

A vehicle for expression and the re-writing of myth: Michael Field's reception of Sappho in 'Long Ago'

Michael Field, the pseudonym for two female poets and lovers, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, undertook the 'audacious' task of 'the extension of Sapphics into lyrics'.¹ For Field, using Sappho did not just 'bear the thrill of transgression', but the very fact that she was an Ancient Greek meant they were authorised to write about themes of homosexuality and female desire in the late 19th century.² The sanction of the classics meant that, despite living in the same society which used Wilde's work as evidence to condemn him, they could write about these themes from a sympathetic lens: from the perspective of Sappho herself. Sappho was depicted by the Victorians either as a sexualised pornographic figure, or a very sanitised version such as a heterosexual headteacher. Field, however, uses Sappho, a symbol of not just homosexuality, but also the first and most renown for giving such intense and emotive expression to female and homosexual desire, as a vehicle for which they could express their own desires and passions. In-turn, Field re-wrote the Victorian Sapphic myth.



Alma Tadema's 1870 'Sappho and Alcaeus', depicting Sappho as the Victorian headmistress



Auguste Charles Mengin's 1877 'Sappho'. Sappho is depicted as a figure of desire, demonstrating the pornographic portrayal of Sappho by Victorians, who often suggested her to have been a prostitute

For Field, using the figure of Sappho was a way of writing about homosexuality from a safe distance, with the authorisation of the classics and the ancient world. For them, Sappho, as the first lesbian poet and the founder of lyric poetry as it is known today, provided the

¹ Preface, Michael Field, Long Ago

² Greek textual archaeological and erotic epigraphy in Simeon Solomon and Michael Field, Stephane Evangelista

vehicle for which they could express their own homosexuality in lyric poetry. Lucuara tells us 'Long Ago functions somehow as an empathetic text that recognises its most intimate mirror and interlocutor in the figure of Sappho'. Not only does Michael Field use Sappho to write about homosexuality, but they also use her fragments and imitate her style in order to give expression to such desires. Sappho acts as an 'intimate mirror' of their own society and Bradley and Cooper's own views, giving empathy and expression to homosexuality. Influenced by Symonds' 'Studies of the Greek Poets' and Wharton and Symonds' 'Sappho: Memoir, text, selected renderings, and a literal translation', Field frames Sappho in an idealised, almost utopian female homosocial and homosexual community on the island of Lesbos. Although widely debated, this is the kind of society many historians would place Sappho, and certainly where Symonds did. In lyric LIV, Sappho describes her **'maids'** as **'flitting mid the honey-bees'** and **'in apple-orchards with cool waters by'**, often also weaving garlands, a motif throughout 'Long Ago', and Sappho's own work, which symbolises homosexual love. This utopian setting, clearly influenced by Sappho's own exotic and erotic settings (for example the apple grove in fragment II where *'cold water splashes beyond apple branches, // and the place is all shadowy with roses // A dreamless sleep falls // from the shimmering leaves.'*) is complimented with a maenad-like description of the maidens. In lyric XVII, the women are **'around an altar...the perfect, virgin orb'**, with the **'moon...full'**, while they **'dance with lightsome feet // And lift the song with voices sweet'** in response to Sappho's lyre, in a circle around the altar. Field depicts Sappho as an enchantress, setting up an intimate and illusive setting. Thus, Field creates an erotic image of the women under Sappho's care, mingling with their Edenic landscape. Field is therefore able to express their own passion. By using Sappho's own life, her intimate homosocial and homosexual community, and imitating the exotic content of her own poetry, Sappho functions as an 'intimate mirror' for their homosexual desires. At the same time, Field is able to re-write the Victorian myth of Sappho: she is depicted neither as a headmistress nor a prostitute, but in the setting most historians today place her.

