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Greek Antiquity, Women's Modernity:
Hellenism in the Work of Michael Field, Amy Levy and Virginia Woolf

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μυάσασθαί τινά φαιμι † και ετερου † άμμέου
Sappho, fragment 147

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Abstract

Despite their frequent exclusion from academic institutions and the Grand Tour, many Victorian women became deeply engaged with the Mediterranean and ancient Latin and Greek culture, not merely as travellers but also as translators, scholars, and cultural interpreters of antiquity. These women classicists traversed geographical as well as intellectual landscapes, actively challenging gendered restrictions on authority and participation within classical studies.

This thesis examines the intersections among classical reception, Mediterranean culture, feminism and identity formation in selected works by three women writers: Michael Field, the collaborative pseudonym of Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), Amy Levy (1861–1889), and Virginia Woolf. Although writing within the broader context of late Victorian culture, each author also engaged with emerging modernist perspectives, reflecting distinctive historical and cultural positions. Their sustained engagement with classical antiquity and shared queer identities collectively provide a cohesive analytical framework for this research.

By adopting the methodology of Women's Studies, Gender and Cultural Studies, Classical Reception Studies and Mediterranean Studies, I analyse the historical context and the material conditions in which these women, excluded from Oxford and Cambridge, had access to the classics.

Introduction

Between 1830 and the early twentieth century, travel to the Mediterranean became an integral aspect of British life, with the upper classes in Victorian and Edwardian Britain increasingly journeying abroad. Although initially only a minority of Britons travelled for leisure, this group expanded steadily as increased wealth and reduced travel costs made foreign holidays more attainable. Victorian and Edwardian cabinet ministers, aristocrats, dowagers, heirs to landed estates, and members of the Royal Family regularly visited the Mediterranean, not as eighteenth-century Grand Tourists undertaking a singular, formative journey, but as recurrent travellers returning to what had become, in effect, a second home (Pemble 1987). As John Pemble noted, Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals lived and died by harvesting the rich body of literary material generated by their travels; *jeunesse dorée* from Oxford and Cambridge explored the galleries, churches, and ancient ruins of Italy and Greece (Pemble 1987, 2). Victorian women were by no means absent from these classical itineraries. Though often excluded from formal academic institutions and the traditional Grand Tour, a number of women began to engage deeply with the classical world, not only as travellers but also as translators, scholars, and interpreters of ancient cultures. These Victorian women classicists navigated both geographical and intellectual terrains, challenging gendered boundaries of authority and access in classical studies.

This thesis investigates the intersection of classical influence, Mediterranean culture, and identity in selected work of three prominent women writers: Michael Field, the collaborative pseudonym of Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913), Amy Levy (1861-1889), and Virginia Woolf. Although these figures wrote within the broader framework of late Victorian culture, they did so from distinct historical and cultural positions; moreover, their engagement with classical antiquity and their shared queer identities form a unifying thread throughout this study. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from Women's Studies, Classical Reception Studies, Gender Studies, and Mediterranean Studies, this research explores how these writers not only appropriated classical traditions

to assert intellectual and creative agency but also reimagined them in ways that disrupt dominant narratives of gender, sexuality, and cultural belonging.

The first chapter provides an overview of Victorian Hellenism and its multifaceted exploration and influence across British culture. The Victorians' enthusiasm for, and engagement with, classical antiquity, particularly for collecting artefacts and visiting Mediterranean archaeological sites like Pompeii, which was seen as a frozen testament to the ancient world, extended to literature, where authors like Lord Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873) used the classical past to explore Christian morality and the supposed corruption of the Roman Empire.¹ Furthermore, the chapter discusses the academic and social significance of Greek studies, especially at Oxford and Cambridge, where Hellenism became linked to new understandings of male love and intellectual "procreancy," influencing figures like Pater and Wilde. As Linda Dowling (1994) explains, while university reformers such as Benjamin Jowett were seeking to establish in Hellenism a ground of "transcendent value alternative to Christian theology" (Dowling 1994, xiii), homosexual literati such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and the Uranian poets "could not be denied the means of developing out of this same Hellenism a homosexual counterdiscourse able to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms: the 'spiritual procreancy' associated with Plato's Symposium and more generally with ancient Greece itself" (Dowling 1994, xiii). The chapter also illustrates the complex and often contradictory nature of interpreting Greekness, revealing how it was appropriated for diverse agendas, from nationalist ideals to arguments about sexual identity and the very definition of "cultured" self (Jenkins 1980, 86). In this regard, the chapter will also give an overview of the reception of Sappho across the centuries to Victorian times when poets such as Symonds refer to male homosexuality as a "glorious tradition," and sees lesbianism in terms of "degeneracy": "while the Greeks utilised and ennobled boy-love, they left Lesbian love to follow the same course of degeneracy as it pursues in modern times" (Symonds 1901, 71). The chapter also presents the

¹ After visiting Italy for health reasons, Lytton published *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) which is considered one of the most successful Victorian novels, reprinted throughout the century, and read as a modern classic. See Arcara 2001.

figure of Jane Ellen Harrison as a pivotal and inspirational Victorian intellectual who, among others, pioneered classical studies and academic teaching for women.

The second chapter focuses on Michael Field, whose education in the classics deeply informed their poetic output. Bradley and Cooper's collaborative works, particularly *Long Ago* (1889) and *Sight and Song* (1892), demonstrate their profound engagement with classical and Mediterranean culture. As fine intellectuals, aesthetes and classicists, Michael Field found a source of inspiration also in Pater's revival of Dionysian primitivism. Their debut book of verse drama *Callirrhoe: Fair Rosamund*, based on Euripides' *Bacchae*, a key classical text on Dionysian worship, reflects this influence. Through Pater's writings, Bradley and Cooper were able to cultivate an "imaginative identification" (Prins 1999, 46) with the Greek maenad, the female devotee of Dionysus, enabling them to articulate a radical social identity rooted in female independence. As Yopie Prins argues (1999), Michael Field's engagement with Pater reconfigures the male homoeroticism subtly embedded in his account, particularly in his masculinisation of the originally feminine Dionysian cult, into a new mode of desire that disrupts the normative constructions of female sexuality under Victorian patriarchy (Prins 1999, 46). The collection of poems *Long Ago*, inspired by the surviving fragments of Sappho reimagines the lyricism and eroticism of the ancient Greek poet through a distinctly Victorian lens. Meanwhile, *Sight and Song*, an ekphrastic collection of poetry inspired by their travels through Europe and encounters with Renaissance masterpieces, reflects the fusion of classical and modern artistic sensibilities. In this regard, the chapter analyses Michael Field's rewriting of Venus' mythology through female homoeroticism. Through these works, not only did Michael Field draw upon the cultural heritage of the Mediterranean but they also articulated a lesbian aesthetic that celebrated their lifelong romantic partnership and challenged gender norms. In *Sight and Song*, Michael Field also gave agency to the women depicted in the paintings they decided to "translate into verse" (Field 1892, v), pioneering an interpretation through a distinctly female, and possibly lesbian, gaze. Almost a century before the concept of the "male gaze" was articulated by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey in the 1970s, Michael Field offered a radical reimagining of visual art through a lens that centred female

subjectivity. Their interpretation of Watteau's painting of 1718 *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* is particularly significant, as it aligns with themes later explored in the 1970s by Monique Wittig, foregrounding a lesbian narrative perspective. This thematic coincidence highlights Michael Field's innovative approach to art criticism and poetic engagement, challenging the heteronormative frameworks that dominated both Victorian and classical traditions.

The third chapter examines Amy Levy (1861-1889), a trailblazing figure in many respects. As the first Jewish woman to attend Cambridge University, Levy gained unprecedented access to formal education in the classics, a privilege denied to most Victorian women. Her rewriting of Euripides' *Medea* and her portrayal of Socrates' wife Xanthippe in the dramatic monologue "Xantippe: a Fragment" (1881) reveal her engagement with classical themes of exile, betrayal, and the constraints imposed by patriarchal societies. Levy's work reflects a critical awareness of the cultural and intellectual disenfranchisement of women, both in antiquity and in her own time. By reconstructing Xanthippe's reputation as a woman of intellectual ambition thwarted by societal norms, not only does Levy critique the systemic exclusion of women from education but she also aligns herself with a feminist reinterpretation of classical texts. Moreover, the fact that Levy's poetry is often addressed to women has prompted scholarly speculation about her identity and the ways in which queer desire may be subtly expressed within her writing.

The fourth chapter explores Virginia Woolf's multifaceted relationship with the classics and her broader analysis of women's relationship to formal education. Woolf's seminal essays, such as *A Room of One's Own* (1929), foreground the necessity of educational and material resources for women to fully participate in cultural production. Her essay *On Not Knowing Greek* (1925) exemplifies her fascination with ancient Greek literature and its distinctive capacity to convey human emotion and tragedy. Woolf's novels, too, are imbued with classical references, particularly Greek tragedy, which she used to explore themes of identity, loss, and the human condition. For Woolf, the classics were not merely an intellectual pursuit but also a means of articulating her political and aesthetic visions. Furthermore, her relationships with women, including her romantic and

intellectual connection with Vita Sackville-West, underscore the interplay between her lesbian identity and her engagement with classical traditions.

Across these chapters, the thesis also examines how the queerness of these women intersects with their classical engagements. Michael Field's sapphic poetics, Amy Levy's subversion of traditional gender roles in classical narratives, and Virginia Woolf's exploration of gender and sexuality in relation to ancient Greek culture reveal the ways in which the classics served as a vehicle for articulating alternative identities. By reimagining and reclaiming the classical tradition, these women writers not only challenged the gendered restrictions of their time but also redefined the boundaries of literary and cultural authority. This study ultimately argues that their classical engagement was not merely a reflection of their intellectual aspirations but also a radical act of self-fashioning that positioned them as both heirs to and innovators of the classical tradition.

The poetry of Michael Field and Amy Levy, like the works of many other Victorian women poets, suffered a long period of neglect following their deaths. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s that their contributions were rediscovered and critically examined, as part of a broader movement to recover the voices of marginalized writers. The feminist literary scholarship of this period sought to address the historical erasure of women's literary achievements, particularly those whose works challenged conventional norms of gender and sexuality. Michael Field's innovative engagement with classical themes and queer aesthetics, as well as Amy Levy's complex exploration of Jewish identity, feminist concerns, and classical intertexts, have since become focal points of scholarly interest. This revival has allowed contemporary readers and critics to appreciate the radical and pioneering aspects of their poetry, which anticipated many of the feminist and queer theoretical frameworks that would emerge later in the 20th century. By situating their works within their historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts, this thesis contributes to ongoing efforts to ensure that their voices, once silenced, continue to resonate in modern literary discourse.

Hélène Cixous's *Le Rire de la Meduse* (1975) famously advances the concept of *écriture féminine*, proposing a mode of writing intrinsically linked to the female

body and experience. While Cixous's call for women to write themselves into language constitutes a powerful act of symbolic resistance, her underlying essentialism, where femininity is construed as an innate, bodily truth, ultimately reifies the very structures it seeks to subvert by supporting the same conceptual framework ('woman' as a category equal to body plus nature plus emotion) that supports patriarchal domination. This differentialist position, shared also by theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, situates "feminine" writing within the realm of nature, specificity, and irreducible difference. Kristeva relied on the psychoanalytical discourse by anchoring feminist political semiotics in the pre-Oedipal or the pre-symbolic (Delaney 2023). In contrast, Monique Wittig's materialist feminism exposes the political nature of sexed subjectivity. Wittig rejects the notion of "feminine writing" as a naturalizing metaphor that mystifies the material conditions of women's oppression. For Wittig (1992, 59-60) to speak of a "feminine" style or essence is to reproduce the discursive apparatus through which femininity itself is constituted and constrained, namely, through the ideological triad of "Difference, Specificity, (and) the Female Body/Nature":

"Feminine writing" is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women, and as such it enlarges the apparatus under which "femininity" presents itself: that is, Difference, Specificity, Female Body/Nature. Through its adjacent position "writing" is captured by the metaphor in "feminine writing" and as a result fails to appear as work and a production process, since the words "writing" and "feminine" are combined in order to designate a sort of biological production peculiar to "Woman," a secretion natural to "Woman."

Thus, "feminine writing" amounts to saying that women do not belong to history, and that writing is not a material production. The (new) femininity, feminine writing, and the lauding of difference, are the backlash of a political trend very much concerned with the questioning of categories of sex, those two great axes of categorization for philosophy and social science. As always happens, when something new appears, it is immediately interpreted and turned into its opposite. Feminine writing is like household arts and cooking.²

² The excerpt is from Wittig's essay "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" originally published as "Avant-note" to *La Passion* by Djuna Barnes, translated in *Feminist Issues* 1, no.1, Summer 1980.

My work aligns with Monique Wittig's materialist feminism, adopting her theoretical framework to reject the essentialist premises of *écriture féminine* and the broader "troika Kristeva-Cixous-Irigaray" (Bourcier 2005, 192). In contrast to frameworks that posit a biologically or psychically grounded "feminine" mode of writing, this thesis foregrounds the socio-political construction of sex and gender as mechanisms of domination in the context of literary and cultural analysis. This work examines the material and social conditions that shaped women's access to knowledge and intellectual production in Victorian England, with particular attention to the ways in which these dynamics intersected with literary representations of female same-sex desire. Drawing on feminist methodologies, the project highlights the structural asymmetries that governed women's educational experiences and their exclusion from epistemic authority. By distancing itself from differentialist and essentialist theories, including the work of Cixous and the concept of *écriture féminine*, this research privileges a materialist analysis attentive to historical constraints, social relations, and institutional power structures.

Within the theoretical framework that supports this study, Christine Delphy's "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move" (2000) is a critical point of reference for interrogating the ideological construction of feminist canons. Delphy exposes how the Anglo-American invention of the phrase "French Feminism," primarily associated with Cixous, Kristeva, and Irigaray or, what she calls the "Holy Trinity" (Delphy 2000, 168), operates as a strategic misrepresentation that obscures the materialist and political commitments of feminist movements in France. Delphy argues that this triad of theorists, often elevated in Anglophone contexts as emblematic of French feminist thought, are in fact either antifeminist (as two of them, Cixous and Kristeva openly declared) or peripheral to, or even disavowed by, French feminist activism (2000 187, 168). For Delphy, the canonisation of these figures serves to reintroduce essentialist and psychoanalytic frameworks into Anglo-American feminist discourse, under the legitimising banner of imported intellectual authority. Not only does this process distort the context and content of French theoretical production but it also erases the visibility and influence of materialist and political strands of feminism rooted in social struggle. In this context, Delphy's intervention is foundational to this

project's rejection of differentialist and essentialist theories, and its insistence on a materialist analysis of gender as a social and political construct, rather than a transhistorical or bodily essence.

