

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Ehnenn, Jill *Michael Field's Revisionary Poetics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023. 276 pp.

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<1> In an early moment of Jill Ehnenn's *Michael Field's Revisionary Poetics*, Ehnenn describes a "sense of not knowing" relevant to Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley's experience of intersubjectivity. She writes, "In the case of translation, one will never know if one's version—translation—of the text captures the complete sense of the original. One wonders if it is correct—but one does the translation anyway" (38). It struck me that this description also applies to the work of writing a book review. Reviewers attempt to capture the complete sense of the original but, ultimately, the best we can accomplish is a thoughtful gloss. In what follows, I attempt my own process of phenomenological *l'engrenage*, "a 'gearing into and take up' of the other, the past, the unknown," that Ehnenn makes one of her central approaches to Cooper and Bradley's prolific outpouring of verse dramas, ekphrastic poetry, lyrics, elegies, devotional verse, and private diaries.

<2> Ehnenn's superbly researched and artfully woven (to use her recurrent metaphor of "the theoretical tapestry [she is] weaving to facilitate this book's inquiry" [31]) study of the work of Michael Field (the collaborative pseudonym of authors Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley) arrives in a moment when Field scholarship is expanding into something of a middle period. Almost two decades have passed since Marian Thain's *'Michael Field,' Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Fin de Siècle* (2007) was published, the first monograph about the poets. Even as Ehnenn was completing the proofs on *Revisionary Poetics*, Carolyn Dever published *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field* (2022), offering an innovative reading of the couple's shared *Works and Days* diary as "the great unknown novel of the nineteenth century" (4). Added to this are Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo's co-edited *Michael Field, Decadent Moderns* (2019) and a forthcoming collection by this author and Ana Parejo Vadillo about Cooper and Bradley's verse dramas. Ehnenn rightly points out that such "scholarship has successfully moved Michael Field out of the margins and firmly into the canon of Victorian study" (3). Ehnenn

capitalizes on the opportunity to revisit Cooper and Bradley's work through the "rich theoretical developments that have emerged in the academy" subsequently (3). More than "just another book" about Michael Field, Ehnenn has crafted something of a pause in the scholarship to assess where the criticism on Bradley and Cooper has been and where it might go moving forward. In other words, Ehnenn, not unlike Bradley and Cooper, is in dialogue with past scholarship in order to innovate and rethink Michael Field for future criticism.

<3> The complexity of Ehnenn's conceptual framework is admirable and expertly handled, being really a model of how to structure not only a monograph's introduction but the subsequent chapters, as well. Ehnenn's prose is consistently lucid, and she is clearly mindful of helping her reader; she always takes care to enumerate her claims, to offer signposting to remind readers of where she's been and where she's heading, and to unpack complex concepts with great care. One might object that these writerly moves should go without saying, but sadly, they so often do not. I can imagine this volume being as accessible to undergraduates as it would be useful and welcome by specialists in the field. All these writerly moves are welcome especially in a project focused on prolific, collaborative, queer authors whose writing spanned many genres and whose shared complex philosophical paradigms continue to intrigue.

<4> Ehnenn's method is "threefold, weaving together historical, phenomenological, and formal concerns" to explore Cooper and Bradley's revisionary poetics, as a form of re-seeing history, themselves, and their work. First, she observes that Cooper and Bradley's revisions of history were designed to reassess and to include, understanding that older ways of seeing things are "no longer working" or that "claims to objectivity and truth have failed, or at least are incomplete." To address this issue, Cooper and Bradley adapted histories and cultural artifacts for new uses and modern contexts. Second, Ehnenn recognizes that their revisions of history were also a form of nineteenth-century adaptation, which provided a number of models "such as Darwinian adaptation, resurrection, reform, and translation" (27). Replicas and reproduction were what Mieke Bal calls a "traveling concept" (qtd. in Ehnenn 28), and as such enabled Bradley and Cooper to embrace ambiguity, create relationships and networks, and expand creativity and knowledge.