However, Field suggests a threat to this female community. Several of Sappho's poems are wedding songs and many historians believe she trained small and intimate groups of aristocratic girls for married life. Field uses this role, framing Sappho as a subversive 'interlocutor' of their own society.³ Sappho, in 'Long Ago' sees marriage as a threat to her idealised, utopian feminine community. Sappho does not just prepare these women for marriage, but Field's Sappho resents the prospect of her maidens entering the 'patriarchal economy of marriage', even equating this threat to death throughout the collection (**'the harsh rape of death'**).⁴ In lyric XX, in which she describes sending her maidens off to marriage, the refrain **'my heart turned cold, and then I drop my wings'**, suggests the pain she feels sending them off to marriage, leaving the protection of her **'wings'** and the homosocial and homosexual community. However, this pain is more explicitly directed against the prospect of a heterosexual marriage in lyric XVII, in which the women pray for their maidenhood to return, of which one interpretation might be that they are asking to

³ Michael Field's Long Ago as a paradigm of intertextual theory: from strangeness to metaxology, Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara

⁴ Michael Field's Long Ago as a paradigm of intertextual theory: from strangeness to metaxology, Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara

return to their homosexual community. Moreover, in lyric LIV, Sappho presents their homosexual community as superior to the maiden's later married life. She suggests her group of girls to be although a changing assembly, eternally youthful, dwelling in blissful surroundings (**'As Aphrodite's doves//Glance in the sun their colour comes and goes'**). Unlike married life, which grows old and is not immortal. Thus, Field uses Sappho's role in society on the island of Lesbos, in 3BC, as an 'intimate mirror' in which they can give expression to their own homosexual and homosocial community of two and critique the Victorian marriage market. Thus, in 'Long Ago', Field uses Sappho as a vehicle to express their own homosexuality, 'reframing the Greek poet in terms of a transgressive female sensibility'.⁵ Field not only rewrites the Victorian myth of Sappho by giving expression to her homosexuality, but they also use her to challenge the society in which it was created.

Not only does 'Long Ago' reframe Sappho as a subversive figure, who gives expression to homosexuality, but they also imitate her renown for giving the sharpest of expression to female desire. While they do not achieve her sharpness of expression, Field imitates Sappho's placing of the female experience of passion and desire at the fore. In lyric XLII, Field uses this to subvert the Victorian perception of marriage: the poem is centred around the bride, and the bridegroom 'exists only to be involved, and the very structure of invocation renders him absent'.⁶ The female experience is the focus of the lyric. Leighton, in her study of 'Victorian Women Poets' finds Field an anomaly, no doubt for this reason, calling it 'a poetry which altogether misses that stress of truth against pleasure, conscience against desire, which constitutes the main tension of other Victorian women poets'. There is no guilt felt by Sappho for any of her desires in 'Long Ago', only Field's imagination of natural feelings without the expectations of a Victorian society. As strict Christians, this was not in-line with how Bradley and Cooper felt. Their diaries suggest they both felt immense inner conflict and guilt due to their relationship.⁷ Thus, Sappho, not only as an ancient Greek homosexual poet, but indeed also the intensely direct style in which she gives expression to female desire, provides the vehicle for which Field can express female desire in their own lyrics, without the guilt and scrutiny of Victorian society.

While it's true a sexually liberated Sappho emerged in the nineteenth century, most poets such as Baudelaire and Swinburne used Sappho as a pornographic figure, with the purpose of shocking their Victorian bourgeoisie audience. Instead, Field uses Sappho to 'mediate on the creative power of female sensuality and sexuality'.⁸ Field attempts to imitate Sappho's directness in her description of passion in lyric XIV, comparing the fear of Atthis leaving their bed to the **'imminence of death'**, and perhaps her pithiness with the exclamation **'Assuageless pain!'** in lyric IX. Indeed, Field does not only give expression to female desire

⁵ Michael Field's Sapphic Communities: Constructing the Transgressive Feminine Sensibility of Long Ago, Elizabeth A. Primamore

⁶ The Victorian Sappho, Yopie Prins

⁷ Michael Field, the Two-headed Nightingale: lesbian test as palimpsest, Virginia Blain

