

“The one question is not what
you mean but what you do”:
Michael Field’s Ekphrastic Verse

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As poets, dramatists, and life writers, Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper) have already been much rehabilitated into the late-nineteenth-century canon, with conferences, critical essays, collected editions, and monographs dedicated to their work. *Sight and Song* (1892) has attracted particular attention.¹ Twenty-first-century critics have highlighted the revolutionary aspirations of that volume but tend not to dwell on the fact that the volume consolidates the downturn in Michael Field’s literary career begun by their preceding verse drama, *The Tragic Mary* (1890). Through three comparative analyses of poems from *Sight and Song* with poems from Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *First Series*, I examine the possible aesthetic reasons for the (arguably justifiably) lukewarm response from those contemporary aesthetes and art critics whom Michael Field had most wished to impress with their efforts to challenge existing aesthetic practice and produce an original poetics.² In doing so, I highlight how the volume reflects the aesthetic and creative hurdles that Michael Field faced operating in that strongly male homosocial milieu.

In brief, I argue that Michael Field’s ekphrastic poetry suffers because of their preemptive efforts to insulate themselves from the gendered criticism that their lived experiences had conditioned them to expect. Michael Field failed to distinguish themselves as fin-de-siècle art critics—and to repair their reputation as poets³—with *Sight and Song* precisely because they were so eager to do so. *Sight and Song* sought to establish its poems as representative of how one *should* respond to art objects, as a model to be followed, but comes instead to exude a *Stimmung* of fixity that found little favor with the contemporaries whose decisive aesthetic judgments Michael Field were aping.

I here deploy Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s theory of *Stimmung* as a pervasive mood that emerges from the reading of a text, even centuries after its writing, which he associates in particular with the fin de siècle. For moods to become so pervasive that they are “articulated in texts other than on the level

of representation,” Gumbrecht argues that there must be a “requisite density of feeling” in the social context around their production that amounts to “forms and tones” becoming “‘charged,’ as if by electricity.” That is to say, wherever we detect a *Stimmung*, whatever it might be, “we may assume that a primary experience has occurred [to the author] to the point of becoming a preconscious reflex.”⁴ *Sight and Song’s Stimmung* of fixity, in respect of both art interpretation and representation, I argue, reflects a “preconscious reflex” in Michael Field, conditioned by their experiences of being aesthetically instructed and corrected by Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Bernard Berenson, and others.⁵

The forms of art criticism prevalent during the late-nineteenth century, such as the public lecture or published commentary, were strongly associated with masculinity. Although numerous studies have highlighted the growing participation of women in the field in the second half of the nineteenth century,⁶ it remains true that “the Victorian art critic’s voice as a public noise can be generalized as a male voice, and those individual critics whose voices have been distinguished from the chorus by later generations . . . were all men.”⁷ To Swinburne, as Stefano Evangelista suggests, “the art gallery is a workshop in which the sensibility of the literary *man* is modified by its sensuous experience of the visual arts in their material form.”⁸ As women, however, Michael Field seem to have been more used to having their aesthetic sensibilities “modified” not just by their encounters with art objects but also by male counterparts. Cooper records an experience of being under the pressure of possible “modification” from such a “male voice” when visiting the National Gallery with Berenson, Mary Costelloe, and others: “we are taken to the Giorgione—in the dimness I cannot find out which is the picture—I mistake it and try to work up enthusiasm for a poor figure above,” reflecting, she says, “what an awful element of sham there is in mortals.”⁹

My reading reflects contemporary criticism, which itself illustrates the sorts of fin-de-siècle experiences I have in mind. While criticism of *Sight and Song* was generally tepid, W. B. Yeats in particular criticized its approach to verbalizing visual content and, as he saw it, participating in “the growing tendency to make the critical faculty do the work of the creative.” While acknowledging that Michael Field, whose dramas he had much admired, “have poetic feeling and imagination in abundance,” he expresses disappointment that they “have preferred to work with the studious and interpretive side of the mind.”¹⁰

Yeats here responds indirectly to the methodological statement in the preface of *Sight and Song*: to express “what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves” through a “method of art-study” founded

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on “patient, continuous sight” (p. v). To Berenson, Cooper presented this methodology defiantly, if playfully: “you laugh, and [Giovanni] Morelli feels uncomfortable in his grave—but the self-willed poets watch their pictures, receive of them, and write.”¹¹ However, the Fields’ shared diary records anxiety about the volume and their method’s outcomes, concluding that the “Song” of this “queerest little book” “soon fades away,” making “[their] teeth chatter with fear” about how it would be received.¹² We may say, then, that *Sight and Song*, in overprioritizing “sight,” has fallen foul of Swinburne’s aesthetic principle that “the one question [in art] is not what you mean but what you do,” their intentions not fully reflected in the volume itself.¹³

Swinburne’s work had influenced Michael Field’s early dramas and their first volume of poetry, *Long Ago* (1889).¹⁴ The latter drew on the Sapphic tradition that Swinburne had illuminated in the *First Series* and elsewhere, and when it was published, they sent him a copy with a short letter expressing their “sincere admiration” for his work.¹⁵ As my close readings illustrate, it is not difficult to see the influence of the *First Series* and Swinburne’s essays on *Sight and Song* also. But my attention here will be on distinctions, rather than questions of influence, and on Michael Field’s success in their efforts to “do” what they “mean[t].” In the three moments of comparison that follow, I attend to poems that bear similarities in their form and content, the better to control for such variables, in an experimental fashion. Swinburne and Michael Field both treated art objects with an attitude of “sincere and studious love”—we might recall the echo of “studious” in Yeats’s critique—but they differ in how the “studious” nature of that “love” manifests itself within their poetry.¹⁶ Studious attention to art need not mean studious poetry, as these moments of comparison seek to make clear.