The decision to focus on women in this study arises not from an essentialist assumption of shared experience, but from a concern with the historical imposition of ignorance, exclusion, and epistemic inequality. In Victorian Britain, while men were increasingly incorporated into a system of compulsory education and classical training, women were often raised deliberately ignorant. When women's colleges were finally established, they offered separate and typically inferior curricula, reflecting prevailing beliefs in women's intellectual inferiority. Traditionally, educational advancement for women was frequently portrayed as dangerous, both to their physical and mental health, and to the moral fabric of society. In fact, as Gilbert and Gubar (1984, 55) pointed out: "as the Romantic poets feared, too much imagination may be dangerous to anyone, male or female, but for women in particular patriarchal culture has always assumed mental exercises would have dire consequences." These institutionalised disparities functioned to deny women full intellectual agency and autonomy, reinforcing a patriarchal order in which knowledge was gendered and policed. Gilbert and Gubar describe this cultural context as "debilitating," noting that "women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 53).

The recovery of nineteenth-century women writers ran along with the rise of feminist and women's studies in the 1970s, which saw the resurrection and reappraisal of forgotten and suppressed female voices and texts: some of these authors have been revealed as central figures to the cultural feminist cause, especially for the genealogy of a lesbian tradition. The crucial background for the lesbian tradition in literature is Lillian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981), especially the section on Katherine Philips.³ Significantly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's only mention of a female precursor in "A Vision of Poets" is Sappho (ll. 318-21), and Christina Rossetti's poems "Sappho" (1846) and "What Sappho Would Have Said Had Her Leap Cured Instead Of Killing Her" (1848) were

³ "Had she written in the twentieth century, her poetry would undoubtedly have been identified as 'lesbian'" (Faderman 1981, 68). See also Hobby 1991.

excised from her collected work by William Michael Rossetti (Gubar 1984, 44n1). It is within this framework of rediscovery and reintegration into the English literary canon of forgotten Victorian women authors and classicists that this work attempts to engage in the debate on the studies on Michael Field, one of the most original and idiosyncratic voices of women's poetry at the close of the nineteenth century. Rarely comparable to any other poet, either at the *fin de siècle* or at any other time, Michael Field represents anything but orthodoxy.

As Gilbert and Gubar (1984, 541-544) report, in the 1959 edition of Emily Dickinson's poems, the critic James Reeves recounts a friend's assertion that "'woman poet' is a contradiction in terms,"⁴ a claim he cites only to refute. Nonetheless, the remark encapsulates a longstanding cultural assumption: that the lyric form is inherently incompatible with 'femininity.' This view, rooted in nineteenth-century ideologies, would be critically revisited and dismantled by twentieth-century feminist thinkers. Historically, when women's poetry has been praised by patriarchy, it has often been on the grounds of its "feminine" qualities, sensitive, delicate, emotional, or, conversely, criticized for lacking these very traits, thereby reinforcing a narrow, essentialist framework. The lyric voice, when articulated by women, has frequently provoked meditations on female fulfilment or, conversely, on female madness. Even Virginia Woolf invented the parable of Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*, the imaginary sister of William, whose literary gifts are stifled by social constraints and whose life ends in suicide, her body buried at an unremarkable site in Elephant and Castle, a once-neglected area of London, to symbolically resonate with urban marginality and erasure.

Moreover, the male-dominated cultural valuation of literary forms has contributed to this gendered perception. Whereas novel-writing was deemed commercially viable and therefore suitable for women because of its perceived practicality aligned with feminine domesticity, poetry, and particularly lyric verse, has been associated with divine inspiration, bardic ritual, and spiritual transcendence. From the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, the figure of the

⁴ This sentence seems an evolution of an aphorism attributed to John Wilmot count of Rochester: "Whore's the like reproachful name, as poetess – the luckless twins of shame." Arcara 2021, 14.

poet was elevated to a quasi-priestly status, especially after Romanticism reconfigured aesthetics with the language of theology. Within these criteria, if women could not be priests, then they could not be poets either⁵ (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 546). However, Cynthia Scheinberg (2002, 19-20) offers a revision of Gilbert and Gubar's framework for understanding women's poetic identity in nineteenth-century England. Scheinberg argues that, since poets were generally presumed to be Christian, and women were seen as embodiments of Christian ideals, Christian women were, by this logic, naturally positioned to be poets. Scheinberg brings these assumptions into conversation with representations of Jewishness, arguing that many Christian women poets shaped their poetic identities both through and against imagined constructions of Jewish identity. In this broader context of Victorian poetics, Scheinberg's study further develops into a more complex picture: if poetic authority is aligned with Christianity, and women are assumed to embody Christian virtue, then Christian women poets had a particular interest in interpreting Jewish identity in ways that could reinforce their own claims to poetic legitimacy. Conversely, Jewish women poets such as Grace Aguilar (1816-1847) and Amy Levy, aware of the cultural linkage between poetic voice and Christian identity, devised alternative strategies for negotiating both Christian womanhood and Jewish identity in their work. In Levy's case, this often takes the form of what has been described as "an unorthodox spirituality that refuses clear identification with either Christian or Jewish traditions, and her most direct intimations of lesbian sexuality"

⁵ Elaine Hobby (1989) in *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649-1688* offers a comprehensive and nuanced study of English women's writing, critically analysing their literary contributions within the broader social and historical contexts of the second half of seventeenth century. Her work foregrounds the complex interplay of constraint and creativity, emphasizing the various limitations (familial, educational, religious, and societal) that shaped women's access to authorship. As Hobby explains in the Introduction, with no formal education, restricted literacy, and pervasive cultural norms discouraging female intellectual agency, very few women wrote for publication; their texts comprise less than one percent of all publications from the era (1989, 6). Yet, as the scholar demonstrates, women employed a wide range of strategies to navigate and negotiate these constraints. They often framed their writing as divinely inspired, morally virtuous (as, for example, Margaret Cavendish claimed it was preferable to gossip), or grounded in gendered domains such as midwifery. These rhetorical strategies allowed them to assert their authorial presence within a literary culture that otherwise marginalised or silenced them. In this historical patriarchal context, the figure of Aphra Behn (1640-1689), playwright, novelist and poet, stands out as exceptional (Arcara 2021). Hobby's work is a significant contribution to both literary and feminist historiography, illuminating the often-overlooked efforts of seventeenth-century women to carve out spaces of autonomy, resistance, and expression within a deeply patriarchal society.

(Scheinberg 2002, 194-195), further complicating the relationship between religious, poetic, and sexual identity in the Victorian period.

The aesthetic tradition required poetry to be mediated through classical models, the “ancient rules” of Greek and Latin literature, which were largely inaccessible to women. The Platonic ideals embedded in the Western literary canon thus remained the purview of men, forming a “sphere of masculine learning” from which women were systematically barred (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 544). Consequently, the association of poetic “collapse” or “deficiency” with femininity was a cultural mechanism of exclusion. As Bonnie Zimmerman asserted in 1981, lesbian literary criticism is “plagued with the problem of definition” (Zimmerman 1981, 456). This thesis attempts to engage with that problem, acknowledging the difficulties of naming and recognising female same-sex intimacy in literature. These difficulties include: the historical refusal or foreclosure of female same-sex possibilities within heteronormative representational systems or “grid[s] of cultural intelligibility” (Butler 1993, 20); the classed, racialised, and cultural exclusions embedded in the term *lesbian*; the term’s historical specificity, instability, and often abject associations; its potential anachronism in nineteenth-century contexts; and the broader pragmatic challenges of articulating emotional, erotic, or affective ties between women in ways that do not rely on modern taxonomies of sexuality (Medd 2015, 1). Judith Bennett’s useful term “lesbian-like” (Bennett 2000, 2) simultaneously invokes and destabilizes the category of “lesbian”; when used adjectivally, applied more to practices than to individuals, it effectively sidesteps reductive forms of identity essentialism. Though an imperfect signifier, the term *lesbian* nonetheless gestures toward a specific historical figure: the ancient Greek poet Sappho of Lesbos. In fact, *sapphist* was once a more commonly used term of identification than *lesbian*. With both her name and her island of origin functioning eponymously, Sappho emerges as both a figure and a symbol of the complexities surrounding the definition and identification of “lesbian literature.”

Within this context, the history of Sappho and her reception emerges as a particularly charged and ambivalent site. Across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sappho was alternately romanticised, censored, appropriated, and pathologized, her legacy shaped as much by male literary fantasies as by efforts to

recover a usable past for women writers (Spraggs 1991, 51). While male homosexual writers and aesthetes could lay claim to a classical Greek tradition that legitimised homoeroticism, female same-sex desire lacked comparable cultural lineage. As such, Sappho became a crucial, if unstable, touchstone in attempts to articulate a literary tradition for women that could rival the male-dominated classical canon. Yet the reception of Sappho also reveals the limits of intelligibility for female same-sex desire, which was often foreclosed, denied, or rendered abject within heteronormative systems of representation.

An important link within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's poetry is fragmentation. Ruth Hobley (2022) argues that while literary texts, particularly lyric poetry from this period, often exhibit fragmentation and dissolution – the term 'decadence' is founded on a profound sense of societal, moral, and textual fragmentation, – most research on the fragment as a literary form has traditionally focused on the eighteenth century, the Romantic era, or explicitly modernist texts (2022, 3-8). Despite the prevalence of fragmentation in Victorian and early twentieth century writing,⁶ the period has been largely overlooked in studies of literary fragmentation. There's an underlying assumption that Victorians, associated with "wholeness and integrity," were too "finished for fragments" (Hobley 2022, 19). Obviously, Sappho emerges again as a central figure in the gendered perception of both lyric poetry and the textual fragment. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, since so many of Sappho's original Greek texts were destroyed, "the modern woman poet could write 'for' or 'as' Sappho and thereby invent a classical inheritance of her own" (Gubar 1984, 47).

This thesis asks how affective passion between women, and intimacy, desire, and attachment might be read in texts where the available categories of recognition are mediated, and often constrained, by dominant ideological, historical, and representational systems. In addressing these questions, my research situates its analysis within the specific historical, educational, and literary contexts of Victorian Britain, with particular attention to the formative role of classical

⁶ George Eliot referred to *Middlemarch* (1871) as "the fragment of a life," Tennyson's alternative title for *In Memoriam* (1850) was "Fragments of an Elegy."

antiquity, Greek and Latin texts, in shaping the imaginative and intellectual frameworks through which Victorian women writers articulated intimacy, affiliation, and cultural authority. While male writers could rely on a shared classical education rooted in institutional camaraderie and formal instruction, women were largely excluded from such settings. Many encountered the classics through indirect or private means: via their brothers' or fathers' books, private tutors, or autodidactic efforts. Nevertheless, they reworked classical texts and tropes to carve out a literary space for themselves, often appropriating, revising, or queering the authority of antiquity to articulate their own perspectives. This engagement with the classical past became a means not only of literary self-fashioning, but also of challenging inherited narratives of gender, authorship, and intellectual legitimacy.

In *Women Classical Scholars. Unsealing the Fountain from the Renaissance to Jacqueline de Romilly* (2016), Edith Hall and Rosie Wyle point out how women studied, translated, and edited classical texts for more than five hundred years despite being confined to the shadows of their fathers, husbands or brothers, and excluded from academic institutions. Women scholars were also subject to misogynistic accusations such as that of possessing “excessive ambition.” The collection of essays curated by Hall and Wyle has been relevant to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges women have encountered over the past five centuries in gaining access to the classics, traditionally regarded as among the most prestigious and exclusive forms of cultural and intellectual capital, and of the strategies through which some capable and determined women have managed to overcome these barriers. Through this study, I encountered what Hall and Wyle describe as “histories of exclusion, marginalization, exploitation, and often personal loneliness, frustration, and misery” (Hall and Wyle 2016, 4), experiences that have affected not only English women. A particularly tragic example is that of the Viennese scholar Eva Sachs (1882–1936). She matriculated at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin in 1904, and after a decade of intensive study, completing far more coursework than was required of her male peers, she successfully defended her dissertation. Sachs' work, supervised by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the towering figure of Prussian classical philology,

redefined the relationship between Theaetetus the mathematician and Plato. An expanded version of her dissertation was published in 1917 and remains a seminal contribution to the field (Calder 1988, 206). While Sachs' influence on Wilamowitz's major two-volume study of Plato, published in 1919, has occasionally been acknowledged, the full extent of his intellectual debt to his dialogues with her has never been thoroughly explored. Wilamowitz himself opposed the idea of women receiving higher education and only reluctantly agreed to allow Sachs to prepare for the *Habilitation*, the post-doctoral qualification (Calder 1988, 208). Before she could complete her *Habilitation*, Sachs suffered a psychological collapse – likely due to Wilamowitz emotional cruelty – and died “in an insane asylum, speaking ancient Greek and believing ‘she could save Socrates if she got there in time’” (Calder 1988, 208).⁷ Even today, Eva Sachs is largely remembered not as a compelling scholar in her own right, but merely as a source of material for understanding Wilamowitz (Hall and Wyle 2016, 5).

Lord Tennyson's famous poem *The Princess* (1847) actively engages with the theme of women's education, drawing partial inspiration from the founding of Queen's College for women in 1847. As Hall and Wyle (2016) underlined, Tennyson's personal commitment to the cause has been a matter of critical debate, however the poem itself, particularly following its adaptation into the comic opera *Princess Ida; or Castle Adamant* by Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert in 1884, attained significant cultural prominence. *The Princess* played a notable role in shaping public discourse surrounding the creation of educational institutions for women, a conversation also significantly influenced by the cartoons on the popular satire magazine *Punch* (see Chapter I) and remained culturally influential at least through the Edwardian period. While feminist scholars have frequently critiqued the poem's ideological framework as inherently sexist and reactionary, its popularity and cultural reach were nonetheless considerable (Hall and Wyle 2016, 1). However, it is worth noting that educators and reformers selectively

⁷ The quotation in Calder's article is from Sachs' cousin Vera Regina Lachmann (1904-1985), a professor of classics at Brooklyn College. It dramatically resembles Virginia Woolf's recollection of her first episode of mental health issues when she was hearing the birds speaking Greek (see Chapter 4).

appropriated the more progressive-sounding rhetoric of *The Princess* to legitimise and promote the cause of women's education. For example, the lines "O lift your natures up / Embrace our aims: work out your freedom. Girls, / Knowledge is now no more a fountain sealed" (ll 74-75) were adopted as the motto of the Girls' Public Day School Trust in 1872. The same lines also appeared on a plaque depicting Minerva, which was displayed in the Assembly Hall of Nottingham Girls' High School, established in 1875 (Wyle and Hall 2016, 2).