⁸ Michael Field's Sapphic Communities: Constructing the Transgressive Feminine Sensibility of Long Ago, Elizabeth A. Primamore

through description, but by describing those whom she desires. This is done primarily through wedding songs, thus using Sappho's role as someone who sung and composed wedding songs and an ancient lyricist who focussed on female desire, to undercut Victorian sensibility and give expression to female desire. In poem LXVII, Sappho describes a bride who is kept '**inviolat**'. The image of her as a '**blushing apple on the topmost bough**' recalls Sappho's fragment about the apple beyond the reach of apple-pickers.⁹ In lyric XLII, Field keeps the bride in the state of the fragment leaves her: coming down the aisle, about to reach the bridegroom. She never reaches the bridegroom, building a 'highly eroticised' suspense.¹⁰ Thus, in both lyrics, Field gives the most powerful form of expression to female desire through 'the eroticising of that textual entanglement by turning it into an infinitely desirable female figure'.¹¹ Field's imitation of Sappho's erotic style and tantalising description of those whom she desires thus institutes an erotic undercurrent of passion and desire throughout 'Long Ago'. Field, therefore, brings the female experience of passion and desire to the fore, giving to it an expression unprecedented in the Victorian era and dispelling any myth that Sappho was purely heterosexual.

Field's expression of female sexuality through Sappho is perhaps most starkly optimised by their dismissal of 'the web of myths around Phaon and the Leucradian leap', as popularised by Ovid in the *Heroides*. The myth recounts Sappho jumping off a cliff in response to her unrequited love from Phaon.¹² This myth was the most frequent, if only depiction of Sappho among other Victorian poets and painters. For example, Mary Robinson, who wrote a series of sonnets entitled 'Sappho and Phoan') and Selva's 1880 painting 'Death of Sappho', which epitomises the favoured melodramatic approach of the time. Instead, Field takes influence from Sappho herself, in which there is 'enough of heart-devouring passion in Sappho's own verse without the legends of Phaon and the cliff of Leucas'.¹³ Instead of relying on a popular myth, Field gives expression to the emotions they imagined might have constituted such an experience. Unlike Field, Ovid, who forever facetious, undermines his pathos with his love of wit, rhetorical devices and verbal cleverness. There is only one poem in the whole collection which deals directly with the mythical suicide, the last poem. It is ironically an extension of the fragment '*I think men will remember us even hereafter*'. It serves as a tragic culmination of Sappho's experience of love throughout the collection and is perhaps not compelling without the other poems dealing with her both experience of desire.

In lyric XIX, the extension of the fragment '*The moon and the Pleiades have set, // it is midnight, // time is passing, // but I sleep alone.*', the last line '**I lie alone**' is perhaps

⁹ Michael Field's Long Ago as a paradigm of intertextual theory: from strangeness to metaxology, Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara

¹⁰ Michael Field's Long Ago as a paradigm of intertextual theory: from strangeness to metaxology, Mayron Estefan Cantillo Lucuara

¹¹ The Victorian Sappho, Yopie Prins

¹² The Sappho Companion, Margaret Reynolds

¹³ Michael Field's Sapphic Communities: Constructing the Transgressive Feminine Sensibility of Long Ago, Elizabeth A. Primamore

evocative of 'I die alone'. The extension of this fragment creates more pathos than the Victorian depiction of Sappho jumping off the cliff, frenzied and deranged. It instead imagines her in a more relatable situation; it conveys the feeling of loneliness, vulnerability and insignificance which accompanies rejection by comparing the emergence of the night sky to Sappho's lying alone. Her feeling that her suffering has gone unnoticed and rendered insignificant by the size of the stars and the moon paradoxically brings more significance, expression and pathos to the image of her lying alone at night. Throughout the poem there is a semantic field of death, with Sappho imagining herself in a tomb. The lines regarding Aphrodite are particularly emotive: **'And what were life // Without the mystery of her zone, // Her rosy altars, and her heavenly fires, // Warm, to assuage the strife // Of vain desires ?'** Sappho in previous poems in the collection has chided Aphrodite with a vigorous and playful tone; here she is doleful and defeated. She is left cold and alone, without Aphrodite's fires. Thus, in only one poem more expression is elicited for the female experience, than the entire myth surrounding her.