Tenses and Tension; Verbs and Voltas

In this first moment of comparison, I turn to two single sonnets, “A Cameo” (*First Series*, p. 113) and “*Saint Katharine of Alexandria*, by Bartolommeo Veneto” (*Sight and Song*, p. 31), which dwell on similar themes: suffering, blood, fingertips, and more generally the body’s form, fluids, and flexion.

Swinburne’s “A Cameo” plays with the dividing line between plastic art object and poem, “cameo” referring both to a carved relief portrait and a short literary sketch. An example of notional ekphrasis, the poem pertains not to an identifiable art object but to an imagined scene.¹⁷ While this removes the verifiability of Swinburne’s ekphrasis, as factual questions of accuracy cannot arise, Swinburne must nevertheless ekphrasize the image in his mind’s eye in such a way that it can simulate for the reader the imaginary viewing of a real art

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object. Swinburne's poem describes the hypothetical art object quite concretely: "There was a graven image" (l. 1). "Graven," linked etymologically with "gravity" and "gravitas," receives an additional emphasis by virtue of being linked in the line's pattern of stresses with the past-tense "was." The line has a stern weight about it, and Swinburne's choice of the past tense helps account for, or counterbalance, its notionalness: the art object once was, although it may be no more. At the same time, the use of the past tense allows the sonnet's description of the imagined scene to proceed in a way that is diachronic—action follows action—but also suggestive rather than definitive. What happens to the "young men and the old" after they are "pass[ed]" by Desire (l. 3)? The ekphrasis knows not, and no physical art object is available to help us. The answer is ours alone to provide.

By contrast, Michael Field's poem maintains a constant present tense: "The Virgin-Martyr stands" (l. 2), "a cloudy seal / Is on her eyes" (ll. 6–7), "the yellow hairs are spread" (l. 8). This emphasizes the availability of the art object for the reader, in conjunction with the poem's subtitle, which locates it in Frankfurt. At the same time, however, the poem's present tense asserts a finality of interpretation that reflects *Sight and Song's* style as a whole. The continuous present tense invites us to bracket each described facet of the art object. "Remember that. Now look over here," the poem seems to say. It catalogues the art object (we might say "studious[ly]"), and everything is left in its place; were we to return our gaze to Katharine's hand against the wheel, it would look the same as it first did when described to us by Michael Field. As Janis McLarren Caldwell has argued, their ekphrastic technique can act as a "literary form of resurrection" for the dead, but here that resurrection is of a static and not dynamic sort.¹⁸

Michael Field's "continuous sight" is thus active here. While Swinburne's poem also presents persistent facts, because they are framed in the past tense, "A Cameo" demonstrates narrative motion that is reflected in the most marked formal distinction between the two sonnets: the lack of a volta in "*Saint Katharine*." The volta of "A Cameo" divides the central personified feelings of this heavily populated poem from their effects and handmaidens, who "followed like beasts" (l. 12). The "senses and the sorrows and the sins, / And the strange loves" are in motion, with no certain destination (ll. 9–10), in keeping with the poem's sense of the passing of time in the art object that mirrors its own passing in time. In the sonnet's final line, Death almost speaks but communicates instead the word "*Peradventure*" through the "lock" that conceals them behind a "gaping grate" (ll. 13–14, original emphasis). Swinburne's imagery is precise but demands the reader's interpretation. Is Death's message that they

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can offer a release from the suffering apparently imposed by Desire, Pain, Pleasure, Satiety, and Hate? Or that such experiences keep Death at bay? The final rhyme with “indenture” hints that we are slaves both to our emotions and to chance, but the poem’s tension increases until the last, denying the release of the poem’s own death.

In “*Saint Katharine*,” the volta is suppressed, making for a flatter reading experience. The sonnet adopts a Petrarchan octet with rhyme scheme *abbaabba* but then defers to a Shakespearean ending of a final quatrain and couplet. Neither the usual Italian line 9 volta nor the English line 12 volta materializes. The final two and a half lines are separated from the preceding lines by a colon, but otherwise lines 5 to 12 are largely separated by midline semicolons. Our expectations frustrated, the drama of the sonnet form is diminished. As we struggle visually to find a volta-like gesture on the page, we struggle also to find one in the verbal content, which lacks any dramatic shift in thought or emotion.

Here, I readily admit to approaching poetic form mimetically, asking how formal characteristics resemble the viewing of art objects through the vivid, immersive description that characterizes ekphrasis. This is not the only way to approach form,¹⁹ but the care that both Swinburne and Michael Field took in employing prosody and form to enhance and convey meaning suggests that they are matters to which we should attend. More generally, mimesis is intimately connected with the genre of ekphrasis. Shahar Bram has argued that—in the *Iliad*, which contains the ur-ekphrasis of Achilles’s shield—“ekphrasis emerges . . . as a representation of the mimetic principle itself,” “creat[ing] a reality that ensures us a deceitful separateness” from “true reality.”²⁰ Mimesis is thus nested within the genre; every verbal tool, especially those that are visually available on the page, is deployed in negotiating “the verbal representation of visual representation.”²¹

Returning to “*Saint Katharine*,” then, what little break there is at the colon in line 12 pulls us out from the near scenery around the saint—the “thicket of bay-branches . . . / Above her shoulder” (ll. 11–12)—to consider the landscape farther away: “open landscape glows / Soft and apart behind her to the right, / Where a swift shallop crosses the moonlight” (ll. 12–14). It is as though the ekphrasis cannot bear the pressure that is inevitably put on the final couplet to reach a resolution for the poem and the eternal suffering of Saint Katharine that its middle lines dramatize. It instead buckles under its own weight, averting its gaze from the central figure to focus on the background of the image, and doing so with prosaic precision, locating the scenery according to the figure’s body (“apart behind her to the right”). The search for

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an appropriate rhyme for “moonlight” seems to compound the poem’s tendency to descriptive specificity.

