrative as a double mediation of historical events within the play, but Beowulf himself is also the site at which the Fields can deploy their own doubly mediated field of vision to deconstruct the truths of common English history.

As argued above, Beowulf occupies a pivotal nexus between worlds: male and female, Christian and pagan. He is a blind man in a seeing world, and arguably a seeing man in a blind world. More than that, Beowulf is an anachronism: he is a Saxon after the Norman Conquest; he is a Greek chorus in an archaic Shakespearian five-act drama; Beowulf’s very name intertextually associates him with the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon epic that narrates the adventures of a sixth-century warrior. He is a man bodily, temporally, spatially, even generically “out of time.”

Kate Thomas has argued that the Fields are deliberately “out of time” in the sense that in their poetry, letters, and journals they embrace “a specifically broken, interrupted teleology” (330) in their self-canonizing vision of themselves as unappreciated in the present but celebrated in the future, as reflected in lyrics such as “Prologue.” The Fields’ temporal disorderings, Thomas comments, are significant for queer theorists because

If we are to work against “making historical analysis,” what Michel Foucault called the “discourse of the continuous,” we must not seek to stake queer history against the temporal anomalies to which it often clings. We must instead detail fissured and posturing queer anomalies . . . (332)

As a “man” out of time and place, Beowulf’s anachronistic presence creates an interstitial space through which Michael Field can present both conventional historical narrative and construct an alternate field of vision to represent and reinterpret events.

Freeman’s Metanarrative: Finding the Center

Bradley and Cooper’s personal letters have revealed a great deal of information regarding the production of their early verse dramas, and it is clear that Michael Field’s historical plays were rigorously researched using both primary source material and scholarly work, and frequently by appealing directly to experts. In the early 1880s, Freeman’s recently published account of the life of William Rufus represented the cutting edge of
historical scholarship. In *William Rufus*, the Fields both reproduce Freeman’s narrative and fundamentally disrupt the comfortable teleology of a totalized, male-centered English history.

Freeman’s history functions within the Fields’ drama as a metanarrative—a mode of totalizing representation by which history is created as a unified, coherent narrative. Linda Hutcheon, working within a very different body of literature, British postmodern fiction, uses the term historiographical metafiction to describe those twentieth-century novels which attempt to de-totalize and de-naturalize history:

Recalling Lyotard’s definition of the postmodern condition as that which is characterized by an active distrust of the master narratives that we have used to make sense of our world, the aggressive assertion of the historical and the social particularity of the fictive worlds of these novels ends up calling attention, not to what *fits* the master narrative, but instead, to the ex-centric, the marginal, the borderline—all those things that threaten the (illusory but comforting) security of the centered, totalizing, masterly discourses of our culture. (86)

While not wishing to claim that *William Rufus* fits into the postmodern genre of historiographical metafiction, nevertheless, it seems to me that what the Fields are seeking to do in this drama is to create a kind of metafictional self-reflexivity similar to that which Hutcheon finds in later twentieth-century novels.

Hutcheon argues that historiographical metafiction makes obvious the politics of representation inherent in narrating history that is central to historiographic theory. This is achieved by creating a double effect in which “the text’s self-reflexivity points in two directions at once, toward the event being represented in the narrative and toward the act of narration itself” (76). This doubleness with regard to history and its relationship with the interpretative historian creates what Hutcheon calls a juxtaposition of “what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge” (71). In this way the text de-naturalizes or de-totalizes the historical events it relates, opening them up to alternate readings by marginalized or “ex-centric” voices, “those relegated to the fringes of the dominant culture—the women, blacks, gays, Native Peoples, and others who have made us aware of the politics of all—not just postmodern—representations” (17).

In *William Rufus*, the text engages in metafictional self-reflexivity in several ways. Michael Field’s preface clearly states, “In the matter of accuracy this play is not to be regarded as a study of the Past.” I have already commented that the Fields deliberately selected an archaic verse form in Elizabethan five-act drama for their early plays, foregrounding the issue of the plays’ form and their overt textuality. But perhaps the most striking way in which history is problematized as a narrative in the play is the character of Eadmer the biographer. Eadmer plays Boswell to Anselm’s Johnson; his function is to “write/ The chronicle of your loved destiny,/That walks along the earth;” (II.ii.57–59) explicitly for “future days” (25). There is no sense of objectivity in Eadmer’s chronicle of the saintly life of Anselm, rather he performs a dual role as biographer and subservient manservant: “Edmer [*sic*], my stole is falling; set it right” (III.iii.2). Eadmer is a minor character in the play, a representation of the early chroniclers. At one level his purpose is as sounding board for Anselm to soliloquize upon his relations with the king—but, nevertheless, the relationship between Anselm and Eadmer, and the act of chronicling, highlights the narrative and narrated character of history.
The totalizing metanarrative of a bad king is also fragmented by the subplots within the play in which the effects of the King’s decisions unevenly impact the lives of the peasants of the New Forest. These are not always supportive of Freeman’s narrative: Harold is executed for poaching deer in the New Forest, but Wilfrith enters the monastery under Flambard and flourishes, while Leofric the artist has the opportunity to carve the New Minster and is rewarded at the end of the play with an even larger commission.