<5> Ehnenn's aim in the section on historical methods is to establish a philosophical and literary approach for understanding Michael Field's adaptations of history. To do so, Ehnenn turns to two philosophers Bradley and Cooper "studied intensely"—Hegel and Nietzsche—and two contemporaries who similarly influenced the pair—

G. H. Lewes and Walter Pater. From Hegel and Lewes, she identifies investments in anachronism and an appreciation for revision. In Pater, she locates

three simultaneously diachronic and synchronic concerns: (1) how the artist might “maintain the historical specificity of [similar types of cultural artifacts] while also asserting their generalized value and their relations to one another over time”; (2) how the artist might achieve both aesthetic and historical value, [that is] “absolutely unique yet also representative of his age”; and (3) how a type expressed concrete historical identity while also expressing something beyond itself” (Pater 127, 138 qtd. in Ehnenn 29-30).

Each of these concepts reinforced Bradley and Cooper’s tendency to reshape, adapt, and transform history. Nietzsche similarly authorized Cooper and Bradley to “remint the universally known into something never heard before” (Nietzsche 94 qtd. in Ehnenn 30). Ehnenn augments these historical methods by turning to queer theory for its methods of reclamation and temporality. She then rounds out this section by employing adaptation theory, a subsection that offers five recurring areas of concern relevant to Bradley and Cooper’s writing, among which are adaptors being recognized as translators, conversations about fidelity to an original text versus intertextuality, and fraught distinctions between adaptation and appropriation.

<6> Most vital for Ehnenn’s phenomenological approach are Sara Ahmed’s concept of queer orientation and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *l’engrenage*, that “gearing into and taking up” already mentioned above. Without getting into the weeds of these ideas, I will say that Ehnenn recognizes both as processes. Ehnenn seeks to tap into Cooper and Bradley’s sense of experience “of revising histories, figures, and forms in an evolving context” (37). On the one hand, *l’engrenage* lends its notion of seeking fit, of making something come together, of “a chain of events, or an intertwining,” but also “something accomplished by the act, not something pre-determined by the shape of the gears and the teeth” (Merleau-Ponty 47n qtd. in Ehnenn 37). *L’engrenage* strikes me as similar to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of being “tuned in,” a sense of inclination toward, attention to, and intensification of concern for (*On Listening* 4-6). On the other hand, Ahmed considers how queer and female subjects orient and reorient to point of view and lived experiences. Both *l’engrenage* and orientation are formal strategies for Bradley and Cooper’s revisionary poetics through which the couple continually geared into and took up “a willful engagement with the unknown” (39).

<7> Ehnenn’s third methodological framework is form, which gets less of an extensive overview in the introduction but emerges with greater emphasis in each of

her close readings throughout the chapters. The affordances of form, a concept from Caroline Levine's *Forms: While, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, is chief among Ehnenn's critical apparatus, as it equips her with another traveling concept that she can apply to literary devices or the different genres that constitute the focus of each chapter. That forms "do things" and are portable, empowered Bradley and Cooper to "take advantage of certain affordances while using the forms to do new personal and cultural work" (43). Attention to form discloses both poets' "engaging with the unknown" and recognizing the "political power" of the forms themselves (44-45). Taken together, Ehnenn's tapestry of methods, including historical, phenomenological, and formal models, constitutes the apparatus through which her later chapters identify and tease out Bradley and Cooper's revisionary poetics. Ehnenn draws together each of these methodological threads in the chapters that follow, which unfold chronologically.