We might ask ourselves, then, why Michael Field employs the sonnet form only to decline to use one of its most powerful tools. Rather than attributing this to poetic incompetence, we might think of it as itself a characteristic of their ekphrasis and their efforts to achieve an “objective” description and “continuous sight” of the art object. While Michael Field’s poem shares with Swinburne’s a fascination with the combination of pain and pleasure, the organs of touch, and the uncertainty of an end to torment, Michael Field’s prioritizes the accurate and detailed description of a specific canvas to the detriment of the rhetorical or emotional priorities that the poetic form might seek to impose. Their suppression of the sonnet’s formal and generic demands indicates their resolve in pursuing what “poetry” the picture “objectively incarnate[s],” almost perversely ignoring poetry’s affordances to further the *Stimmung* of fixity that, for them, seems to accompany objectivity. The interpretative efforts of the supposed second stage of their “method of art-study”—the “play” of the “inevitable force of individuality”—seems to come too late or “mould the purified impression” too little, rendering the “song” quickly over and “sight” all that remains, as they themselves had feared (*Sight and Song*, pp. v–vi).

This first moment of comparison illustrates the static present of Michael Field’s ekphrasis, which emphasizes the omnipresence of the art object as a final arbiter of what can be seen and understood, compared to the mobility of the image that Swinburne positions, somewhat counterintuitively, in the past. We may contrast Michael Field’s approach to ekphrasis here with the one expounded by Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Evangelista describes Winckelmann as treating ekphrasis as a “hermeneutical strategy,” wherein “the critic’s subjective, intense emotional investment in the object translates on the page in the form of stylistic intensification, signalled by the momentary abandonment of the scientific and prosaic language of the art historical treatise in favour of a style that approximates the condition of poetry.” Michael Field, however, refuse to abandon the spirit of “scientific” language, favoring instead the sort of “issues of technical detail and attribution” that troubled Swinburne in “professional art historical criticism” (Evangelista, pp. 163, 164).

Michael Field shared these preoccupations with, and indeed we may suspect learned them from, professionalized art historians such as Berenson. The identification of a painter from “optical stylistic evidence”—identified by “patient, continuous sight”—was a crucial part of the formation of a new artistic canon in the mid- to late nineteenth century, of which Berenson was a significant part.²² Upon first meeting Berenson in Paris in 1890, Cooper and

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Bradley paid him to give them lessons at the Louvre, soon nicknaming him Doctrine, although he was at that time a struggling art critic. Hilary Fraser suggests that Berenson “personif[e]d the patriarchal ‘male conscience’” for them throughout their friendship,²³ and Berenson was influential in how Michael Field organized the travels that led to *Sight and Song*. Cooper records, while they were making their plans, how “Bernie praised our choice of Dresden” and “began to teach me the right understanding of the pictures, & in order that I might recognise a Lotto, not so called.”²⁴

Michael Field often “depended upon [Berenson’s] approval of their artistic sensibility,” and they sometimes sought a final determination from him on the details of paintings.²⁵ In a letter to Mary Costelloe during the writing of *Sight and Song*, dated February 2, 1892, they ask her to find out from him “whether Giorgione’s *Venus* [wa]s a noon-tide picture” as it “seem[ed]” to them, “but out on seeming!”: they want his final determination (manuscript letter from the Berenson Archive quoted in Thain and Vadillo, eds., *Michael Field*, p. 326). However, they were also willing to push some of the boundaries that Doctrine set. Their diaries, letters, and works reflect a certain pride in their own moments of insight, emboldened by their own critical assessment of how their male counterparts reached their aesthetic judgments. For example, although both women admired Walter Pater’s work, Bradley at one point records a tart response to his subjective aesthetic: “Pater often issues his own emotions, that are *very peculiar to himself*, as if they were the result of other individualities—to whom he has not been able to give the value of an I.”²⁶ Conscious of the flattening, generalizing tone that male counterparts’ aesthetic pronouncements could sometimes take, Michael Field were nevertheless willing to risk taking a similar attitude by co-opting the tools of the “professional” in seeking to develop their own “method of art-study.”

Sleeping Beauties, Prone and *En Couchant*

A second moment of comparison illustrates how strongly Michael Field’s adherence to these tools affected their poems’ ability to register the “emotional energy” of encountering the art object.²⁷ I turn here to Swinburne’s “Hermaphroditus” (*First Series*, pp. 79–81) and Michael Field’s “Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*” (*Sight and Song*, pp. 98–105), which provide thematically similar, eroticized descriptions of recumbent gods of love and sexual desire: Hermaphroditus and Venus.

Swinburne’s poem addresses, through apostrophe, Bernini’s Borghese *Hermaphroditus*, avoiding the need to deploy gendered pronouns to describe the figure (although this hardly averted criticism of the poem on the grounds

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of illicit eroticism). The poem comprises four Petrarchan sonnets, the final one with a variation in its sestet's rhyme scheme that nods to the erotic variation of its subject matter, which is starkest in that final stanza. Although recumbent, Hermaphroditus is not asleep but occupies the "brief space" "between sleep and life," a postcoital, liminal zone into which the poem's immersive description plunges us (l. 15). The statue's inherently monumental nature is thus accounted for subliminally while leaving open the possibility of motion, of the statue complying, like Galatea, with the exhortation to "lift up thy lips, turn round, look back for love" (l. 1).

Little, otherwise, demonstrates that the poem is ekphrastic, except for a literary knowledge of the chain of ekphrases into which Swinburne was writing himself (including Théophile Gautier's "Contralto" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*)²⁸ and the poem's superscription: "*Au Musée du Louvre, Mars 1863.*" We can compare this superscription, a fairly uncommon feature in Swinburne's ekphrases, with subtitles used systematically in *Sight and Song*, which produce a feeling of completeness, a *musée imaginaire* wherein it would be impossible to go wrong in the identification of an art object (and thus be subject to correction).²⁹ Evangelista notes that Swinburne's paratextual reference not only identifies the ekphrased art object but is "the record of a precise encounter and an individual relationship between object and poet-critic, one of an infinite series of possible critical responses to the same art work" (p. 178). There is a hint that the superscription operates defensively, caveating the enduring truth of the poem's description; had Swinburne visited the statue in February, or April, a different poem might have resulted. Any such suggestion is absent in the subtitles of Michael Field's poems and would be directly at odds with their "objective" efforts.