Hutcheon also notes that metafictional historiographies often deliberately use anachronism to de-naturalize temporal relationships (71); that is to say historical figures articulate a kind of presentism in that the ideas and language they espouse frequently belong to the contemporary moment. In *William Rufus*, Beowulf represents a similar kind of engagement with atemporality – a dislocation that revels in its own queer temporality and functions as a means of articulating an alternate or ex-centric vision. Beowulf’s multiple disruptions disturb the politics of representation inherent in Freeman’s metanarrative history. Paratextual elements, such as the preface and the introductory quotation, underline the authority of Beowulf’s visuality, highlighting the superficial nature of authorized history which fails to apprehend – indeed is blind to – the powerful, pagan, female forces in determining events. The metanarrative is further destabilized by Eadmer and his subservient biography – not only is history de-naturalized as one of a number of possible representations, but its reliance on the act of narration, and on the narrator, is similarly unveiled.

From the start of the recovery of “Michael Field,” boundaries have been set up between their lyric poetry and their verse dramas. The past decade has witnessed remarkable critical scholarship on the lyric verse of *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song*, and much of that is influenced by the notion that it is possible to read in the text itself the doublings and re-doublings not only of collaborative authorship, but of lesbian partnership. However, while critics have readily embraced the concept of multiple textual voices and complex fields of vision in the lyrics, to date there have been but few attempts to engage with the verse dramas, and these invariably take a different approach from readings of the lyric texts. While Michael Field is still quite a new area for study, and this goes some way to explain the relatively narrow range of texts subject to rigorous scholarly investigation, nevertheless it is time to question the boundary that divides lyric from verse drama. In this article, I have challenged the prevailing belief that Michael Field’s historical dramas are fundamentally different – less generically innovative and less interesting – than their books of lyric poetry. In *William Rufus*, I have found that Bradley and Cooper, through the figure of Beowulf, reproduce a visuality similar to that performed in the lyric verse. They use this field of vision as a nexus between the worlds of the play, and as a means of translating historical events. Further, Beowulf then becomes a site from which Michael Field can deconstruct the master narrative of English history.

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**NOTES**

1. Rumens’s subtitle for this column, “An intriguing bit of ekphrastic poetry from a very intriguing pseudonymous pair,” tends to give the edge to biography. Similarly, of the over three hundred comments posted to the *Guardian’s* website, as many responded out of interest in the story of an aunt-niece lesbian collaboration as commented on the poem.

3. See Vadillo, “Outmoded Dramas: History and Modernity in Michael Field’s Aesthetic Plays”; Bickle, “‘Kick[ing] against the Pricks’: Michael Field’s *Brutus Ultor* as Manifesto for the New Woman”; Ehnenn (ibid.); and Taft, “The Tragic Mary: A Case Study in Michael Field’s Understanding of Sexual Politics.”


5. In its invocation of a powerful, unseen female force, *William Rufus* is similar to Michael Field’s 1886 play *Brutus Ultor*. This play opens with a Delphic oracle, ‘Who kisses first his mother shall be king’ (I.i.1). The oracle is misunderstood by the Tarquins Sextus and Aruns, who immediately race to kiss Tullia, their mother and historically the woman who instigated the death of her own father so that her husband could be king (Livy 1.48.5–7). Brutus fulfils the prophesy and claims the title “Lord of Rome” as he explains to his wife, Publia, by understanding the primacy of the Earth-mother: “Heaven is not wanton with its yea and nay/It lets men bear the issue of their deeds./Hear what befell. I lay down on the earth,/In the grass, as it had been my mother’s tomb” (I.iv.130–33). Brutus, like Beowulf, is a man who understands that there are powerful female forces at work in human history, forces that go unapprehended by the dominant men of the plays.

6. In direct contrast to Rufus’s difficult speech, Beowulf’s narrative commentary is delivered with eloquence. Indeed, the most poetic speeches in the play belong to Beowulf – but his speech goes unremarked, and his unsettling prophesy is dismissed as from an “afflicted lunatic” (I.i.142) or is simply not heard by key characters like William Rufus, Flambard, or Anselm. The seeing world of the Normans is blind to the powerful pagan forces of the Earth that control their destiny.

7. André Raffalovich sent Michael Field three letters which suggest he read Michael Field’s early work as that of an Aesthetic young man within the tradition of Victorian Hellenism (Raffalovich Letter to Michael Field Add. MS. 45851 fols. 67–74 British Library).

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