By tracing these intersecting concerns (gender, sexuality, education, and classical reception) the present study aims to offer a more nuanced account of how Victorian women negotiated, inhabited, and at times resisted the constraints imposed upon their intellectual and affective lives. To this end, the thesis examines a series of case studies that bring these tensions into sharp relief, focusing on women writers who grappled with the legacies of classical antiquity, the limits of female education, and the representational challenges of articulating same-sex desire. Through close readings of selected texts, the project explores how these authors appropriated and reimagined classical traditions, often working outside formal institutions of learning and relying instead on private or informal modes of accessing knowledge. The main objective of the research will be to trace the elements of a "counter-discourse" (Prins 1999) on the classics and the Mediterranean produced by British women writers and the role that the reception of ancient same-sex love (or "Greek love") played in the construction of modern British homosexual identities (Aldrich 1993) in terms of lesbian relationships.

The cultural and intellectual framework of Victorian Britain imposed significant restrictions on women's access to formal education, particularly in the study of the classics, which were central to the academic curricula for men. The classics, comprising the literature, philosophy, and histories of ancient Greece and Rome, served not only as a cornerstone of intellectual training but also as a marker of social and cultural prestige. For Victorian women, however, institutional barriers often excluded them from this sphere of knowledge. Women were generally denied entry to universities, and the study of Latin and Greek was considered unnecessary, if not inappropriate, for their gender. Yet, despite these constraints, many women

sought to engage with classical texts through alternative means: self-education, private tuition, or informal intellectual networks. This pursuit of classical knowledge was not merely an academic endeavour but also a mode of resistance against a patriarchal system that denied them access to intellectual and cultural authority.

Across the chapters, the thesis also examines how the queerness of these women intersects with their classical engagements. Michael Field's sapphic poetics, Amy Levy's subversion of traditional gender roles in classical narratives, and Virginia Woolf's exploration of gender and sexuality in relation to ancient Greek culture reveal the ways in which the classics served as a vehicle for articulating alternative identities. By reimagining and reclaiming the classical tradition, these women writers not only challenged the gendered restrictions of their time but also redefined the boundaries of literary and cultural authority. This study ultimately argues that their classical engagement was not merely a reflection of their intellectual aspirations but also a radical act of self-fashioning that positioned them as both heirs to and innovators of the classical tradition.

Chapter I

Victorian Hellenism and Women's Education

Hail, cultivated maidens who design
To wrest your learning from a lecturer's lips,
And take your dose of intellectual wine
In sips.
See what we offer you, choose what you please,
Professors (gowned) are ready at your call
To set your feet in wisdom's path. The fees
Are small. . . .
Come, then, aspiring maids, and let us show,
In Art, in Letters, Science, Game, and Song,
That they who rate our sex's standard low
Are wrong!
A. Hood⁸

1.1 Classical reception studies

The nineteenth century stands out as a pivotal era in classical reception studies, particularly when analysed through Romantic and Victorian Hellenism lenses. Groundbreaking research from the early 1980s, notably Richard Jenkyns's *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank M. Turner's *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), highlighted the extensive influence of Greek culture upon the governing classes and the intellectual elite in nineteenth-century Britain. Both scholars examine the profound impact of ancient mythology, history, and religion on various dimensions of Victorian culture, including literature, art, architecture, education, philosophy, and political thought. Jenkyns and Turner underscore the extent to which Greek antiquity was construed as a living legacy, one that bore immediate relevance to the moral and intellectual concerns of nineteenth-century Britain. Indeed, for classically educated Victorian gentlemen, Greece functioned as an idealised cultural referent, signifying both aesthetic refinement and philosophical depth, and affirming their own self-conception as heirs to the Hellenic tradition.

⁸ "To Maidens who Desire the Higher Education," *Ladies' Department Magazine*, King's College London 1898, pp. 12-13.

Jenkyns focuses on topics such as classical education, poetry, and the Victorian reception of Greek tragedy, Homer, and Plato, revealing how ancient texts were mobilised to articulate contemporary values and anxieties. Turner, on the other hand, turns to questions of religion and mythology, particularly through an exploration of Matthew Arnold's engagement with Hellenism. The scholar traces how figures such as Homer, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were reinterpreted within Victorian intellectual discourse. The shift in emphasis from Rome to Athens during the Romantic period signals a revaluation of Greek cultural ideals, which Turner characterises as a reaction against the "Latin culture of Augustanism" of the eighteenth century (Turner 1981, 61).

As Isabel Hurst underlines, Arnold's lecture of 1857 "On the Modern Element in Literature" articulates a vision of Hellenism as essential to the moral and aesthetic regeneration of modern society (Hurst 2021). For Arnold, fifth-century Athens represented a unique confluence of political and cultural maturity, a moment in which civic life and literary production achieved an ideal balance. He proposed that the age of Pericles offered a model of civilisation to which nineteenth-century Britain might aspire. In contrast, Jonathan Sachs (2009) cautions against an overemphasis on Greek paradigms at the expense of Roman ones. While acknowledging the centrality of Hellenism to Victorian thought, Sachs underscores the continued importance of Roman models, particularly in the realms of politics and imperial ideology: "Greece is firmly associated with liberty, democracy and popular will, while Rome comes to stand for the spread of ideas and institutions through empire" (2009, 323).

The dynamics between Hellenic and Roman influences in the Victorian imagination is further explored in Norman Vance's *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997), which foregrounds the ideological and literary tensions between these two classical legacies. Vance highlights the adaptability of Augustan poets such as Virgil and Horace, who reworked Greek models to suit their own historical and political contexts – an intertextual strategy that many Victorian writers sought to emulate (Hurst 2021). For modern scholars, recovering the Victorians' ease and fluency with classical allusion remains a complex task, one that requires attentiveness not only to the texts themselves but also to the cultural frameworks

within which they were read and appropriated. In this regard, Arcara's work of 2001, "Victorian Britain and the Mediterranean: the South as Figure of Alterity in Art, Literature and the Discourses of History and Empire," summarizes how the Victorian views on the Mediterranean culture were complex and multifaceted, shaped by cultural, historical and ideological factors. Arcara points out that the Mediterranean was considered the "cradle of civilization", from which Britain, among other north-European countries, can claim to be its descendants (Arcara 2001, 37). The Victorians saw themselves as heirs to Greek and Roman civilizations, claiming cultural and moral superiority while revering the Mediterranean's historical significance. Arcara also underlines that Turner's observation that "writing about Greece was in part a way for the Victorians to write about themselves" can equally apply to Rome (Arcara 2001, 45), considering the glorification of the Roman empire, which was frequently compared to the British one. This analogy was clearly used to culturally justify the imperial ambitions of the British, who saw themselves as continuing the legacy of Rome, inheriting its "sceptre" of power and responsibility (Arcara 2001, 39). In one respect, Arcara argues, the British perceived themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Roman legacy, and it was through the lens of Roman precedent that the Victorians sought to legitimize their own imperial expansion across the globe. Simultaneously, however, the decline and eventual fall of the Roman Empire, consistently interpreted in moral and civilizational terms, carried significant cautionary resonance for Britain at the height of its own imperial ambitions (Arcara 2001, 39). As Jenkyns (1980, 40) points out, in the nineteenth century "the British stood astonished at the sudden importance of their small island", and, in Victorian Britain "Latin catchphrases like *Civis Romanus sum*, *Pax Britannica* and *Imperium Britannicum* became part of the political rhetoric of the age. Foreign observers accepted the analogy and by feeding it back to the British reinforced their sense of Roman identity" (Pemble 1987, 64).

Considering these analogies with the Roman Empire, Laura Eastlake (2019) highlights also the relationship between manhood and the act of reading. Eastlake argues that the study of Latin texts played a significant role in the formation of masculine identity, positing that ancient Rome was "the maker and the marker of

elite Victorian manliness” in both its physical and intellectual forms (Eastlake 2019, 18). In this regard, Hurst points out that “poets such as Horace shaped the language of parliamentary debate and provided a model of masculine friendship” (Hurst 2021). In addition, as I will show in this chapter, during the Victorian era, Classicism became a coded language for male homosexuality.

The Roman Empire assimilated and adapted Greek culture, bringing its artists and educators to Italy (Evangelista 2009, 10). As Evangelista points out, Romans translated Greek texts and reproduced Greek art presenting it as part of their own achievements. This blending of Greek and Roman heritage continued for centuries, particularly as the new Church maintained the Latin tradition within the realm of Christian culture throughout the Middle Ages. Even during the Renaissance, the revival of classical ideas was largely facilitated by Latin culture: Greek works were primarily studied in their Latin translations, and the imitation of classical art was predominantly based on Roman pieces, many of which were reproductions of Hellenistic originals. While geographical Greece became influenced by Byzantium and later Ottoman rule, Italy solidified its position as the cradle of Europe’s classical history (Evangelista 2009, 6). It was precisely this enduring identification with the classical past that, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, positioned Italy, particularly its southern regions and Sicily, as a pivotal destination for English intellectuals undertaking the Grand Tour. As John Pemble argues, the South was imagined as both a “classical shrine” and a “zone of decadence,” a place where the glories of antiquity persisted amidst a backdrop of perceived cultural decline (Pemble 1987, 5-6). For many English travellers, Sicily’s Greek ruins and Mediterranean landscapes offered an emotional and aesthetic encounter with an ancient world that seemed more tangible and immediate than in Greece itself. The fascination with the South thus reinforced Italy’s role as the symbolic heart of Europe’s classical and cultural legacy, shaping the literary and artistic sensibilities of a generation. Moreover, the Mediterranean served as a central motif in homoerotic literature and art from the 1750s to the 1950s. During this period, writers and artists drew upon classical mythology and history, invoking figures such as Ganymede, Antinous, and the pair of Achilles and Patroclus, to express a sexuality that society deemed sinful, pathological, or criminal. Many sought refuges

in southern Europe, particularly Italy, to admire the remnants of Antiquity and the masterpieces of the Renaissance, while also escaping the social stigmas prevalent in their home countries and seeking sexual connections.

In the context of the British engagement with Greek culture, few episodes are as renowned as the controversy surrounding the Elgin Marbles.⁹ The debate, which unfolded from 1807 to 1816, polarized leading intellectuals, captured the national press's attention, and even engaged the Houses of Parliament, making it a well-documented historical event. However, it is particularly important to emphasize the significant symbolic implications of this event, which catalysed an extensive discourse regarding the cultural significance of ancient Greece in the modern era. The British Museum's eventual decision to acquire the Marbles represents a pivotal moment in the integration of ancient Greek heritage into the cultural identity of the nation. Shortly after the Elgin dispute, Percy Bysshe Shelley remarked that "we are all Greeks," asserting that our laws, literature, religion, and arts trace their origins to Greece. Romantic Hellenism, which permeated Shelley's Britain through the influence of German thinkers such as Goethe and Schiller, positioned ancient Greece as an idealized locus of artistic culture and civilized values, frequently in contrast to Christian ideals. This critical juncture also saw Greek art and mythology become focal points in the poetry of Keats and Leigh Hunt, who rendered these ancient subjects accessible to modern middle-class audiences. Concurrently, modern Greece garnered public interest largely due to Lord Byron's notable Hellenophilia and his active participation in the Greek nationalist movement (Evangelista 2009, 8).

The prominence of Greek tragedy in Victorian literature and culture owes much to the ready availability of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in translation, alongside the enduring influence of A. W. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815). Richard Dowgun (1982) traces several distinct phases in the religious reception of Greek tragedy, from the view of Aeschylus as

⁹ The Elgin Marbles, also known as the Parthenon sculpture or the Parthenon Marbles, are still the subjects of ongoing debate in the British Parliament. See <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/elgin-marbles-uk-government-assessment-of-loaning-the-sculptures-to-greece/#ref-1> and <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/parthenon-sculptures>.

“approximating and intimating Christianity,” to interpretations of Sophocles as dramatizing the gods’ indifference to human suffering, and Euripides as offering a rational critique of religious belief (Dowgun 1982, 71-90). Aeschylus became associated with Romantic tastes for the primitive and the sublime, while Sophocles emerged as the tragedian of choice for figures such as Matthew Arnold and George Eliot. The first English production of *Antigone* in 1845, for instance, prompted George Eliot’s essay “The Antigone and its Moral,” where she argued that the play’s “dramatic motive” retained its force even across shifting religious contexts (Hurst 2021). Fiona Macintosh (2015, 305) notes that Sophocles was “regularly and routinely domesticated by the Victorians,” and increasingly came to be seen as an exemplary tragedian for both ancient and modern audiences. By contrast, Euripides was aligned with ideas of modernity, radicalism, and psychological realism, qualities that particularly appealed to writers such as Robert Browning and Oscar Wilde.

In the wake of the French Revolution, *Prometheus Bound* offered Romantic writers a figure of heroic defiance against tyranny and divine authority, as well as a symbol of creative autonomy. Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, among others, engaged deeply with the Prometheus myth. Elizabeth Barrett Browning translated *Prometheus Bound* twice: first as a rapid, literal version completed within a fortnight, and later as a more reflective adaptation shaped through correspondence with Robert Browning, where the language of martyrdom, sin, and expiation reflected the Christianized readings later attached to the myth (Hurst 2015, 449-470). Augusta Webster also produced a translation of *Prometheus Bound*, though her title page specified that the text had been “edited” by her husband. In a brief Preface to the translation, Thomas Webster remarked that the translator “wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady’s name could give,” and praised her “conscientious adherence to the letter of the text” (Webster 1866, i). While intended as a gesture of support, such assurances appear largely unnecessary: Augusta Webster’s competence as a translator needed no external validation, particularly given the precedent set by other women translators such as Anna Swanwick, whose 1865 translation of the *Oresteia* was widely acclaimed and followed by her versions of Aeschylus’ remaining plays. Nonetheless, in the context

of Victorian gender norms, it is understandable that Augusta Webster may have felt compelled to enlist a male figure to author the Preface in order to enhance the perceived legitimacy and scholarly authority of her work in the eyes of a predominantly male readership (Wallace 2015, 251-252; Hardwick 2000, 209-224).