Again, there is a certain paradox inherent in this distinction. Swinburne's poem is more specific about its encounter with the art object, even as it shies away from descriptive realism, rendering it ambiguous in its ekphrastic nature. "*Sleeping Venus*" bears the subtitle "The Dresden Gallery," but does not evoke the experience of the gallery in the same way. The location is cited as an address that the reader can visit in order to experience the same encounter that is set out in the poem. While "*Hermaphroditus*" is a "'gallery' poem inasmuch as it explicitly engages with the space of the museum," inviting the reader imaginatively to inhabit the same physical space as—and so risk sexual contact with—Hermaphroditus, Michael Field's poem distances them and the reader from Venus because her (painted) presence is unnecessary (Evangelista, p. 178).

"*Sleeping Venus*" does not follow a common poetic form but seems to draw on a heavily modified sonnet structure. Each verse has fourteen lines,

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with an unusual inversion of the octet-sestet structure, emphasized by the indentation of the final eight lines in each stanza and the shift between the sestet's alternating rhymes and the octet's four rhymed couplets. Although most lines throughout the poem are a trimeter of some type, the third line of each stanza has five feet, and the penultimate line has fewer unstressed syllables, resulting in a feeling of anticipation for each stanza's final line. We can readily imagine how such a formal structure might be well suited to the expression of same-sex love: the "inverted" nature of that sexual desire reflected in the sestet-octet structure; the expanding and tensing of each stanza's meter evoking the movement of bodies in response to each other; the varying rhythmic patterns suggesting stimulating syncopations. And, indeed, many readings of "*Sleeping Venus*" emphasize the poem's supposed "sexually charged description of feminine autoeroticism."³⁰ However, Michael Field's ekphrastic method and aim again interrupt the potential eroticism of their chosen form and subject matter.

The erotic content of "*Sleeping Venus*" is most pronounced in each stanza's concluding octet, in particular in the poem's early stanzas, with Michael Field staking out ground for their poem in the tradition of verse like Swinburne's "*Hermaphroditus*." In "*Hermaphroditus*," the volta of each sonnet transitions between a description of the sexualized body—the "long smile" (l. 4), "sterile kiss" (l. 19), or expression—and a meditation on the broader significance of the figure's desirability. In Michael Field's poem, the voltas are prominently marked between lines 6 and 7 of each stanza using indentations, and they instead draw us into a more private space closer to Venus.

Thus, from reflecting on the fact that Venus is shown "Amid earth's fruitful tilths" (l. 6), we are drawn to her in her "slumber" (l. 12). While the stanza explicitly declares that she, like the land, is "pure" (l. 9) and impossible to "violate nor spot" (l. 11), the poem's use of indentation when Michael Field give their most intimate descriptions of her as visually marked asides seems to seek to protect Venus's position in a sort of fantasy space. In the second stanza, for example, a comparison between Venus's "curves" (l. 15) and the "breadths of pasture" (l. 17) gives way to an indented reflection on the "sex" (l. 22) that Venus and Earth share, "a bond, a holiness" (l. 23) that "must bless / And unite them" (ll. 24–25) in "shameless" openness that is veiled only by the "haze" (l. 28) of a "long, opal cloud" (l. 27). These declarations of the "shameless" openness of Venus's sexuality—and that of the fecund Earth—are nevertheless coyly shielded by Michael Field's poetic form.

This pattern continues in stanzas 3 and 4, where the sestets address Venus's arms and legs, and the octets her breasts; stanza 5, which focuses on Venus's hips, protects the fact that "her hand the thigh's surface leaves, /

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Falling inward” (ll. 62–63), enjoying in “deep, / Universal pleasure” (ll. 64–65) and “the good / Of delicious womanhood” (ll. 69–70). However, the poem’s erotic immersion in the image of Venus, who it suggests has fallen asleep after masturbation, is interrupted in a painful anticlimax, bringing us news first of the dull, grey-brown grass (l. 92), a “pale cloud-bank” “on the sober blue” (ll. 95–96), and then of the “single tree” (l. 107) in the background and the brightness of the blue paint used for the sky (“a blue no flowers attain”; l. 110). The instinct to withhold some of Venus’s erotic power to herself and the female poets through the indented structure of the stanzas gives way to the cossetting of landscape features that do little to increase an erotic sense of oneness with the slumbering goddess.

In the poem’s concluding stanza, it looks, like “Hermaphroditus,” to meditate on the broader significance on the desirability, and desire, of its central figure, but it also deeroticizes the figure of Venus by emphasizing her mystic omnipresence: “her resting is so strong” (l. 113) that “she will not pass / While the sun strikes on the grass” (ll. 125–126). The goddess’s slumber makes her an inaccessible, if exalted, figure. The erotic force of the poem would have been far stronger without the final three stanzas, and again, we must question why the poem is thus. It is difficult to conceive of the poets—who, only a few lines earlier, dwelt on Venus’s hand slipping between her legs and only a few years earlier had published a set of Sapphic poems—seeking to sanitize the poem or maintain their modesty with these final verses that are akin to a film camera panning away from a love scene. Rather, it seems that Michael Field’s sense of duty to the ekphrastic genre and anxiety about how their “idiosyncrasies” might have affected their “patient, continuous sight,” impinge on their and our erotic experience of the art object (*Sight and Song*, p. v–vi).