<8> Chapter 1, "Rewriting History: The Early Plays and *Long Ago*," details how Bradley and Cooper transformed historical detail to explore feeling. While the Renaissance and Romantic closet drama provided women authors with "outlets for dramatizing their political and cultural concerns" (Burroughs 9 qtd. in Ehnenn 50), Bradley and Cooper's prefaces articulated a clear position on historical verse dramas, one that did not shy away from anachronism. Following Sharon Bickle's assertion that Michael Field's adaption of *Callirrhoë* (1884) is not anachronistic, Ehnenn cautions that we should not dismiss their claims of anachronism as "disingenuous" due to their philosophical stance toward history. For example, the couple explicitly reject fidelity to historical sources in preface to another of their verse dramas, *William Rufus* (1885). Instead, Ehnenn demonstrates through careful close reading that Bradley and Cooper viewed the historical persons and events they replicated as traveling concepts through which they explored accuracy of feeling rather than fidelity to content. Michael Field altered original narratives in their dramas to better express emotion, a choice which emerged out of "their fierce dedication to the Dionysian" (63). Bradley and Cooper, following Pater, also used history to find and construct community. Ehnenn claims the closet drama worked for Bradley and Cooper as a form because it enabled them to "show rather than tell," "to write scenes that can't actually be performed onstage," and "to manifest their own queer structures of feeling" (67). Consequently, their dramas reflect participation in a queer phenomenological project of representing history as "a product of the orientations that come from lived experience," an ongoing vehicle for creating communities with the past and present (73).

<9> Bradley and Cooper's willingness to gear into and take up the unknown likewise manifests in the ekphrastic poetics of *Sight and Song* (1892), the subject of Ehnenn's

second chapter. Here, Ehnenn says she wants to “get into the time and space between looking at an art object and a finished poem about that art object” (88). To do so, she again employs her queer, feminist, historical, phenomenological method to looking and thinking across time. Ehnenn identifies five affordances of ekphrasis and then applies each to examples from *Sight and Song*. These affordances enabled Bradley and Cooper to work against male traditions of representation, invite their readers to decide what they “see” in a poem, exercise and represent synesthesia, understand ekphrasis as another mode of adaptation, and gear into a sort of “representational friction, a specific form of aesthetic intertextuality pertaining to slippages between the world, the visual medium, and/or the original referent” (100). At this point, Ehnenn engages in a bit of archival detective work as she identifies an archive error in a “museum label” misidentifying the painting Bradley and Cooper reference in “St. Katherine of Alexandria.” This moment is one of several in which Ehnenn’s voice breaks through loud and clear; there is a sense of being taken along on a scholarly hunt, which is a delight. Ehnenn’s attention in the chapter to touch rather than vision, the male gaze vs. the female, and “the potential for ekphrasis to negotiate homoerotic desire” all enrich her readings of poems such as “A Pen-drawing of Leda” and “The Marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne” (116).

<10> The third chapter applies recent arguments about eco-paganism—“a symbiotic relationship between life forms...to diffuse self-identity within a larger collective”; and “negotiations of both the natural and unnatural that can be understood as both decadent and queer” (Denison 437-8 qtd. in Ehnenn 136)—to the lyrics in *Underneath the Bough* (1893). Ehnenn’s prosodic readings were a highlight of this chapter, as she gives close attention to rhyme schemes and meter to support her claims. She also uses musical theory here as a metaphor for variations on a theme and “contrapuntal music,” which relies on interdependence rather than individuality, involving as it does simultaneous, multiple musical lines operating in point and counterpoint (142). Her argument in this chapter is that *Underneath the Bough*’s lyrics represent “an exploration of that individual subject’s inextricable relation with the natural world, in all of its multiplicities” (135). Ehnenn claims that Bradley and Cooper take an “entangled approach” to writing nature in *Underneath a Bough* in order to represent a queer, decadent lyric speaker. Here, as with earlier chapters, Bradley and Cooper’s poetry is bound up in “a uniquely subjective and queerly boundaried aesthetic of heightened emotion and entanglement” (137). Ehnenn demonstrates that the “lyric I” for Michael Field is instead a “lyric we” distributed “within larger collectives” (Denison 437 qtd. in Ehnenn 146). Through this diffused “lyric we,” Bradley and Cooper emphasize the entanglements and queerness of nature.