As Webster remarked in her review of Robert Browning's *Agamemnon* (1877), while Aeschylus' language posed considerable challenges, it was not as opaque as Browning's idiosyncratic and hyper-literal translation might imply (Hurst 2021). Seeking to convey to the non-Greek reader an experience "as Greek as the English will bear," Browning employed compound epithets and retained Greek syntactical structures wherever possible. His two long poems, *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) and *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875), embed "transcripts from Euripides" within frame narratives that reflect on both the plays themselves and their historical performance contexts. Kathleen Riley (2008) charts the varied critical reactions to Browning's translation of *Herakles* in *Aristophanes' Apology*, ranging from Margaret Oliphant's bewildered irritation to the more sympathetic readings offered by J. A. Symonds and Thomas Carlyle (Riley 2008, 186). Browning's reworkings of Euripides, as Yopie Prins (2015) argues, are less concerned with accessibility than with critical intervention: they allow Browning to reflect on the history of classical reception in English literature while simultaneously fashioning a distinctive, self-conscious contribution to that tradition (Prins 2015, 509).

Although Greek tragedy's structural economy, with its unities of time, place, and action, stands in stark contrast to the sprawling form of the Victorian three-volume novel, some of the period's most innovative classical appropriations occur in fiction. George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, among others, repeatedly turned to Greek tragedy as a moral and aesthetic benchmark for the realist novel (Macintosh 2005; Vance 2015). As Shanyn Fiske (2015) notes, Romantic admiration for the "naturalism, originality and intensity" of Greek sculpture, particularly the Elgin Marbles, fundamentally reshaped Victorian aesthetic values: the perceived vitality and imperfection of Greek artifacts were privileged over the polished surfaces of Roman art. Similarly, Greek tragedy came to represent a source of unmediated "emotional truth" and psychological depth absent from more refined literary forms

(Fiske 2015, 583-584). In the popular theatre, tragic figures like Medea were adapted to articulate the experiences of abandoned or wronged women (see Chapter III); likewise, the Victorian novel drew on such archetypes to explore female suffering and agency. George Eliot, for example, mobilizes Medean imagery to frame the unconscious motivations of Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, who leaves her infant to die, and to depict the latent rage of Lydia Glasher in *Daniel Deronda*, who poisons her rival's marriage prospects (Fiske 2015, 579). Yet Victorian writers remained acutely aware that tragic grandeur could not be straightforwardly transposed into contemporary settings. As Eliot acknowledges in the Finale to *Middlemarch*, there are no longer the conditions for a "new Antigone" to "spend her heroic piety in daring all for a brother's burial: the medium in which [her] ardent deeds took shape is forever gone" (Eliot 2008, 822).

1.2 Male homosexuality and the Classics

In *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece* (2009), Stefano Evangelista argues that "writers such as Pater, Swinburne, and Michael Field (to name but a few) transformed Greek, the language of the academic, political, and moral establishment, into a language of dissent" (Evangelista 2009, 11). Despite their differing interpretations of ancient Greece, the Hellenisms of Arnold, Pater, and Swinburne, each a product of the elite educational institutions of the public school and Oxford system, consistently situate Greek culture within exclusive, male-dominated spheres such as the university, politics, and other loci of cultural authority. Fiske (2008, 15) highlights how Arnold's invocations of Eton, his repeated references to "men of genius," and his direct addresses to male contemporaries make clear that, if Greek art and literature symbolize the human, or humanistic, impulse toward intellectual and moral development, such impulses are implicitly gendered. Pater, likewise, restricted access to the Greek world to a refined male elite, capable of apprehending "the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner" (Pater 1873, 154). Arguably even more decisively than Arnold, Pater delineated Greek knowledge as a rarefied and masculine domain. As Linda Dowling (Dowling 1994, 94) observes:

Pater would throughout a long lifetime of writing demonstrate by his very neutrality and urbanity that he was writing from within the great tradition of humanist thought. Yet his writing would always consist of a daring texture of covert allusions working continuously and unmistakably to demonstrate that the reiterated liberal claims for liberty, individuality, self-development, and diversity as the qualities capable of rescuing England are unintelligible unless viewed within the context of a Socratic *eros* of men loving men in spiritual procreancy.

Pater's rhetorical restraint and classical humanism masked a radical subtext: throughout his oeuvre, he embedded veiled allusions that consistently asserted the centrality of a homoerotic, Socratic *eros*, of men loving men in acts of spiritual generation, as the interpretive key to liberal ideals such as individuality, diversity, and cultural renewal (Fiske 2008; Evangelista 2009).

For Pater, then, Hellenism was inextricable from a male intellectual elitarian culture which not only excluded women but rendered the female intellect illegible within its framework. Swinburne, though often positioned as a radical counterpoint to his Victorian peers, similarly grounded his poetic and critical authority in an erudite engagement with Greek literature. Even while he celebrated female creative agency and reimagined figures such as Sappho, Swinburne's allusions to classical sources served to demonstrate his scholarly command of Greek, positioning him both as heir to a venerable tradition and as a provocative critic of dominant cultural discourses. Despite his iconoclastic posture, Swinburne, like Arnold and Pater, relied on an elite, male-coded classical inheritance to underwrite his authority. As David Riede notes, Swinburne's dependence on a classical tradition already defined as an exclusively male legacy "cut his most ambitious verse off from the expression of what might be called a female point of view" (Riede 1993, 35). The tension Riede identifies between the legitimating force of classical tradition and the poet's transgressive desire for individual expression, reveals how, even for male writers, the classical heritage functioned as both a resource and a constraint, shaping the terms on which they could engage with history, identity, and cultural authority.

In *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1877), John Addington Symonds articulates a set of fundamental questions about the relationship between antiquity and modernity that informed Victorian Hellenism:

The travail of the whole earth, the unsatisfied desires of many races, the anguish of the death and birth of successive civilizations, have passed into our souls. Life itself has become a thousandfold more complicated and more difficult for us than it was in the springtime of the world. . . How can we then bridge over the gulf which separates us from the Greeks? How shall we, whose souls are aged and wrinkled with the long years of humanity, shake hands across the centuries with those young-eyed, young-limbed immortal children? (398)

Wallace argues that the sense of threat, and the accompanying sense of temptation, experienced by these authors and others of their milieu stemmed in part from the transformations wrought by industrial modernity, including the rapid expansion of print culture and the emergence of a broader reading public (Wallace 2015, 268). However, this unease also drew on deeper literary precedents, particularly those associated with the feminization of classical antiquity. Alexander Pope's translation of the *Iliad* was notoriously received with suspicion by certain contemporaries, who found its polished couplets overly refined and lacking the martial vigour expected of epic (Wallace 2015, 269). This feminizing reception became a means through which literary authority and cultural legitimacy could be questioned. In response, Pope produced *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock-epic in which the heroic masculinity of Achilles is displaced onto the figure of Belinda, whose violated vanity becomes the site of a tragicomic drama. Through this parody, Pope simultaneously acknowledged and subverted the expectations of epic tradition, transforming classical heroism into a scene of delicate social satire (Wallace 2015, 269). A century later, similar dynamics shaped the reception of John Keats. Critics often described Keats in infantilizing and feminizing terms, disparaging his poetry for aesthetic excess and insufficient classical authority. Wordsworth's remark that Keats's *Ode to Pan* was merely "a pretty piece of paganism" exemplifies a broader critical discomfort with Keats's political radicalism, outsider status, and lack of formal classical education (Wallace 2015, 269)). Keats responded articulating his poetic belatedness in works such as the *Ode to Psyche* (1819), where the goddess's tardy inclusion in the Olympian pantheon becomes a metaphor for his own marginal position within the literary tradition: "O brightest! though too late for antique vows, / Too, too late for the fond believing lyre" (ll. 36-37). Instead of erecting a public temple in her honour, the speaker vows to enshrine Psyche within the "wreathed trellis of a working brain" (l. 60) a private, introspective space aligned with the soft,

feminized qualities of his poetic imagination, which he presents as a more fitting sanctuary for her than the monumental structures of classical antiquity (Wallace 2015, 269).

Despite Arnold's attempts to fortify the perceived fragility of the modern mind through recourse to the robust authority of classical authors, the classical tradition simultaneously served as a site for the subversion of normative gender boundaries. This counter-current manifested, in part, through performance. The burlesque adaptation of Greek tragedy (see Chapter III for a recount of the burlesque versions of Medea) exposed classical texts to parodic effects akin to those found in Pope's mock-epic verse, challenging the gravitas typically associated with antiquity. This trajectory culminated in the first British staging of a Greek tragedy in the original language, *Agamemnon*, performed at Oxford in 1880, which notably featured Frank Benson cross-dressed in the role of Clytemnestra, further unsettling conventional associations between classical heritage and masculine cultural authority.

After years of education steeped in Latin and Greek texts, as well as in history and philosophy, the men who entered institutions such as Parliament, the Church of England, and the Civil Service came to interpret contemporary issues through the lens of classical antiquity. As a result, many of the pressing social and political debates of the era, such as those concerning divorce and child custody in the 1850s, were articulated in classical terms. One prominent example is W. E. Gladstone, among the most renowned politicians of the period, who produced what Turner describes as "the single most extensive body of Victorian Homeric commentary" (Turner 1981, 160). In these writings, Gladstone argued against the dissolution of marriage, citing the absence of divorce in Homeric epics, which he viewed as representing a prelapsarian ideal. This illustrates a broader tendency among Victorian thinkers to idealize aspects of ancient Greece and Rome to support visions for modern Britain. By invoking classical precedents, speakers sought to lend authority to their proposed solutions to contemporary social problems (Hurst 2021). Yet, as Norman Vance observes, such interpretations were often "selective and ahistorical" (Vance 2007, 92). The use of historical and literary examples in this way contributed to a distorted and increasingly fragmented understanding of

antiquity, as figures like Gladstone made dubious claims, such as the supposed absence of prostitution and homosexuality in the Homeric world, to suit their ideological purposes.

As Arcara notes, the classical education delivered in the exclusively male environments of the men's colleges served as a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. During this transformative time, young men were introduced to the sexual mysteries of smoking rooms, gentlemen's clubs, and the "forbidden" classics, such as the *Index Expurgatorius of Martial* and the *Priapeia* (Arcara 2020, 33; 2019, 288). "Writing about Greece was in part a way for the Victorians to write about themselves" comments Turner (Turner 1981, 8). That classical models should be chosen as a shared frame of reference is not surprising since, Christopher Stray reminds us, for much of the nineteenth-century classical education was taken for granted by men "for whom it was simply the pervasive subject of formal learning." (Stray 1998, 46).

Prominent figures such as Matthew Arnold extolled the civilizing virtues of classical antiquity, while Victorian authors, including Tennyson and Swinburne, relied heavily on mythological themes and classical motifs, further attesting to the enduring legacy of these ancient texts within the literary and cultural fabric of the time. In the twentieth century, modernist writers including T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf reworked classical references to reflect cultural fragmentation and continuity.

1.3 Women's education and the Classics

The subject of women's contribution to nineteenth-century classical discourses has been the focus of ongoing research by scholars such as Rowena Fowler in the 1980s and, later, by Isobel Hurst, with her *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006), and by Yopie Prins with her *Ladies' Greek* (2017), to name only a few. Hurst challenges the idea that only women with exceptional, namely masculine, intellects could achieve fluency in the classical languages and demonstrates the variety of women's Latin and Greek knowledge received and processed also through popular channels, such as public lectures, theatre, classically themed historical novels and so on. Hurst also highlights the fact that the non-

traditional ways in which women accessed classical culture “made women’s responses to the classics distinctive” (Hurst 2006, 2). Nineteenth-century women who cultivated a passionate reading of Greek were taught by private tutors or did their own independent reading from their brothers’ books. However, as Hurst points out, it was undeniably more difficult for a girl to study Latin and Greek at home, or later on in the century at school or college, than for a boy who followed the traditional path from public or grammar school to university (Hurst 2006, 2). As Yopi Prins underlined in her *Ladies’ Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (2017, 5), many of the women who embarked in the study of the classics seemed exceptional in their own way:

... in their diaries, correspondence, autobiographies, biographies, and other narratives, we encounter again and again a narrative of desire for ancient Greek that has its own predictable *topoi*: an early encounter with the Greek alphabet, a primal scene of falling in love with the language, a pedagogical experience that revolves around the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek, an attempt to translate and incorporate Greek into a body of writing, an idea that the woman writer herself might be the very embodiment of Greek letters.

The importance of knowing the classics for women cannot be overstated: over the course of the nineteenth century, learning Greek increasingly served as a rite of passage to becoming a “woman of letters”. The phrase is a late Victorian invention used to describe women who conceived of their literary careers professionally, but “women of letters flourished throughout the century, as women increasingly conceived of their literary careers and constructed their public personae in a professional mode” (Prins 2017, 6). As Prins explains, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s public persona became one of the central myths of authorship embraced by and constructed for Victorian women writers, who saw in her the embodiment of a “Woman of Greek Letters” (Prins 2017, 6). Barrett Browning actively contributed to this autobiographical myth through *Aurora Leigh*, her widely read and frequently cited “novel-poem,” which recounts the journey of its titular heroine as an aspiring female writer. In Book I, the protagonist Aurora recounts acquiring “the trick of Greek” from her father during childhood (I, 714), subsequently seeking to resuscitate the classical mode through her own compositions in English: “odes... bucolics...didactics...and elegiac griefs,” thus aligning her literary formation with

a tradition of Hellenic erudition. The figure of Aurora Leigh, both as Barrett Browning's fictional heroine and as a projection of her own literary persona, became a formative model for women writers seeking to inscribe themselves into the traditionally masculine domain of authorship. Among those who engaged deeply with this legacy were Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the aunt-and-niece writing duo later known under the shared pseudonym "Michael Field" (see Chapter II). Prior to this, however, both authors experimented individually with pseudonyms that directly referenced Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. Bradley adopted the name Arran Leigh, while Cooper took on the complementary pseudonym Isla Leigh for their first collaborative publication, *Bellerophon* (1881). This early act of naming, echoing the titular character of Barrett Browning's verse-novel, signals not only a deliberate homage to *Aurora Leigh*, but also a strategic positioning of their poetic ambitions within a lineage of classical learning, feminist authorship, and mythic self-fashioning.

Moreover, knowledge of the classics served as a gateway into hitherto closed sections of societal influence: for nineteenth-century women writers, translation from classical languages was a means of engaging with, and even entering, a male dominated world of scholarship, criticism, and sometimes political influence. In the early 1880s, A. Mary F. Robinson (1857-1944) gained prominence for her Hellenising poetry and her translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (Evangelista 2009, 76). The same decade witnessed the rise of the first ambitious women trained in Classics at Cambridge to gain scholarly distinction. Among them were Jane Ellen Harrison and Eugénie Sellers (1869-1943), later Strong, who would become the first English women to achieve recognition as professional scholars of, respectively, Greek and Latin. At the time, both were based in London, supporting themselves through private tuition and widely attended public lectures. Harrison, in particular, became known for her highly original and performative lecturing style.