Swinburne’s “Hermaphroditus” offers an alternative sort of conclusion. Here, too, the poem takes refuge in the eroticized figure’s mythological status in its final stanza. However, in Swinburne’s poem, the panning away from sexual experimentation is equated with the selflessness associated with orgasm: “Hermaphroditus” ends with Swinburne’s vision of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus’ “melt[ing]” together (l. 53). This final sestet has a varied rhyme pattern that breaks from the despair-ridden sestets of the preceding three sonnets, illustrating the blamelessness of Hermaphroditus’s situation (ll. 51–56). The speaker asserts knowledge of the truth of Hermaphroditus’s transformation as a moment of sexual experience and enlightenment—“I know; I saw” (l. 51)—before describing how “thy moist limbs melted,” “the large light turned tender in thine eyes,” and “all thy boy’s breath softened into sighs” (ll. 53–56). The mingling of the rhymes in this sestet, bearing a *cdcccd* pattern, is less

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balanced than the *c d c d c d* patterns of the earlier sestets, imitating the mingling of the bodies of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis that is boldly mixed sex.

By drawing on this trope of melting, Michael Field might have made use of their associations between Venus and the Italian landscape to suggest lesbian sexual experience—two female bodies merging together—under the guise of an ekphrastic description of the similarities of the curving lines used to depict both. Yet, despite many of the critical readings that seek to interpret “*Sleeping Venus*” thus, the poem itself abandons the idea as a half-formed thought: the “detail” of the painting and Michael Field’s use of art criticism’s “professional tools” to describe it take priority over the prospective “emotional energy” in the interest of fulfilling their promises in the preface to *Sight and Song*. Michael Field’s methodological success comes at the expense of the poem’s creative and erotic success.

Independence and Experimentation

In this final moment of comparison, I examine how, despite the volume’s *Stimmung* of fixity and dedication to “objective” description, Michael Field also share Swinburne’s attitude toward art and the spaces for viewing art. Evangelista calls Swinburne’s essays and poems “unique in that they portray the gallery as a literary space in which the experience of the art object generates literary experimentation,” and Michael Field’s ekphrastic volume shares this attitude (p. 160). *Sight and Song* aims to offer readers a *musée imaginaire* that might be a safe space for art lovers who, like them, did not wish to be patronized when told that “*of course* such an[d] such person bears traces of Giorgione’s influence” because “such a remark makes the poor student hot with shame & angry at his ignorance.”³¹ In this regard, then, *Sight and Song* evinces more independence and individuality than first suggested by Michael Field’s attention to attribution and the other professional tools applied by Berenson et al.

I want to turn to two poems that comment on their own relationship to the chosen art objects: “Before the Mirror” (*First Series*, pp. 129–131) and “A Portrait, by Bartolommeo Veneto” (*Sight and Song*, pp. 27–30). Both the poets here choose different titles for their poems than the painted works. In “Before the Mirror,” Swinburne treats J. A. M. Whistler’s *Symphony in White, No. 2* (formerly *The Little White Girl*), while Michael Field label “A Portrait” a picture that is variously known as *Flora, Portrait of a Young Woman as Flora, Idealised Portrait of a Courtesan as Flora*, or some other combination thereof (with occasional mention of Lucrezia Borgia thrown in for good measure). The promise of these fresh names is borne out in both poems, which diverge from the painted content that they ostensibly ekphrasize. For both Swinburne and

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Michael Field, the question at hand is what the young woman sees of herself and, as a corollary, whether an ekphrasis might reflect a portrait as it is to *its* self.

John Hollander's *The Gazer's Spirit* bears *Symphony in White, No. 2* on its cover in most editions, and "Before the Mirror" is included in the "Gallery" portion of that work. Although the poem was, according to Swinburne, "entirely and only suggested to [him] by the picture," his verses make little effort to convey the visual content of Whistler's painting *per se*.³² However, as it appears in the *First Series*, "Before the Mirror" might certainly be termed a "gallery" poem because of its subtitle: "(Verses written under a picture) / Inscribed to J. A. Whistler," which, slightly odd in its use of "under," was granted by Swinburne when publishing *First Series* in recognition of Whistler's addition of the poem, printed on gold paper, at the bottom of the picture's frame.

Swinburne's poem follows an unusual form that now bears his name, comprising three sets of three septets with a set pattern of rhyme (*ababcbb*) and lines varying in length from pentameter to dimeter. There is something deeply feminine in the nested tripartite structure of Swinburne's poem, which seems to mimic the three phases of womanhood (variously described but in common neo-Pagan parlance, the Triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, Crone).³³ The poem invites this interpretation, moving thematically from attention to the better-than-"maiden" white of "this face" in part 1 (ll. 6, 7) to the woman's questioning of her "hand, a fallen rose, / . . . snow-white on white snows" in part 2 (ll. 34–35) and finally to a melancholic consideration of the passing of all things, including "joys" (l. 44), "sorrows" (l. 46), and "old loves" (l. 61).

At a more granular level, the alternating *b* rhymes mimic this triplicity both within stanzas and across the three stanzas of each part, as the *b* rhymes are shared in each triple (barring part 2, where the imperfect rhymes of "were" and "bear" must suffice as rhymes with "care" and "fair"; ll. 37, 39, 35, 42). There are commonalities, too, in the *a* and *c* rhymes employed in part 1, but that pattern is not sustained into the second and third parts, as though the unity of form is beginning to give way, just as the young woman's clear vision of herself in the mirror gives way to other "ghosts" (l. 50). Yet each stanza's long final line contains a *c* rhyme at midline, where the meter might have allowed a line break between a three-period and a two-period line. The soft undulations back and forth are suggestive of a flower, a rose, its petals regularly aligned except for where they are tightly furled upon each other in their center or, in this case, the stanza's end. This same texture is suggested also by the woman's white dress, which ripples, billows, and contracts.