<11> As they do in *Underneath the Bough*, Bradley and Cooper favored modes of eco-entanglement, and the Dionysian and Decadent tropes favored by male Aesthetes, in their elegiac poetry. Ehnenn's chapter on the elegiac tradition turns to aspects of Michael Field's mourning for family members and their dog Whym Chow to claim that the couple created an "elegiac scaffold" that not only helped them to grieve but became a framework for eco-entanglement, "albeit in a fluid and shifting way" (172). After exploring the work of traditional elegy and Victorian mourning's logics of time and space, Ehnenn turns to two distinct stages of Michael Field's elegiac texts: the first involves verse and diary references to "their dead"—family members, close friends, and historical figures; the second pertains to the series of elegiac texts written in response to the death of Whym Chow (177). In the first stage, the couple's dead are figured as still present and, coupled with rituals of mourning described in their diary, constitute a rhetoric of enduring connection with the dead. The poets worked to straddle a dialectic of presence and absence, unity and sameness. Doing so enabled Bradley and Cooper to craft new relationships to their dead, which were in some cases more functional than when the dead were still alive. Unlike their earlier elegiac texts, their poems to Whym Chow differ in that they do not offer consolation. Whym Chow seems to thwart detachment from the dead, as Bradley and Cooper's inability to let go of memories forestalls consolation rather than enabling the couple to move on. Ehnenn devotes a number of pages to describing the 'trinity' that Bradley and Cooper believed they formed with their dog. Within this queer relationship, Ehnenn suggests that mourning Whym Chow had to continue as long as Bradley and Cooper's relationship would. They had, after a fashion, taken their dog into their own intersubjective relationship in such a way that his passing threatened the integrity of their own union.

<12> The penultimate chapter on Bradley and Cooper's devotional verse was, perhaps, least engaging. Although this author willingly pleads guilty to the distaste for the couple's Catholic work Ehnenn identifies, Ehnenn observes, "their negativity is often articulated in a tone of disappointment, exasperation, and even betrayal" in their devotional verse (208). Even so, she makes a case for scholars to not dismiss Bradley and Cooper's devotional verse because they represent a shift, especially following Cooper's cancer diagnosis, to understanding subjectivity as situated in the body. To my knowledge, there haven't been many (any?) disability studies readings of Michael Field, but Ehnenn gives us one here. The second half on Cooper's cancer diagnosis, and the attendant shift from worship to identification with the pain and disability of martyrs and Christ's passion was really the strongest section of this chapter. That the Catholic lyrics initially explored how the pair were becoming Catholic is fairly clear. However, Ehnenn's contextualization of Cooper's cancer diagnosis together with her disability studies reading and her queer

phenomenological framework opens up the later devotional verse. Phenomenology, she explains, helps us to understand subjectivity as located in the body, as “a new kind of intimate boundary-crossing” centered in Cooper’s body. Read in this way, Bradley and Cooper’s devotional verse anticipates current disability studies and queer scholarship on desiring disability and queer/crip futures.

<13> With *Michael Field’s Revisionary Poetics*, Ehnenn delivers an absorbing, deeply thoughtful, and virtuosic re-vision of Bradley and Cooper’s writing, highlighting not only their queer subjectivity but their developing philosophical stances. The chapters on “Rewriting History” and ekphrastic poetics stand out for their erudite analysis, exceptional close reading, and demonstrations of Ehnenn’s tripartite methodology. Future studies might take up Ehnenn’s provocation in the final chapter to read Bradley and Cooper’s shared journal, *Works and Days*, as fictional autobiography, a form of, not always reliable, “self-fashioning” through which the couple entangled their writing and identity (242). Ehnenn’s study makes clear that the truths of subjective experience are always partly “fictions, too” (247). Throughout, she asks astute questions about telling and retelling, originals and adaptations, history and fiction, making and remaking. Her study makes clear that the work of Michael Field’s revisionary poetics was always to “write themselves into their equally unknown future selves, making, creative, revising what their [work] performs, and in so doing become the subject of their own *poiesis*” (247). Ehnenn’s insights in *Michael Field’s Revisionary Poetics* will naturally be fruitful for Field scholars; however, I would caution against pigeon-holing this project solely for critics interested in Bradley and Cooper. There is a wealth of ideas and models available here for those in queer studies, disability studies, phenomenology, book history, archival research, historical poetics, autobiography and life writing, and really anyone seeking an example of how to talk about authors who reach backward to better understand themselves, their current moment, and their future.