In addition to being among the first women to receive a Cambridge education, Harrison became a central figure in the Cambridge Group between 1900 and 1922. This intellectual circle, which included Francis M. Cornford and Gilbert Murray, was instrumental in formulating theories concerning the ritual origins of myth, drama, and literature, contributions that would become foundational to the

development of myth criticism. Harrison's stature was such that Virginia Woolf named her among the great women in history, alongside Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and George Eliot. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter IV, several connections can be traced between Woolf and Harrison who published her *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (1925) with the Hogarth Press and appeared as a phantasmatic presence in *A Room of One's Own*.

Jane Ellen Harrison belonged to the pioneering generation of classical scholars who integrated emerging anthropological methodologies and newly available archaeological evidence, such as vase paintings, inscriptions, and funerary art, into the study of Greek religion. While her early work on Greek art and mythology adhered to conventional interpretations, her most influential publications, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903) and *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912), played a transformative role in challenging the prevailing conception of classical Greece as a realm of serene rationalism and aesthetic refinement (Ackerman 1991). Harrison's scholarship foregrounded the primacy of ritual and the irrational in Greek religious practice, suggesting that these elements were foundational rather than peripheral. Her intellectual milieu included influential contemporaries such as Johann Bachofen, whose 1861 work posited matrilineal and matriarchal structures in early societies, and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) critiqued the rationalism of Socratic thought and emphasized the Dionysian origins of Greek tragedy. Moreover, Harrison's work was shaped by the comparative mythological studies of James G. Frazer, whose *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915) profoundly impacted scholarly understandings of ritual and myth, despite his personal scepticism toward Harrison's theories. In her autobiographical *Reminiscences of a Student's Life*, Harrison recalled the revelatory power of Frazer's work, writing that "at the mere sound of the magical words 'Golden Bough,' the scales fell – we heard and understood" (Harrison 1925, 80).

Among British classicists, Harrison stood out for her uncompromising emphasis on the chthonic and ritualistic dimensions of Greek myth, which she viewed as emotionally and spiritually richer than the rationalist traditions valorised by both Victorian Britain and classical Athens. As Turner notes, Harrison believed

that “rationalism and propriety were incommensurable with the full expression and realization of the human spirit” (Turner 1981, 125). Accordingly, Harrison turned from the literary canon of Olympian mythology to the ecstatic rites of Orphic religion and other cultic practices, as represented in material remains such as vase imagery and sculpture. In *Prolegomena*, the scholar characterized the Orphic religion as “the worship of life itself in its supreme mysteries of ecstasy and love” (Harrison 1908, 659) and in *Themis*, she memorably likened the Olympian gods to “a bouquet of cut-flowers ... severed from their roots” (Harrison 1912, vii). The implications of Harrison’s thought, as outlined here, extend well beyond classical studies; in Chapter IV I will show how her ideas found powerful expression in the modernist fiction of Virginia Woolf. For instance, Harrison’s exploration of pre-Olympian fertility rites and matriarchal societies provided Woolf with a framework to challenge patriarchal literary conventions and create woman-centred narratives (Cramer 2005, 459). Harrison’s critique of Olympianism led the famous scholar Gilbert Murray to remark that she had rendered the term “Olympian” almost pejorative (Kimball 1989). Although she later moderated her position, Harrison continued to regard the Olympian pantheon as a cultural construct detached from authentic human experience (Ackerman 1991, 229).

In her later works, Harrison’s focus shifted increasingly toward the social origins of religion, a development shaped in part by her engagement with the philosophy of Henri Bergson and, more significantly, the sociological theories of Émile Durkheim. Durkheim’s contention that religion emerges from collective thought and communal experience proved particularly resonant for Harrison, who sought to understand religious phenomena not as abstract doctrines but as expressions of social cohesion and identity. This line of inquiry finds its most explicit articulation in *Themis*, where, under the guise of analysing the recently unearthed *Hymn of the Kouretes*, Harrison advances a sociological theory of religious development. As Ackerman notes: “She must have seen Durkheim’s view of religion as projection of group needs and wishes, as not only in tune with her own intuitions but unifying rather than atomizing and therefore more likely to be right” (Ackerman 1991, 222). Building on Durkheim’s theories, Harrison argues that early religious group identities were formed within matrilineal communities,

what she characterizes as primordial, quasi-organic societies, before being gradually displaced by the ascendancy of patrilineal (and implicitly patriarchal) structures. These later formations, she suggests, found their theological expression in the Olympian pantheon, which for her embodied a rationalized, hierarchized, and somewhat sterilized version of religious experience. In this regard, Harrison's work may be viewed as a precursor to later academic approaches that move beyond traditional philological and literary methods, privileging instead interpretive frameworks drawn from anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Yet even as she adopted these interdisciplinary methodologies, Harrison maintained a rhetorical intensity and psychological depth in her prose that set her apart from the more dispassionate tone of her contemporaries in the social sciences. (Kimball 1989). Moreover, Harrison concentrated on what she termed the "making of the god," seeking to reconstruct the social psychology of ancient Greece through a dual methodology. On one side, she drew upon pre-Homeric literary fragments and archaeological evidence; on the other, she engaged with contemporary anthropological accounts of the so-called "savage mind." These accounts, grounded in extensive ethnographic data on so-called "primitive" societies, emerged in large part as a by-product of the imperialist expansion and the concomitant accumulation of colonial knowledge at the close of the nineteenth century (Ackerman 2003, 95).

Both Harrison and Seller Strong had been shaped by the aesthetic ethos that infused the newly founded women's colleges at Oxford and Cambridge during the height of Pre-Raphaelite fashion. Harrison was a regular guest of the Pater family, who had relocated to London in 1885, while Sellers was associated with the Humphry Wards¹⁰ and moved in the same social circles as the painter Lawrence

¹⁰ Humphry Ward, a Fellow and tutor of Brasenose College, Oxford, who subsequently joined the staff of *The Times*, and Mary Augusta Arnold, niece of Matthew Arnold, who had lived in Oxford since her schooldays, married Ward aged twenty. Mary Ward, "Mrs Humphry Ward" as she used to sign, had a central role in the women's education movement in Oxford, helping to found Somerville College and campaigning for the right of women to access university learning alongside male students. As Vera Brittain notes: "The Wards' little house in Bradmore Road, furnished with antique chests, Morris wallpapers, and blue pottery, became a centre of modern ideas where the daring new schemes for women were discussed" (Brittain 1960: 42). However, in 1889 Mary Ward was one of the organisers and principal signatories of the "Appeal Against Women's Suffrage," an article in which 108 women of prominent social position called on "the common sense and the educated thought of the men and women of England against the proposed extension of the Parliamentary suffrage to women" (*The Nineteenth Century*, June 1889, p.781).

Alma-Tadema (1836-1912). In the fashionable cultural milieu of late-Victorian London, intellectual interest in ancient Greece gave rise to a form of popularised classicism, reflected in the contemporary enthusiasm for Greek theatricals, classicising *tableaux vivants*, and the work of artists such as Alma-Tadema and Albert Moore, whose paintings presented antiquity through a distinctive blend of domestic familiarity and exotic allure (Evangelista 2009, 77).

Often described as the most intellectually gifted woman in Britain, Harrison was, throughout her adult life, widely regarded as a genuine role model for intellectually ambitious young Englishwomen. Upon her death, friends and colleagues concurred that her remarkable life warranted proper commemoration. Hope Mirrlees (1887-1978), a former student and close companion during the final six years of Harrison's life, was entrusted with the task of writing her biography. Although recollections were gathered, notes compiled, and manuscript drafts accumulated, no definitive work materialized. In 1959, another of Harrison's former students, Jessie G. Stewart, published *Jane Ellen Harrison: A Portrait from Letters*. This impressionistic account drew chiefly on the approximately eight hundred extant letters from Harrison to her close friend and fellow classicist Gilbert Murray, whose replies were burned along with other papers by Harrison herself in 1922 when she and Mirrlees left Cambridge to live in Paris. Although Stewart lacked formal scholarly credentials, scholars agree that she succeeded in capturing aspects of Harrison's intellectual charisma and in conveying the vibrant academic atmosphere of pre-First World War Cambridge. Her work also expanded upon Harrison's own engaging but selective memoir, *Reminiscences*. Nevertheless, Stewart herself would have acknowledged that her volume did not constitute the comprehensive biography that Harrison's legacy merited (Ackerman 2003, 96).

Despite her significant contributions to classical scholarship, Jane Ellen Harrison was largely neglected by academic discourse until a resurgence of interest in the 1980s. Notably, in 1987, during the second wave of the feminist movement, the American scholar Sandra Peacock published *Jane Ellen Harrison: the Mask and the Self*, which was met with substantial disapproval by classicists and anthropologists, who challenged both its psychoanalytic framework (Heilbrun 1989; Segal 1990; Michels 1991; Baker 1991) and evidentiary basis (Levine 1991;

Ackerman 2003). Understandably, Peacock's choice to apply Freudian theory to Harrison's life was one of the central points of criticism by scholars. This "heavily Freudian reading" and "psychohistorical thrust" (Levine 1991, 138) led to a reductionist interpretation of Harrison's life as "a bundle of Freudian anxieties" (Heilbrun 1989, 9) and of her significant accomplishments as "the outcome of a series of unhappy decisions (Heilbrun 1989, 9). From Peacock's point of view, in fact, Harrison's life was driven by guilt over her mother's death when she was only one month old, with consequent Oedipal dynamics with her father, and feelings of abandonment when he remarried leading to a fear of sexuality. Peacock's imposition of psychoanalytic practice on a historical subject was seen as inherently problematic, full of contradictions and a lack of knowledge of Victorian history and customs (Levine 1991, 139). In addition, Peacock privileged Harrison's emotional relationships and personal history to the detriment of a proper consideration of her scholarship and adopted an open anti-feminist view: "Feminist scholars particularly, wishing to see in her a model of a successful female intellectual, have failed to understand how much her scholarly success cost her" (Peacock 1987, iv) in reference to Harrison's rejection of marriage and childbearing.

Almost two decades after Peacock, two further attempts were made to reconstruct Jane Harrison's biography: Mary Beard's *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (2000), and Annabel Robison's *The Life and Work of Jane Ellen Harrison* (2002). In his 2003 review, "Jane Ellen Harrison: Another Life," Robert Ackerman expresses a preference for Beard's work over Robinson's, citing the latter's "numerous typos, small errors of fact, and verbal infelicities," as well as the substantial new information Beard uncovers about the period between Harrison's graduation and her return to Newnham two decades later. (Ackerman 2003, 97). I believe the anthropologist also subtly hints at Beard's privileged access to resources as a Newnham classicist herself. Ackerman's praise of Beard's work further emphasizes Robinson's inadequate engagement with and references to *The Invention*, which he identifies as a notable shortcoming, to the extent that it is his duty to confront the two works to avoid the mark of "failure of intellectual nerve" (Ackerman 2003, 97). Chapters 3 and 4 of Beard's book focus extensively on the relationship between Harrison and Eugénie Sellers Strong. In these chapters, Beard

illustrates how both women, distinguished classicists and exemplary figures of the emerging New Woman, who challenged conservative norms by living and working independently and unmarried in London, moved within similar intellectual circles and sought the support of the same senior male scholars. Notably, in 1883, both participated in *The Tale of Troy*, a remarkable theatrical production presenting episodes from Homer's epics in alternating performances in Greek and English, attended by members of the academic and cultural elite. At some point Harrison and Sellers parted, with Sellers eventually moving to Rome, where she became the Assistant Director and Librarian of the British School for Art and Archaeology. Sellers was highly celebrated during her time as she published works on Roman art that were regarded as path-breaking as Harrison's books on Hellenic art. Undoubtedly, Beard gives relevance to Sellers's presence into Harrison's life more than Robinson, who on the contrary mentions her only a few times. However, as has been noted, "bashing Eugenie Strong has been part of British patriarchal classical discourse for a century. Regrettably, Beard buys into it. Her account is at best grudging and often nasty. The picture presented here of Strong and her accomplishments is inaccurate and unfair: very little of her scholarship is discussed, and her positive impact ... hardly considered" (Dyson 2001, 715).

It cannot go unnoticed that Beard's work looks biased already from the title, which suggests an overestimation of Harrison. As has been noted, with her "aporetic approach, ... Beard seems determined to dislodge Harrison from a pedestal constructed partly by her former pupils, partly by recent interest in early twentieth century ritualism and its connections to modernism and in women scholars and writers" (Murnaghan 2000). The correspondence between Hope Mirrlees and Jane Harrison is filled with affectionate nicknames (they called themselves the "Elder Walrus" and the "Younger Walrus," and styled themselves as the "elder Wife" and the "young Wife"). It is worth to note that Beard characterises the language used in these letters as "sickeningly coy" (Beard 2000, 143), a description that suggests a degree of irritation. As I will show in Chapter II, such evaluative language is notably absent in the treatment of similar epistolary practices by the biographers of Michael Field. Despite the abundance of pet names and sentimental expressions in the correspondence between Katharine Bradley and

Edith Cooper, scholars have tended to frame their relationship in *queer* or even openly lesbian terms, except for the lesbophobic account offered by Treby (see Chapter II). This contrast raises questions about the heteronormative biases that shape biographical and scholarly approaches to female intimacy. Beard also critiques Tina Passman's essay "Out of the Closet and into the Field" (1993) as being "anachronistically conscripted as a model for modern lesbian-feminism" (Beard 2000, 195n76). This critique is directed at Passman's self-ironic remark: "The real problem was that Jane Harrison wrote like a dyke and lived like a dyke, as any Lesbian could see" (Passman 1993, 181). Beard appears to advocate for a more cautious academic approach, as suggested by her reference to more "conventional terms" (*sic*) such as "'abnormal' or 'inverted'" (Beard 2000, 195n74). However, despite repeated references to terminology such as "inversion" (83, 152), "invert" (82), and "inverted" (195n74) in relation to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourses on female sexuality, Beard does not engage with the foundational theories of sexual inversion developed by Havelock Ellis during this period.

Strictly speaking, the terminology of "lesbian" and "lesbianism" appears with striking frequency, used eighteen times throughout the text, especially in discussions of Vernon Lee (1856-1935) and the cultural associations of Paris. For instance, in the same phrase to both Lee and Paris: "glamorous and stylish lesbian (queen of the Parisian Left Bank, the lesbian flagship of the early twentieth-century world)" (88), then again Lee is referred to as "the most famous lesbian in town" (94). Further instances include: "Paris was the lesbian capital of the Western world" (139); "lesbian resonance in Mirrlees's poem" (140); and "discourse of lesbian inversion and the parade of specifically lesbian options" (152). In reference to Mirrlees and Harrison's relocation from Cambridge to Paris, Beard writes: "their decision, as two women, to move from Cambridge to Paris effectively encouraged their relationship to be read as lesbian. For that is what Paris meant" (154).