Swinburne's poem thus registers both the nested nature of the art object's visual content and a *Stimmung* of melancholic lightness drawn from the

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art object; the dreamy unease that viewing it provokes echoes in the poem's aural patterns. The poem also dramatizes the question of priority into which it enters vis-à-vis the art object. The poem's central, unresolved tension is expressed in the middle stanza: "Art thou the ghost, my sister, / White sister there, / Am I the ghost, who knows?" (ll. 31–33). This questioning echoes the paragonal struggle that is often seen as characteristic of ekphrastic work,³⁴ and in 1902, Whistler wrote to the *Morning Post* to dispute a claim that the poem had inspired the painting, not vice versa: "[T]hose lines were only written, in my studio, after the picture was painted. And the writing of them was a rare and graceful tribute from the poet to the painter—a noble recognition of work by the production of a nobler one."³⁵ While both Swinburne and Whistler felt their works to be in sympathy with each other, mutually increased by their juxtaposition, the question of priority always remains in ekphrastic work, and it is one that facticity cannot quite quash.

This tension is also explored in "A *Portrait*," as like "Before the Mirror," and unlike most of *Sight and Song*, the precise description of the art object is combined with a focus on the narrative behind the picture's production. While thematically the poem attends to the agency of a female subject who, having long admired her beauty in the mirror, employs an artist to capture that beauty for eternity on a canvas, as critics have noted, the poem also seems to presume the poet's essential role in "envoic[ing]" the painted figure. Michael Field thus asserts their ekphrastic role in bringing into being this interpretation of the art object through their "labour of vision," which has been transferred to them—and all observers—by the woman of the portrait and which is required to "re-inscribe" "meaning" onto the "vacancy" left by the subject of the art object (Fraser, "Visual Field", pp. 567–568). Labor—to see, to retain a vision, and to communicate it onward—is therefore at the center of this poem.

A seven-stanza poem, "A *Portrait*" is written in rhyme royal, unusual for ekphrases, which often involve the sonnet form. Rhyme royal is not used elsewhere in *Sight and Song*, and so, aside from demonstrating Michael Field's prosodic competence and variety, the form draws attention to the imaginative work done by the ekphrasis, evoking, as it does, the lengthy collections of re-told stories that use the form, such as William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

If Swinburne's speaker in "Before the Mirror" considers only her reflection and seems unaware of her painted status, Michael Field's central figure considers her reflection and responds to it with a desire to create a more stable self-image in the form of a painting. In this regard, the sheer bulk of "A *Portrait*," in comparison with the lithe stanzas of "Before the Mirror," suggests the solidity

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that the former's subject seeks to attain, as well as the greater weight or importance of a portrait, compared to the fleeting image that can be gained in a mirror. "A Portrait" is often claimed to "envoice" the painted woman, but at no point does she actually speak, unlike Swinburne's subject. Rather, the poem prioritizes not the pictured woman's subjectivity but the portrait's. Michael Field seek in their ekphrasis not to return the woman's voice to her but to remind the portrait—and the reader—of its role in storing and transmitting her beauty and the subsequent role that they have played in doing the same.

Michael Field's poem suggests that it has a certain priority over the art object by virtue of this narrative content, but it would be an error to interpret "A Portrait" as merely demonstrating poetry's victory over painting in a paragonal struggle. Rather, it demonstrates Michael Field's effort to follow Swinburne's advice and undertake their own literary experimentation. In this way, then, Michael Field might seem to break away from the *Stimmung* of fixity that pervades other poems, such as "Saint Katharine" and "Sleeping Venus," which focus on the minor visual details of the art objects. However, that same *Stimmung* is generated by others means: an emphasis on the poets' labor to reproduce a calcified—"crystal, flawless" (l. 1)—beauty but also to bring us "tidings from the face" (l. 4) and a demand that the reader honor that beauty precisely and only as it is presented to them.

The dramatization of the young woman preparing herself to be painted, choosing flowers and making a wreath, invites us to consider the labor that underpins the beauty of any piece of art (ll. 17–21, 24–25). In turn, this invites us to acknowledge Michael Field's labor in transmitting the central figure's beauty verbally to us through their ekphrasis, via their "effort to see things from their own centre," undermining their suggestion that their poems contain only what the pictures "sing in themselves" (*Sight and Song*, p. vi). Thus, while Swinburne describes the imaginative work of a viewer that parallels his, Michael Field invite us to consider the laborious nature of their own work, rather than conduct our own.

The narrative that Michael Field produce is decisive, the poem adopting the forcefulness of the (imagined) woman herself: "She will be painted, she who is so strong / In loveliness," the line break emphasizing strength of will as well as a strong attractiveness (l. 15–16), and she has the "finest touch" in choosing the most beautiful flowers with which to adorn herself "in her pride" (l. 21). It is not hard to imagine Michael Field considering their own "fine touch" in the working of their poem or that they share with her "her strange, emphatic insight true" about how she ought to be depicted (l. 26). The effort of the painted woman to (successfully) "conquer death" (l. 43, l. 49) seems to

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parallel the effort of Michael Field to ekphrasize her, giving her new life that might also, they might hope, last “for centuries” (l. 29) in another static “literary form of resurrection.”

Conclusion

In these three moments of comparison, I have examined how fixity—the fixed nature of the art object’s representation and the fixed nature of received interpretations—pervades *Sight and Song*. This *Stimmung* was, I suggest, the primary cause of the contemporary indifference, and occasional criticism, with which the volume was received. My own criticism of the endings of “*Saint Katharine*” and “*Sleeping Venus*,” which flop, leaving the tension that has been built to dissipate unattended, echoes Yeats’s criticism that “none [of the poems] have any sustained music,” “the garment of emotion and passion” (p. 116). The “Song,” as Michael Field knew themselves, “soon fades away.”

Maintaining for a moment the spirit of comparison, there is an interesting sort of inversion here between Yeats’s criticism of Michael Field and T. S. Eliot’s later criticism of Swinburne’s poetry as being both nonmusical sound and comprising *only* sound, lacking in imagery.³⁶ Insofar as we might credit these particular critical assessments as saying something broader about ekphrasis, it is this: ekphrastic poetry is uncomfortable with either imposing itself too much, in a sort of excess of “song,” or too little, in an excess of “sight.”