Michael Carbonall Selva's 1880 'Death of Sappho'

Field does not just take influence from Sappho's own myth, but they instead elevate her, weaving her into the wider web of Graeco-Roman myths, using them to humanise Sappho. In lyrics XII and X, Field weaves Sappho into the myth of Procne and Philomena. In XII, Sappho identifies herself with the metamorphosised Philomena. In this poem, desire is presented as a debilitating and entrapping force: the bird, like Sappho can only sing of failed love – **'she suffers, withers and nearly drowns underneath the affective tyranny that arises from her own passion.'** Thus, through this imagery and identification with a sparrow, whose voice has been restored, but is condemned to only sing of a poisonous desire, Field gives more expression to the myth of Sappho's unrequited love, than the popularised myth of her suicide itself. Indeed, in lyric V, Field draws on Sappho's fragment *'As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth underfoot and the purple flower [is pressed] to earth.'* Field uses this as an extended metaphor throughout the lyric (**'My beauty droops and fades away, // Just as a trampled blossom's may.'**, **'So underneath thy scorn and pride My heart is bowed, and cannot hide // How it despairs.'**). Here, Field draws on a classical literary heritage of the wilting flower of a symbol of a damaged erotic love. Used by Catullus in LXII and a similar image is seen in XI ('just as on the meadow's edge a flower has been touched by the passing plough'), which was then used by Virgil when describing the death of two homosexual lovers, Nisus and Euryalus. Again, Field depicts the vulnerability of the

rejected lover, with pathos and empathy, through the image of the **'droopi[ing] flower'**. Thus, Field does not only bring an empathy which was missing from the Ovidian recount of Sappho, but they also subtly re-instate the homosexual element to Sappho's desire, through the image of the flower and its erotic connotations.

Moreover, Sappho is not just depicted as the tragic and scorned lover. She retains a dignity that she does not in other Victorian receptions. In lyric XXIV, Sappho retains her characteristic chiding of Aphrodite, through the repeated refrain of the fragment *'Why should I praise thee, blissful Aphrodite'*. Here, Sappho is not full of self-pity because of her failed love, but instead scolds Aphrodite in a playful manner – something highly reminiscent of Sappho's only surviving full poem *'Ode to Aphrodite'*. Thus, while Field is certainly influenced by the Ovidian myth, they use Sappho's own fragments to give expression to this failed love, not just depicting her as scorned lover, tragically driven to suicide. Instead, in *'Long Ago'*, Sappho becomes an empathetic and strong female figure, following the same path as the Ovidian Sappho, but in a more realistic and reputable way. Field, through Sappho, gives expression to unrequited love and female sensuality, but in a sensitive way, not with the aim of popularising her into a tragic figure of myth and legend, but instead rewriting such a narrative.

Michael Field use Sappho as a vehicle for expression: of their own desires, of the wider female and homosexual experience of love, and of the rewriting of the Victorian and Ovidian Sapphic myths. The translations which Field used, by John Addington Symonds and Henry Wharton, were only published four years prior to *'Long Ago'* in 1885 and was the first to use the female pronouns. Moreover, universities were starting to educate women in the classics in this period, of which Bradley and Cooper were the first generation. This gave rise to an opportunity for *'Hellenism and Feminism'* in this period.¹⁴ I would argue Michael Field, although nowhere near as overtly and explicitly as the Uranians¹⁵, used Sappho in this way to promote homosexuality, if not female desire. Indeed, even Field has a certain timidity, still closely following the Ovidian myth in which Sappho is no longer excited by women due to her love for Phoan. Moreover, many critics have argued Field has imitated the language of male homosexual writers of the time to describe lesbianism (although likely to preserve the secret identity). Despite this, Bradley and Cooper were counter-cultural poets, largely forgotten about until now. Sappho, forgotten for much longer will always remain a myth, separated from us by the barrier of time and society, but more than anything language. Much is lost when translated into English: subtle connotations of words and the smoothing out of metrical variety.

Her myth, however, as shown by her Victorian reception, Michael Field and people such as Anne Carson today, is ever evolving, changing with time, discoveries of new fragments, and a recent growth in appreciation for her writing. The Sapphic myth is a true reflection of any

¹⁴ The Victorian Sappho, Yopie Prins

¹⁵ A movement of male homosexual poets which started in the Victorian era which tried to challenge anti-homosexual ideas using poetry

society, but also one available to be used by the individual as a vehicle in which one might reshape it, expressing their own values and interpretations.

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