Given Beard's dismissal of Passman's passage as anachronistic, this conspicuous recurrence of the term "lesbian" may suggest a degree of rhetorical discomfort, veiled disdain, or even a voyeuristic preoccupation. In this light, one might be inclined to agree with Dyson's observation that Beard offers a "rather

tabloid-style consideration of [Harrison's] sexuality" (Dyson 2001, 715). Overall, Beard's study conveys a tone of irritation more than the gratitude she professes in her preface (Beard 2000, xiii) toward Harrison's life and work. The frequent and, at times, unnecessary repetition of the term *lesbian* appears to function less as a neutral descriptor and more as a rhetorical device contributing to the diminution of Harrison's intellectual stature.¹¹ Moreover, Beard seems to overlook the political implications of Harrison's (alleged) lesbianism and her decision to remain unmarried, choices that, particularly in the context of her time, carried subversive potential and shaped the reception of her work and persona. The biographies examined in this study reveal a substantial gap in the existing literature on Jane Harrison, highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive analysis that thoroughly explores both her intellectual contributions and the intricacies of her personal life.

Scholars have highlighted the formative role that these pioneering women classicists played in the development of classical studies, particularly through their contributions to the study of the relationship between ancient art and religion. Harrison and Sellers are especially remembered for their emphasis on the visual arts as essential sources for reconstructing ancient cultures, and for their pioneering application of archaeological methods to classical scholarship. It is evident that their marginalised position within a predominantly male academic world compelled them to seek alternative frameworks and cultural contexts through which antiquity could be made meaningful for a modern audience. Prins celebrates Harrison as one of the initiators of the female line of Victorian Hellenism (Prins 1999a: 46), and, as I will show in Chapter IV, scholars agree on considering her as an important

¹¹ Mary Beard is currently among the most prominent classicists in British popular culture, known for her bestselling books and widely viewed television programmes on Roman antiquity. A 2018 article in *The Guardian* titled "The Cult of Mary Beard" by Charlotte Higgins recounts Beard's public success, including an anecdote from one of her former students highlighting her unconventional teaching style: "At first she'd be in a normal position, but as the hour progressed she would gradually slide further and further down so you could only see her feet," a reference to Beard lecturing from a chaise longue <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/30/mary-beard-the-cult-of>. Interestingly, this image calls to mind a well-known 1909 painting of Jane Harrison, made by Augustus John, still displayed at Newnham College, which depicts Harrison reclining thoughtfully on a chaise longue with a book in hand. Higgins's article also notes Beard's cultural visibility, pointing out that she is often recognised in the streets by students and members of the general public. Coincidences aside, it is difficult not to draw a parallel between the public acclaim enjoyed by Beard today and the popularity achieved by Harrison in her own time. In this light, the often ambivalent or even contradictory tone of Beard's biography of Harrison appears more incongruous.

influence on Woolf's appropriation of the classics as both the symbol and the instrument of rebellion against the elite of college-educated men (Fowler 1999, 219).

As it has been largely noted, Victorian Hellenism is deeply intertwined with the aesthetic movement. What remains less fully acknowledged, as Evangelista underlines, is the extent to which the aesthetic movement shaped this intellectual project and vice versa. The aesthetic philosophy promoted by figures such as Ruskin and Pater, although not always directed specifically toward antiquity, emphasised the role of the art object in everyday life and directly influenced Sellers's and Harrison's revolutionary work on the sensory and affective experience of ancient art. Aestheticism's interest in the interrelation of verbal and visual cultures, and its experiments in transcending the boundaries between media and genres, further enabled these scholars to reconceptualise classical knowledge. For writers such as Pater, Swinburne, and Michael Field, the act of writing about material artworks formed part of a broader aesthetic experimentation in integrating textual and visual forms. Their imaginative use of *ekphrasis* underscores the role of visual experience in shaping literary understanding, encouraging audiences to interrogate inherited systems of classification and reassess critical conventions (see Chapter II).

These same aesthetic principles deeply informed Harrison's and Sellers's conviction that a sophisticated understanding of the classical world could not be achieved apart from the visual arts. Moreover, aestheticism, with its appeal to women and younger men, provided an alternative platform for disseminating interest in antiquity beyond the conservative, male-dominated academy. It offered a cultural framework in which the study of ancient Greece was associated with intellectual freedom and innovation. In this sense, while aestheticism facilitated new engagements with classical antiquity, the innovative Hellenism of early female classicists also contributed to the dissemination and popularisation of aestheticism and its ideals.

Anxieties surrounding women's appropriation of the intellectual and cultural authority traditionally associated with classical learning found vivid expression in

contemporary visual satire. A notable example appears in an 1876 *Punch* cartoon entitled *St. Valentine's Day at Girton*,¹² published shortly after the establishment of the first women's colleges at Cambridge. The illustration portrays two students from Girton College, an institution noted for its rigorous commitment to classical languages, examining a Valentine written in ancient Greek. One student speculates, "Charming, isn't it? Gussie must have sent it from Oxford?" to which the other responds, "Yes, it's out of the *Antigone* – the Love Chorus, you know. How much jollier than those silly English verses fellows used to send!" (1876, 73).

The two women, casually smoking and reading Sophocles, embody the contemporary caricature of the "advanced woman," a figure whose erudition unsettles traditional gender hierarchies. As Perry Williams (1987) has observed in her analysis of early women students at Cambridge, the humour of the cartoon hinges on the perceived threat posed by a woman whose education renders her intellectually and emotionally independent of men. A woman who finds more pleasure in a classical Valentine written in Greek than in conventional romantic verse appears less as an object of satire and more as a symbol of cultural disruption (Williams 1987, 200).

The implications of the cartoon go beyond mere parody. The *Antigone's* choral ode to Eros, invoked here as the source of the Greek quotation, frames love as a destabilising, uncontrollable force: "Ἔρως ἀνίκατε μάχην Ἔρως ὃς ἐν κτήμασι πίπτει." ¹³ In the context of the cartoon, this invocation of eros acquires a subversive edge. The classical text, once a male-coded domain, becomes a medium of female intimacy and intellectual solidarity. Whether the Valentine was sent by a male student at Oxford remains ambiguous, but its significance is ultimately realised in a moment shared between two women at Girton. Here, Greek eros supplants both sentimental English poetry and the men who once authored it, suggesting a symbolic displacement of patriarchal authority through shared classical knowledge (Prins 1999a, 44). The campaign against the admission of women to universities extended well beyond misogynistic satire (Arcara 2020, 33).

¹² Reproduced in Prins 2017, 238

¹³ "Eros undefeated in battle, Eros you destroy all things," translation by Yopie Prins, 1999a, 44.

At Oxford, critics decried what they called the “invasion of the Amazons”.¹⁴ In Cambridge, student protests turned violent in 1897, culminating in clashes at the gates of the Senate House. Even as late as 1921, further unrest led to damage to the buildings of Newnham, and as Brittain reports: “anti-feminism gained so firm a hold that Cambridge University postponed degrees for women until 1947” (Brittain 1960, 109).

Although this period was considered the “heyday” of equal opportunities in schooling, the question of gender was virtually excluded from all conversations and educational policy making (McClellan 2008, 3). As has been highlighted, as late as 1912, the percentage of women going on to higher education was only two per cent of the entire population, and regardless of class consciousness and intent, most of these women were from middle- to upper-middle class backgrounds. Although Cambridge University, and Oxford to some extent, still resented women’s inclusion, attitudes toward women students and academics in the 1920s were generally positive, perhaps due to the war propaganda promoting women in the workforce. Women eventually received degree honours from Oxford and Cambridge in the 1920s, although Cambridge refused to extend full membership to the university to women graduates until 1948. However, the increasing number of women’s colleges, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, must not induce us to assume that equality was reached between male and female colleges and opportunities. Funding toward women’s facilities was hugely lower than men’s. An excerpt from the “Notes and Suggestions” in the *King’s College Magazine Ladies Department* of 1898 reads:

An anonymous friend has given L15,000 towards the liquidation of the College debt [...] We in Kensington, are, however, just a little envious. A quarter of that sum would enable the Committee to make all sorts of improvements in the Ladies’ Department, – perhaps even to found Scholarships, and to supply the library with some of the many books of reference of which we stand so sorely in need (quoted in Kenyon Jones and Snaith 2010, 39).

¹⁴ See “Women Making History: the centenary” <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/oxford-people/women-at-oxford/centenary> accessed November 2024

As I will show, this is an important example of the extent to which Woolf's feminist argument about women's poverty in *A Room of One's Own* was inspired by the material and cultural milieu in which she lived and worked (see Chapter 4).

The compulsory study of the classics formed the backbone of an education system designed to produce the ruling elite in Victorian and Edwardian institutions. This classical foundation was not merely about intellectual development, but served as a cultural filter, determining who could access positions of influence. Later in this chapter, I will examine how women were deliberately excluded from this system and "discouraged from pursuing the kind of education that leads to positions of power" (Fowler 1983, 341). Although numerous studies on Victorian classicism have predominantly highlighted a male-centred culture, Rowena Fowler's 1983 essay "'On Not Knowing Greek': The Classics and the Woman of Letters" spotlighted literary works by female authors whose engagement with ancient texts demonstrated that a formal education in Greek was not a prerequisite for their endeavours to access these texts in their original language (Fowler 1983, 337-349). Subsequent research by Yopie Prins, Isobel Hurst, Shanyin Fiske, and T. D. Olverson has examined how various interpretations of Hellenism empowered women writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Michael Field, and others to express their aspirations for intellectual satisfaction and their quest for knowledge traditionally reserved for men. These analyses also consider their literary ambitions amidst a male-dominated literary canon and their frustrations regarding the treatment of women and children within a patriarchal society (Olverson, 2009; Prins 1999, 2017; Fiske 2008; Hurst 2006;). Given that women were largely barred from institutions associated with classical education until the late nineteenth century, the study of Greek became a privilege of only the most dedicated self-taught individuals, often coming from families linked to the Church of England or universities. Many of the women who attained a high level of proficiency in the classics were distinguished figures in literature or education. Following their emergence as students and teachers of classics in universities from the 1870s onward, a defining symbol of the Girton Girl (a student at Girton College, Cambridge, linked to the New Woman movement) was the presence of a Greek text in its original form. For female aesthetes like Jane

Ellen Harrison and Michael Field, Yopie Prins posits that the interplay of Pater's writings with the environment of Greek studies at a women's college in Cambridge fostered "new configurations of sexuality and gender" (Prins 1999, 47).

As Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall argue in *Family Fortunes* (1987), the rise of industrial capitalism and the consolidation of the middle class in the nineteenth century contributed to an increasingly rigid separation of male and female spheres, intensifying social segregation along gender lines in ways not seen in previous centuries. This division solidified into the ideology of "separate spheres," which associated women with the domestic realm and men with public and professional life. The education of middle-class boys typically involved rigorous training in Latin and Greek, often pursued at public schools and later at universities, preparing them for careers in fields such as law, the Church, civil service, or other established professions. In contrast, middle-class girls were generally educated at home by a governess or occasionally attended a local school for a short period; their curricula rarely included classical languages. As John Ruskin remarked: "a man ought to know any language or science he learns thoroughly, while a woman ought to know the same language or science only to the extent that it enables her to sympathize with her husband's interests and those of his friends" (Ruskin 1865, 161).

The restriction of women's education to the domestic realm persisted until the late nineteenth century. Systematic teaching was typically provided by parents or private governesses in the home setting. Private secondary schools for girls often mirrored this domestic approach and did not equip women with the rigorous philological focus characteristic of traditional classical education for boys. As a result, these institutions were frequently criticized for their "want of thoroughness and foundation, want of system; slovenliness and showy superficiality; inattention to rudiments [and] undue time given to accomplishments."¹⁵ Nevertheless, this informal educational system produced several remarkable women writers, including George Eliot and Augusta Webster, who, despite their lack of formal

¹⁵ "Report of the Commissioners," Schools Inquiry Commission i.548, quoted in Gloyn (2016, 153n2).

schooling, attained high levels of classical and literary expertise through extensive private study. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, a more structured educational landscape began to emerge, as a symbiotic relationship developed between a growing network of girls' schools and newly established women's higher education institutions. Bedford College, London, founded in 1849, was the first of these pioneering establishments (Gloyn 2016, 154).

Newnham College, Cambridge, offers a compelling case study showing how women's colleges began to challenge male dominance in classical studies, producing female scholars who became authorities. Liz Gloyn's essay "This is Not a Chapter About Jane Harrison. Teaching Classics at Newnham College, 1882-1922," provides a detailed chronological account of the pioneering women who taught Classics at Newnham and traces the evolution of their pedagogical methods. Newnham's origins trace back to 1871, when five women students attended university lectures in Cambridge under the supervision of Anne Jemima Clough (1820 -1892). Newnham Hall opened in 1875, and by the spring of 1880, Newnham College was formally registered. By 1882, a second hall of residence was operating, now equipped with the college's first purpose-built lecture rooms.¹⁶ As Hurst notes: "for women's colleges, the greatest challenge was to provide intensive coaching to make up for the lack of ten years or more of grammar, syntax, memorisation and translation of set texts" (Hurst 2019, 7). For women, learning Greek and engaging with classics held significant cultural prestige and was seen as a way to justify their claim to higher education (Prins 2017, 13).

1.4 The reception of Sappho

Born circa 630 BC on the Greek island of Lesbos, Sappho is widely recognized as the preeminent lyric poet of ancient Greece, intensity, and exploration of love's complexities. The surviving poems are few and fragmentary. The society she lived in, the Greek city of Mytilene on Lesbos in the early sixth century BC, is largely lost to us except as it appears in the poems of Sappho and her male contemporary Alcaeus. Although Sappho's poetry survives only in fragments, her legacy continues to resonate across the Western literary tradition, sustained by the

¹⁶ See Sutherland (2006) for a comprehensive history of Newnham College.

fascination with her name, biography, and sexuality. Sappho's poems were still circulating in twelfth-century Byzantium, but by the time of the Renaissance, four centuries later, all that survived was a handful of quotations embedded in the text of other writers (Spragg 1991, 51).

Margaret Reynolds's *The Sappho Companion* (2000) gives an extensive account of the history of the reception of Sappho in English literature across the centuries. In her Introduction, Reynolds interestingly notes the issues posed by the transposition of the poet's Greek name to English (11):

... her name was not 'Sappho' – as we pronounce it – at all. Today, in English, she is all soft sibilants and faded f's, but in fact she is ψάπφ 'Psappho'. In ancient Greek – and, indeed, even in modern Greek – if you hear a native speaker say her name, she comes across spitting and popping hard p's. Ppppsappoppo. We have eased off her name, made her docile and sliding, where she is really difficult, diffuse, many-syllabled, many-minded, vigorous and hard.