Swinburne’s poetic forms reinforce content and themes that he derives from the merest hints of the visual data before him. Like his essays, his ekphrastic poems adopt the aesthetics of “rough suggestive rapidity.”³⁷ Swinburne’s ekphrastic method is transformative, rendering art objects mobile and inviting the reader into a shared “gallery” that is a personal, rather than professional, space. Michael Field may have been inspired by his work and followed many of his precepts, such as highlighting the erotic elements of encounters with art objects, but as women and amateurs writing for an increasingly professionalized audience, their *musée imaginaire* seems to lack the same personal freedoms as they turn instead to producing a “magnificent catalogue.”³⁸

Meanwhile, exhaustive *descriptio* characterizes *Sight and Song*. Michael Field’s “idiosyncrasies” are deliberately held at the edges of their poems through their “effort to see things from their own centre,” but that center was often dictated by the masculinized art community. Largely, *Sight and Song* seeks to illustrate the understanding of art objects that Michael Field shared with some of the most influential figures of the period, and their chosen epigraphs for the volume are significant. With the first, quoting Sophocles in the Greek, they seek to remind readers of their reputation as capable classical scholars,

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demonstrated in *Long Ago's* many quotations of Sapphic fragments. With the second, quoting John Keats, they lay claim to a fertile nineteenth-century male literary tradition. The framing of the volume thus asks its readers to give Michael Field full recognition as members of an aesthetically and classically educated art-critical community.³⁹

Michael Field were not explicitly struggling against the masculinization of art criticism, then, but sought to insist on their own place in that world as Michael and Field. This was not a new phenomenon in their literary career. In 1884, Bradley had protested to Robert Browning that he was “robbing [them] of real criticism—such as man gives man”—by letting out the secret that Michael Field was two women writing together.⁴⁰ Recollecting a conversation with Oscar Wilde on 21 July 1890, Bradley notes how much she had “suffered” from Pater’s way of “speak[ing] of the scholarly conscience as male,” although she says she “recognised [the] justice” of that gendered characterization.⁴¹ Similarly, Bradley pushed back against any misinterpretation of her and Cooper’s work as akin to that of New Women authors, telling Browning that they were not “combating ‘social conventions’” because it was “not in [their] power or desire to treat irreverently customs or beliefs that have been, or are, sacred to men.”⁴² There are elements of both truth and dissimulation in these remarks, but in *Sight and Song*, Michael Field sought to demonstrate their mastery of the techniques of art criticism associated with the male critical gaze that they knew only too well.

By the time Michael Field had begun writing *Sight and Song* in 1890, their dual female identity was common knowledge, although still much to their chagrin.⁴³ *Sight and Song* offered Michael Field an opportunity to demonstrate that they could achieve similar insights into art as the men whose advice they sought, and their effort was not without some success. For example, John M. Gray noted in his review how “Keats-like” *Sight and Song* was.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, as Michael Field might have feared, their gender featured heavily in some of *Sight and Song's* less favorable reviews, including one by Richard Le Gallienne. Their diary on 9 June 1892 accused his *Daily Chronicle* review of doing them a “discourtesy” in its treatment of both their dual authorship and their sex and of “giving [their work] a simper.”⁴⁵

Michael Field’s gender, or rather their gendered experience of art-critical circles at the fin de siècle, informs their approach to the genre of ekphrasis that seeks to deny the presumed defects of being women poets. Although Michael Field’s objectivist ekphrastic method and style might have been expected to deflect gendered criticism of their poetry, then, the real poetic effects of their approach proved, in the round, a failure among their contemporaries. In

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positioning *Sight and Song* to rival, even obliquely, the opinion-forming art criticism of men, they constructed the volume in the only way they knew how. Reflecting art criticism's dogmatism, its *Stimmung* of fixity, back to the male critics who produced it was, perhaps inevitably, perceived by those same critics as an aesthetic failure. But it powerfully illustrates just the sort of imaginative self-suppression that they had been encouraged to exhibit through lessons on art from men. What they had done, ultimately, failed to match what they had meant.

Notes

- 1 Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1892). All future quotations from *Sight and Song* refer to this edition.
- 2 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads: First Series*, vol. 1 of *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1904). All future quotations from *First Series* refer to this edition.
- 3 Hilary Fraser explores Michael Field as part of a tradition of female authors writing from “outside the profession,” “flouting the professional boundaries” of art criticism, and “appropriating the critical discourses of art.” Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), p. 33. That Fraser entitles her chapter on Michael Field “Girl Guides” rather supports my argument, however, that Michael Field were seeking to take up themselves the position of authority that they were used to male “guides,” such as Bernard Berenson, occupying.
- 4 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012), p. 19.
- 5 Although I here focus especially on Berenson, Bradley and Cooper had extensive circles with whom they corresponded, including Pater, Ruskin, and many others.
- 6 See, for example, Claire Richter Sherman and Adele M. Holcombe, eds., *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981); essays on women's place in this sphere in France in Wendelin Guentner, ed., *Women Art Critics in Nineteenth-Century France: Vanishing Acts* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2013); and Meaghan Clarke's “The Art Press at the Fin de Siècle: Women, Collecting, and Connoisseurship,” *Visual Resources* 31, nos. 1–2 (2015): 15–30.
- 7 Pamela Gerrish Nunn, “Critically Speaking,” in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1995), 109.
- 8 Stefano Evangelista, “Swinburne's Galleries,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 40, nos. 1–2 (2010): 171. Emphasis added.
- 9 Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46779, fol. 49r–v. The relationship between Michael Field and Costelloe, and Costelloe's involvement in the writing of much of Berenson's work, is beyond the scope of this article.
- 10 W. B. Yeats, “Review of *Sight and Song*,” *Bookman* 2 (July 1892): 116. Michael Field's influence on Yeats has been analyzed by Kelsey Williams, “‘Copied without loss’:

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- Michael Field's Poetic Influence on the Work of W. B. Yeats," *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 1 (2016): 128–146.
- 11 Michael Field, "Letter to Bernard Berenson, 1891," in *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials*, ed. Marion Thain and Ana Parejo Vadillo (Plymouth: Broadview Editions, 2009), p. 316.
 - 12 Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46780, fol. 89v.
 - 13 Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Victor Hugo: *L'Année Terrible*," in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p. 41.
 - 14 Michael Field shared also with Swinburne a fascination with Elizabethan and Jacobean drama and medieval tales. T. D. Olverson explores in detail the shared Hellenism evident in their dramas in "Libidinous Laureates and Lyrical Maenads: Michael Field, Swinburne and Erotic Hellenism," *VP* 47, no. 4 (2009): 759–776.
 - 15 Michael Field, "Letter to A. C. Swinburne, 27 May 1889," in *Uncollected Letters of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. Terry L. Meyers, 3 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), 2:475.
 - 16 Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Notes on Some Pictures of 1868," in *Essays and Studies*, p. 359.
 - 17 John Hollander distinguishes between "notional" and "actual" ekphrasis in "The Poetics of Ekphrasis," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 4, no. 1 (1988): 209–219; while Peter Barry proposes further subdivisions in both categories in "Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis," *Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2002): 155–165.
 - 18 Janis McLarren Caldwell, "Observing the Dead in Michael Field's Ekphrastic Poetry," *VP* 55, no. 2 (2017): 195.
 - 19 Yopie Prins suggests another model in "Voice Inverse," *VP* 42, no. 1 (2004): 43–59.
 - 20 Shahar Bram, "Ekphrasis as a Shield: Ekphrasis and the Mimetic Tradition," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 22, no. 4 (2006): 373, 374.
 - 21 James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 3.
 - 22 Margaret Cohen and Anne Higonnet, "Complex Culture," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 21.
 - 23 Hilary Fraser, "A Visual Field: Michael Field and the Gaze," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34 (2006): 559.
 - 24 Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46779, fol. 57r. She later records how they "s[ought] out many of the pictures on Bernhard's list, and enjoy[ed] the first thrilling shock of their colour and conception" (fol. 69r).
 - 25 Martha Vicinus, "'Sister Souls': Bernard Berenson and Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper)," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (2005): 334.
 - 26 Michael Field, Miscellaneous papers, Oxford Univ., Bodleian Library, MS Eng

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- misc.d.333, fol. 68–70. Michael Field's typical use of underlining for emphasis in their manuscripts has been rendered here in italics.
- 27 Evangelista notes the importance of “emotional energy” in Walter Pater's definition of the aesthetic critic (“Swinburne's Galleries,” p. 164).
 - 28 Referred to explicitly in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Notes on Poems and Reviews* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1866), pp. 17–18.
 - 29 Although this is the volume's aim, there *are* mistakes in identification expressed in *Sight and Song*, which derive directly from Berenson. Jill Ehnenn has conducted some fascinating forensic work to locate the painting that inspired “*Saint Katharine*,” discovering that the painting is in fact an altered painting of Narcissus looking into a well, which Berenson had himself misidentified. Ehnenn, “On Art Objects and Women's Words: Ekphrasis in Vernon Lee (1887), Graham R. Tomson (1889), and Michael Field (1892),” in *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Franco Felluga, http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=jill-r-ehnenn-on-art-objects-and-womens-words-ekphrasis-in-vernon-lee-1887-graham-r-tomson-1889-and-michael-field-1892 (accessed 18 March 2019).
 - 30 S. Brooke Cameron, “The Pleasures of Looking and the Feminine Gaze in Michael Field's *Sight and Song*,” *VP* 51, no. 2 (2013): 165.
 - 31 Katharine Bradley, “Letter to Mary Costelloe, 2 February 1892,” in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p. 328. The typical use of underlining for emphasis in Michael Field's manuscripts has been rendered here in italics.
 - 32 John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 194.
 - 33 Robert Graves was particularly influential in establishing these figures as archetypes through his *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948).
 - 34 The term derives from the Italian *paragone*, a genre associated with the Renaissance debate about the superiority of one art form over others, as in Leonardo da Vinci's *A Treatise on Painting*. Bram has argued against framing ekphrasis solely in the terms of struggle between language and image (“Ekphrasis as a Shield”).
 - 35 J. A. M. Whistler, letter in *Morning Post*, 6 August 1902.
 - 36 T. S. Eliot, “Swinburne as Poet,” in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), pp. 131–137.
 - 37 Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence,” in *Essays and Studies*, p. 338.
 - 38 Michael Field records this description of *Sight and Song* in the *Athenaeum* with pride and excitement, describing it as “Capital & concise criticism!” (British Library Add. MS 46781, fol. 3r).
 - 39 Similarly, at their request, the volume was bound to resemble Paul Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* (1869) (British Library Add. MS 46779, fol. 146r), which they read during their June 1890 trip around continental Europe.

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- 40 "Letter from Katharine Bradley to Robert Browning, 23 November 1884," in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p. 311.
- 41 Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46778, fol. 97r.
- 42 Katharine Bradley, "Letter of 27 November 1884," in *Michael Field, The Poet*, p. 312.
- 43 Bradley records in their shared diary their response to being introduced as Michael Field at a gathering at Louise Chandler Moulton's on 21 July 1890: "[W]e stood, our wings vibrating in revolt, while hollow, fashionable women lisped their enchantment at meeting with us. A moment came when this could be borne no longer. I laid a master-hand on the hostess, & told her to introduce us by our Christian names." Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46778, fol. 94r.
- 44 John M. Gray, "Review of *Sight and Song*," *Academy*, 18 June 1892, p. 583.
- 45 Michael Field, British Library Add. MS 46780, fol. 105r.

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