Reynolds's work offers one of the most comprehensive and influential modern accounts of Sappho's reception into the British literary tradition, tracing the poet's fragmentary legacy through centuries of literary, scholarly, and artistic engagement. As both an anthology and a critical study, Reynolds's study foregrounds the multiplicity of meanings attributed to Sappho, revealing how her figure has been continuously reinterpreted and reappropriated according to shifting cultural, aesthetic, and ideological frameworks. From classical antiquity to the Victorian era, and into contemporary feminist and queer readings, Sappho's voice has served as a powerful, and often contested, symbol of female authorship, desire, and subjectivity. Rather than tracing Sappho's entire trajectory from antiquity to the present, this study begins with Alexander Pope's 1707 translation of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon," number XV of his *Letters of the Heroines*. Pope's translation of this text, where Ovid plays with the idea that Phaon would not recognise the handwriting as it is Ovid's forged signature, marks a significant moment in the construction of the modern myth of Sappho in the Anglophone world, shaping subsequent interpretations of her voice and identity. From this point, the analysis moves into the nineteenth century, where the reception of Sappho during the Victorian period becomes the central concern. In this context, the figure of Sappho

emerges not only as a classical reference but also as a contested symbol through which questions of gender, sexuality, authorship, and cultural legitimacy are negotiated.

Alexander Pope's 1707 verse translation of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon" became immensely popular and was one of the most influential contributions to the Sappho myth in English literary imagination. Reynolds argues that Pope's version presented an Ovidian picture of Sappho as dishevelled and miserable, unable any longer to compose and fantasising hopelessly in her dreams (Reynolds 2000, 131). An image that later became one of the most persistent images of the Lesbian poet in English literature, although not as an expression of love between women at this time. At various points, Pope maintained relations with two of Sappho's early eighteenth-century champions: Ambrose Phillips (1674-1749), who translated Fragments 1 and 31 in 1711, and Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who co-founded *The Spectator* with Richard Steele (1672-1729) the same year and published two influential early essays on Sappho's life and work. Nevertheless, Pope was perhaps more instrumental than any of his contemporaries in the subsequent decline of Sappho's literary reputation. His satirical attacks were not limited to the classical poet herself, but also targeted contemporary women writers, extending his critique into his own cultural moment (Reynolds 2000, 131).

Pope used the name "Sappho" almost always as a term of abuse for contemporary women writers (Reynolds 2000, 133). For instance, he published accusations against Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) with the soubriquet of "Sappho" regarding personal hygiene, health, morals and appearance after a rift in their friendship¹⁷. However, despite the troubles, Lady Montagu, a self-educated woman writer and poet, did not refuse the name of Sappho and, instead, modelled her poems of desire on Sappho's fragments (Reynolds 2000, 133), to the extent that others went on calling her "Sappho." Pope targeted also other women, such as Anne

¹⁷ The repeated accusations of being dirty, promiscuous, syphilitic and vain can be compared to what today is revenge porn. Aimed at destroying Lady Mary's reputation, these attacks became a sideshow in literary London. In addition, since she lived in Twickenham, the area became the setting of a 1749 anonymous popular volume titled *Satan's Harvest Home* which bore the subtitle "Or, the Present State of Whorecraft, Adultery, Fornication, Procuring, Pimping, Sodomy, and the Game at Flatts (Illustrated by an Authentick and Entertaining Story), And other SATANIC WORKS daily propagated in this good Protestant Kingdom." (Reynolds 2000, 135)

Finch, Lady Winchelsea (1661-1720), who published her own version of Fragment 55 under the name “Ardelia,” for allegedly daring to dislike some verses of “The Rape of the Lock.” In her case, Pope wrote “Impromptu”:

In vain you boast Poetick Dames of yore,
And cite those Sapphoes wee admire no more;
Fate doom’d the fall of ev’ry female Wit,
But doom’d it then when first Ardelia writ.

Throughout the century and over, Sappho continued to serve as measure for women poets, even as the original figure remained tarnished by enduring slander., For example, the seventeenth-century poet Katherine Philips was recognised as “the English Sappho” in late editions of her work in the following century. However, the defamatory associations surrounding Sappho’s name were not limited to Pope’s invective. In the anonymous *Lesbia: A Tale* (1756), Sappho is portrayed as a teenage seductress, and the narrative of her seduction, complete with its predictable consequences, ends with a moralizing lesson:

When Frailty once subdues the Will,
Then Woman will be Woman still (quoted in Reynolds 2000, 134)

Many other anonymous (and/or male authored) publications of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries linked Sappho’s name not just to scandals but also to an utter dismissal of female literary talent, contributing to a decline in her status as a universally admired poetess.¹⁸

Among the Romantic precursors who engaged with the figure of Sappho, Mary Robinson (1757-1800) stands out as a key example. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Robinson actively aligned herself with the Sapphic tradition, most notably through the publication of *Sappho and Phaon: A Series of Legitimate Sonnets* in 1796, a poetic project that may be read as her own postscript to Ovid’s already mediated version of Sappho (Prins 1999: 180). Her association with the Sapphic persona was further solidified when *The Morning Post* referred to her as “the dignified title of the English Sappho” (20 January 1798, 2). As Prins notes, in the “Sonnet Introductory,” the first in the series, Robinson announces her Sapphic

¹⁸ See Chapter 5, “Wanton Sapphoics” of Reynolds (2000).

theme as a series of variations, to “sweep the Muse’s lyre / In varying cadence.” This “cadence” is a dying fall that will be repeated in the sonnets to follow, as “Sappho dies again and again” (Prins 1999a, 181). Prins’s analysis of Robinson’s Sappho is particularly interesting as “Sappho repeats the metaleptic leap of Ovid’s Sappho,” with its tenses jumping from past events in the present tense or future events in the past tense (Prins 1999a, 181).

By the early nineteenth century, the negative reputation related to Sappho’s sexuality was significant enough that scholars like Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker (in 1816) wrote treatises specifically to free her from the sexuality prejudice: *Sappho von Einem Herrschenden Vorurtheil Befreyt* (Sappho freed from a reigning prejudice). According to Welcker Sappho was neither homosexual nor heterosexual, but chaste. This was proven by the fact that her poems were admired in antiquity and “no educated Greek would have thought there were beautiful love poems if something *monstrous* and *disgusting* had been going on in them” (quoted in Reynolds 2000, 234, my emphasis). This rhetorical distancing of the beauty of poetry from the “monstrosity” of lesbian love lays the groundwork for the anxieties and fascinations that would later surface more explicitly in Victorian literary treatments of lesbian desire, revealing how lesbian love was framed as inherently transgressive with negative connotations, for instance, by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909). The disapproval of lesbian love, often regarded as inferior to male homosexuality (or “Greek love”), would also be elaborated at length by John Addington Symonds in *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, first privately published in 1883 and later republished in 1897 as an appendix to Havelock Ellis’s *Sexual Inversion*. In his essay, Symonds refers to male homosexuality as a “glorious tradition,” while he characterizes lesbianism in terms of “degeneracy” (Symonds 1901, 71).

In 1845, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) announced the forthcoming publication of a new poetry collection titled *Les lesbiennes*. Although the volume never appeared under that name, the work was eventually published in 1857 as *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Nonetheless, the collection retained three explicitly lesbian-themed poems *Femmes damnées*, *Lesbos*, and *Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte*, the latter two among the six *pièces condamnées* that Baudelaire was ordered to

remove following the obscenity trial that rendered *Les Fleurs du Mal* one of the most infamous literary works of the nineteenth century. In *Lesbos*, Baudelaire imagines a strange and self-contained female world, distant from moral judgment, where the “victims” of an *excès des baisers* are simultaneously priestesses, fervently devoted to the sacred pursuit of *voluptés grecques*. Sappho’s body dissolves into the hidden landscapes of her island; she reigns as both queen and sacrificial offering among these “vestals,” perishing on the day of her unnamed but unmistakably corporeal and sexually suggestive “blasphemy” (Reynolds 2000, 236).

The transgressive poetics of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal* serve as a crucial precursor to Swinburne’s own exploration of forbidden desire, particularly in his reimagining of Sapphic themes in several of his poems. Both Baudelaire and Swinburne, in different ways, positioned themselves as poetic heirs to Sappho. Baudelaire cast himself as the inheritor-poet, scanning the sea “with his piercing eye” in search of Sappho’s fragmented body, one that his own verse would symbolically recover and restore. Swinburne, most explicitly in his poem *On the Cliffs*, invoked Sappho as both muse and “sister,” aligning himself with her through a shared language of intensity and excess. For Swinburne, Sappho becomes a figure of punishment as much as inspiration. In *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Yopie Prins offers a playful and incisive reading that connects Swinburne’s fascination with flagellation to his academic devotion to Greek metre and his physical thrill in confronting the sea’s force, whether through metre or waves, rhythm is both bodily and poetic (Prins 1999, 125). In an 1868 letter to George Powell, Swinburne eagerly anticipates a seaside escape “to satiate my craving (ultra Sapphic and plusquam-Sadic) lust after the sea” (Swinburne 1868, 305). As Prins notes: “The juxtaposition of Sappho and de Sade in parentheses suggests to what degree Sapphic imitation is already a sadomasochistic fantasy for Swinburne: to repeat Sappho’s leap into the sea, to yield to its cold and cruel torture, to submerge himself in a Sapphic rhythm” (Prins 1999, 125). For both Baudelaire and Swinburne, Sappho represents a maternal origin, *la mère*, inextricably linked to the sea, *la mer* (Reynolds 2000, 237).

In Swinburne's *Anactoria* (1866), Sappho delineates inexhaustibly the tortures she will both inflict and suffer. In this dramatic monologue, the excruciating torture inflicted by Sappho upon Anactoria also functions as a means of inscribing rhythm onto the body. Though Anactoria remains silent throughout the poem, she is nonetheless drawn into language, her voicelessness shaped and expressed through the cadences of Sapphic verse. Transformed into "dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death," Anactoria becomes a vessel for demonstrating, once more, the visceral force of poetry, how profoundly "things in verse hurt." Addressing Anactoria, Sappho subject her to a verbal violence that turns pain into poetry:

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
Intense device, and superflux of pain;
Vex thee with amorous agonies, and shake
Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
Strain out thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death. (ll. 28-34)

The entire passage is filled with doubled meanings, turning Anactoria into the musical instrument or "device" for Sappho's melody, as Cecil Lang points out: "'intense' means 'keen,' but also has its Latin sense of 'strained or 'stretched,'" much as "'strain,' another pun, suggests 'stretch' or 'make taut' (as on the rack, in torture) and also the musical sense of tightening strings for raising pitch" (Lang 1968, 523-524).

While Anactoria initially endures the violent force of Sappho's words upon her body, she gradually comes to embody the very essence of Sapphic song, her body transformed into its instrument (Prins 1999, 126). Swinburne transforms Sappho's lyricism into a vivid and unsettling meditation on the erotic power of rhythm, the act of lyric becomes, quite literally, the beating of "Sappho the Lesbian" into a lesbian body. In sharp contrast to Michael Field's more playful and allusive engagement with Sappho's name (as explored in Chapter II), Swinburne renders a lesbian reading of Sappho overtly and unapologetically sexual (Prins 1999a, 113).

It is important to highlight how, during the Victorian period, the homoerotic desire that underlies Sapphic verse was at times normalized through a heterosexual lens, and at other times made explicit, yet consistently remained subject to appropriation by a male poetic voice (Arcara 2019, 294). This plurality of Victorian appropriations of Sappho is exemplified in the important volume published in 1885 by Henry Thornton Wharton, which, aimed at a non-specialist readership, for the first time presents all of Sappho's extant lyrics, with the original Greek text followed by translations by scholars and poets dating back to the eighteenth century. The novelty of *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation* lies in its revelation that some of Sappho's poems are explicitly addressed to young women. This groundbreaking work provided readers, especially women who lacked access to classical languages, with the opportunity to engage fully with Sappho's poetry. For the first time, her voice, though mediated through translation, became widely accessible to those unable to read the original Greek. As Wharton (1885, x-xi) triumphantly proclaimed:

My sole desire in these pages is to present "the great poetess" to English readers in a form which they can judge of her excellence for themselves, so far as that is possible for those to whom Aeolic Greek is unfamiliar. ... Now that, through the appreciation of Sappho by modern poets and painters, her name is becoming day by day more familiar, it seems time to show her as we know her to have been, to those who have neither leisure nor power to read her in the tongue in which she wrote.

The collection includes a prose "literal translation" of the "Ode to Aphrodite," as well as a verse rendering of the same poem by John Addington Symonds (Wharton 1885, 57-58), both of which preserve the feminine pronouns of the original, thus, for the first time, granting Victorian women readers access to a recognizably "Sapphic tradition" (Leighton 1992, 210-11). Symonds's engagement with Sappho's fragment has a history on its own. Several years prior to his contribution to Wharton's edition, in fact, he translated the same Sapphic ode in an appendix to the second edition of his popular *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1877). In that earlier version, however, he suppressed the lesbian content by choosing the pronoun "he" for the object of Sappho's desire (Vanita 1996, 72). In the third

edition of Wharton's volume, ten years after the first one, another heterosexual version of the same "Ode to Aphrodite" replaces the previous version, as the curator of the volume anticipates in the Preface without any explanation (Arcara 2019, 294).

The evolution, from the Victorian idealization and distortion of Sappho to the modern reclamation of her legacy, forms a crucial backdrop for understanding how women writers at the turn of the century and beyond engaged with her image. As the figure of Sappho was reinterpreted across cultural and political contexts, late-Victorian women, such as Michael Field and Amy Levy, began to challenge patriarchal models of authorship and sexuality, opening the way for the more complex negotiations of Sapphic inheritance that would emerge in modernist writers like Virginia Woolf. The chapters that follow will explore these transitions, tracing also how Sappho's presence shifted from an object of male appropriation to a symbol of female creative and erotic autonomy. This autonomy underpins the "counterdiscourse" articulated by women classicists who resisted and reimagined the male-dominated traditions of classical scholarship (Prins 1999a, 46-47).

As argued by Jane Marcus, the modern cult of Sappho, embraced by the daughters of educated men, women artists, feminists, and lesbians, was ignited through their encounter with Swinburne's work, "a violent and bloody male fantasy about lesbianism" (Marcus 1987, 88), only to be followed by a conscious rejection of his version in favour of a search for the "real" Sappho (Marcus 1987, 89). As already mentioned, this movement reached its zenith in pre-World War I Paris. Figures such as Natalie Barney, alongside numerous lesbian artists, made pilgrimages to Greece in the hope of recovering their heroine and reviving the vision of Sappho's school. The island of Lesbos fired their imagination and desire for cultural and erotic lineage.

This long trajectory of Sappho's reception ultimately culminates in a radical reimagining of her figure in late 20th-century feminist and lesbian literature. As I will show in Chapter II, Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) offers a strikingly embodied and explicitly political version of Sappho, reclaiming her as

a revolutionary voice in a lesbian utopia beyond the constraints of patriarchal language.

Chapter II

Unbinding the Gaze: Desire, Art, and the Body in Michael Field

To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim. The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things.

Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

1.1 Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, a biographical sketch

Michael Field was the shared pseudonym of two women writers, Katharine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913). Together, they co-authored eight volumes of poetry and twenty-seven verse dramas, as well as nearly two dozen volumes of journals titled *Works and Days*. Describing themselves as “poets and lovers,” Bradley and Cooper were aunt and niece, romantic partners, creative collaborators, and outspoken members of the literary elite. As Emma Donoghue (2014) observes in her biography *We Are Michael Field*, “Generally they are characterized as pathetic literary hangers-on; and the prejudices against women writers (especially collaborators, spinsters, and lesbians) that dogged their career still linger on” (i).

This chapter begins with a biographical overview of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper. It traces the development of their literary career across genres, from verse drama to lyric poetry, and considers how their partnership, both personal and creative, shaped their body of work.

The second section situates Michael Field within the broader cultural and intellectual context of late-Victorian Aestheticism. It explores how their adoption of a shared male pseudonym enabled them to participate in the aesthetic and literary circles of their time, while also challenging prevailing gender norms around authorship, artistic authority, and creative collaboration.

The third part of the chapter turns to Bradley and Cooper’s journals and love correspondence, which have proven central to scholarly understanding of Michael Field as a poetic persona grounded in a lifelong, lesbian-like relationship. I examine how their epistolary and autobiographical writings construct and perform an elevated aesthetic identity, and how the choice of their *nom de plume*, as well as the

critical reception it elicited, intersects with broader questions of gender, sexuality, and authorship in the nineteenth century.

The fourth section offers a close reading of selected lyrics from Field's first poetry collection, *Long Ago* (1889), focusing on Bradley and Cooper's pioneering engagement with ancient Greek culture as a mode of lesbian self-representation. Through intertextual dialogue with Sappho, including the insertion of her original Greek fragments, they construct a hybrid poetic voice that merges ancient and modern languages, mythologies, and identities. I discuss how the figure of Sappho functions as an idealized model for Michael Field's "triple" identity, encompassing Bradley, Cooper, and their unified poetic self.

The final section examines poems from *Sight and Song* (1892), a collection of ekphrastic responses to Renaissance paintings encountered in major European galleries. Particular attention is given to the reinterpretation of the myth of Venus under a lesbian signifier, which challenges heteronormative mythological readings and reclaims female desire and agency. I explore how the collection reframes the act of looking at the female body, arguing that Michael Field's poetic gaze anticipates later feminist critiques of the male gaze. Finally, I propose a new reading of *Sight and Song*'s legacy by tracing its affinities with Monique Wittig's *Le corps lesbien* (1973), revealing unexpected genealogies between late-Victorian and twentieth-century lesbian aesthetics.

Michael Field's first two poetry collections, *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song*, function both as independent works and as parts of a larger thematic and narrative arc in their production. Both volumes share their reinterpretation, and rewriting, of two classical figures: Sappho and Venus. Recurring images, tropes, and narrative threads contribute to the authors' cohesive poetic vision. This chapter also examines how Bradley and Cooper construct a distinct, aesthetically defined poetic persona, while simultaneously engaging with homoerotic themes and narratives. My contribution to the critical discourse on Michael Field's work is informed by feminist and lesbian perspectives, engaging with compelling scholarly arguments that explore the female erotic force in their lyrics. My analysis builds on the work of scholars such as Prins (1999a; 1999b), White (1990; 1996), Ehnenn (2008), Evangelista (2009), and Thain (2010), who have, in recent decades, played a key

role in the rediscovery of “the Fields.” Many of these scholars recognize *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song* as works that, to varying degrees, engage with themes of lesbian eroticism in the context of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics.

Katharine Harris Bradley was born in Birmingham in 1846, from a family of tobacco manufacturers. Like other aesthetes of the period, such as Ruskin, the son of a sherry merchant, and William Morris, whose father was a successful stockbroker, Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper came from the prosperous middle class rather than from the established literary elite, entering the literary world from the margins of the merchant class. Charles Bradley and Emma Harris were Dissenters, also known as Nonconformist, namely Protestants who did not belong to the established Church of England, who considered themselves married by means of public vows in 1834. However, Nonconformist and register-office weddings were legalized only in 1836, so technically their daughter was illegitimate (Donoghue 2014, 6). Charles Bradley died when Katharine was just two years old. Emma Bradley, eleven years older than Katharine, married James Robert Cooper and settled in Kenilworth, where Edith Emma Cooper was born in 1862. The death of Charles Bradley likely prompted his youngest daughter and her mother to move in with the Coopers around the time of Edith’s birth. However, Katharine Bradley’s role within the family soon deepened beyond expectation. When Emma Cooper became permanently incapacitated following the birth of her second daughter, Amy, in 1864, Katharine, aged eighteen, assumed guardianship of her niece Edith.

Both women were financially independent and well educated. Katharine Bradley pursued her literary interests through a summer course at Newnham College, Cambridge, and by attending the Collège de France in Paris in 1868. In 1878, she and Edith Cooper enrolled in courses in classics and philosophy at University College, Bristol. Although Bradley and Cooper often presented themselves in their writing as a unified voice, the two women were in fact quite different in both appearance and temperament. Bradley was sociable and outgoing, projecting vitality and robust health, while Cooper was more reserved, delicate, and frequently unwell, though considered the more conventionally beautiful of the two (Thain 2010, 3).

Katharine Bradley was an enthusiastic disciple of Ruskin and joined his Guild of St. George (Field 1933, 145), whose members called him “Master.” Not only did Bradley avidly read Ruskin’s work, but “she privately fantasised about him, calling him “Jack” with an imaginary intimacy that would have horrified Ruskin had he known” (Bickle 2008, 4n6). Bradley initiated the correspondence with Ruskin in summer 1875, while she was at Newnham College. For a couple of years Bradley and Ruskin wrote to each other on matters such as how to form children’s artistic tastes and the existence of the Devil (Donoghue 2014, 15). However, “Master” and Bradley often quarrelled. Ruskin became particularly affronted in December 1877 when Bradley wrote that she had “lost God and found a Skye Terrier,” and he peremptorily excluded her from the Guild (Field 1933, 155-158). Nevertheless, the correspondence continued until early 1880.

As Evangelista point out, Bradley and Cooper poetic identity comes from the shared experience of studying the classics together (2009, 96). Indeed, as Arran and Isla Leigh at first, they authored a collection of drama verses titled *Bellerophon* (1881), which attracted the attention of John Addington Symonds. The poet and classicist expressed curiosity about the aunt and niece who “must pass their time in a Greek dreamland” (quoted in Evangelista 2009, 98). Even at this early stage, Symonds noted what would later become a recurring critique of Michael Field’s oeuvre, specifically, that their lyrics were stronger than their dramas. While his overall response was generally positive, he highlighted a tendency toward “excess and want of taste,” observing that the poems “dwell too much on the erotic elements of Greek mythology, and treat them in a sentimental emotional spirit which is really alien to the sensuous simplicity of the Greeks. It is as though a new Keats had gone a-riot in the floweriest places of a classical dictionary” (quoted in Evangelista 2009, 98). Although partly complimentary, this comparison to Keats, who was famously untrained in classical scholarship, implicitly casts Bradley and Cooper as self-taught classicists, lacking formal expertise. In a letter addressed directly to Cooper, Symonds adopted a somewhat patronizing tone, offering unsolicited advice on Greek mythology and dramatic form. He included a reading list of “real Greek books,” among them Jowett’s translations of Plato, works by Winckelmann and Hegel, and his own *Studies of the Greek Poets* (Evangelista 2009, 98).

Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper produced an impressive corpus of poetry in both lyrical and dramatic mode – twenty-seven dramas, eight volumes of lyric poetry and a masque. In 1884, they embarked on their 29-year literary career as the poet-dramatist-playwright “Michael Field” with their drama in verse about a maiden’s conversion to Dionysiac worship, *Callirrhoë*, based on Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Michael Field’s preface to the play asserts that “the myth of Dionysus is the glorification of enthusiasm,” paraphrasing Pater’s enthusiastic conception of Dionysiac religion, and suggesting that we read *Callirrhoë* as an initiation rite into the cult of Pater (Prins 1999b, 56). Prins also argues that Field’s maenads “articulated various forms of feminine desire” and enacted “a liberation from religious custom and filial devotion into a deeper eroticism” (1999b, 57).

In the 1880s Michael Field’s name had been a byword for poetry for poetic dramas such as *Fair Rosamund* (1884), *The Father's Tragedy* (1885), *William Rufus* (1885), *Loyalty or Love?* (1885), *Brutus Ultor* (1886), *Canute the Great* (1887), and *The Cup of Water* (1887). Between 1895 and 1903, they produced what Ana Parejo Vadillo (2015) calls the “extraordinary Roman Trilogy” of plays: *The World at Auction* (1898), *The Race of Leaves* (1901) and *Julia Domna* (1903).¹⁹

Then the first two poetry collections, *Long Ago* and *Sight and Song* will see the light in 1889 and 1892 respectively. Another collection of lyrics, *Underneath the Bough*, was published in 1893 and there would be no new poetry published for the next fifteen years until *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908). The collections *Poems of Adoration* (1912) is attributed to Cooper while *Mystic Trees* (1913) to entirely to Bradley. *Whym Chow: Flame of Love* (1914) is the collection of elegiac poems dedicated to Field pet dog Whym Chow. Scholars agree that this later verse production reflects the poets’ conversion to Catholicism dated to 1907 (Thain 2010, Evangelista 2009, Ehnenn 2008 et al.).

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of Michael Field’s Roman Trilogy written after 1895, see Ana Parejo Vadillo’s essay (2015) “‘The hot-house of decadent chronicle’: Michael Field and the dance of modern verse-drama,” which argues that these plays merit attention for their remarkable poetic experimentation, anticipating and shaping key innovations later associated with modernism. Parejo Vadillo contends that, drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, Michael Field engaged with Latin decadence and contemporary German philology as a means of revitalising the dramatic form. The essay further suggests that the Trilogy’s sustained focus on dance anticipates the transformative influence of the Ballets Russes on modern aesthetic thought.

Bradley and Cooper drew upon the rich resources of Hellenism, as their plays, poems, and journal entries were saturated with classical allusions, references to mythology and Hellenic figures. The poets' identification with ancient Greek culture was so extensive that they venerated the Greek gods with Bacchic enthusiasm: it is said that they had altars to Dionysus built in the garden and the study of their home in Surrey (Olverson 2010, 111). Their friend and mentor Robert Browning affectionately called them "my two dear Greek women,"²⁰ alluding both to their deep knowledge of the classics and to their same-sex relationship.

Bradley and Cooper aimed to unify the public through their artistic endeavours; however, Michael Field's audience was limited, consisting primarily of a literary circle of neo-Romantics, admirers of Walter Pater, and proponents of art for art's sake. Their gender and collaborative efforts, coupled with limited print runs, relatively high costs, artistic editions, and outdated literary style, contributed to their lack of popularity. They continued to write until their deaths, which occurred less than a year apart, both due to cancer.

Although I do not analyse Bradley and Cooper's correspondence in detail here, their letters provide valuable biographical context for understanding their literary production. The letters collected by Sharon Bickle in *The Fowl & the Pussycat: Love Letters of Michael Field 1876–1909* (2008), once believed lost, reveal how Bradley and Cooper experimented with identity through playful pet names long before their formal literary collaboration. These fascinating texts also showcase their sharp wit and wordplay, offering glimpses into the poets' engagement with late-Victorian aesthetic culture, their experiences as women navigating public and intellectual spaces, and their gradual movement from a provincial environment into wider literary and artistic circles. As Bickle notes (2008, xiv), their accounts of urban life, travel, and artistic observation enrich our understanding of aestheticism, performance history, and the roles available to educated women in the period. Bradley and Cooper's aesthetic interests and their passion for the beauty of nature, reflected, for instance, in their rich and symbolic use of floral imagery throughout their poetry (which is also layered with sexual

²⁰ Robert Browning's endearing term for Bradley and Cooper is cited in *Works and Days: From the Journals of Michael Field*, eds. T. and D.C Sturge Moore, London, J. Murray, 1933, p. 20, quoted in T.D. Olverson 2010.

references as I will show), as well as fashion and art, became integral to their daily lives. They also became part of a predominantly male homosexual social circle that included aesthetes such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Max Beerbohm, William Rothenstein, John Gray, and André Raffalovich, as well as radical thinkers like Havelock Ellis. They occasionally attended the ethical reform society known as the Fellowship of the New Life, and they were regular theatre goers. They visited established writers, gathered at salons, associated with visual artists, namely Charles Ricketts -who designed most of Field's book covers as *livres d'art*- and Charles Shannon, met and encouraged emerging writers, and corresponded copiously. As scholars remark, Bradley and Cooper were well-known literary figures and extraordinarily productive authors. And yet, like so many prominent Victorian writers, they were virtually unknown to twentieth-century readers until scholarly efforts in the 1990s to recover "lost" women's voices revealed their significant body of work, as well as their remarkable biography (Richardson 2021, 5).

During their travel in Italy, Bradley and Cooper visited the Uffizi Gallery and the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence as they were particularly interested in Botticelli's paintings. Alex Murray's (2019) analysis of Bradley and Cooper's travels across Europe (mainly Italy, France and Germany) characterises them as "profane travellers" due to their intricate and frequently conflicted association with the emerging late-Victorian tourism sector (2019, 167-168). The phrase denotes Bradley and Cooper's intentional endeavour to convert the ordinary, commercial facets of travel into a profoundly personal, Bacchic, and spiritual experience. The phrase originates from Michael Field's prose sketch *The Lady Moon* (1893), which opens with the line, "We were a party of profane travellers," as the narrator observes fellow passengers and initially asserts, "[W]e all thought we had done with religion" (Ms quoted in Murray, 168). However, the rapturous response of a young man to the sight of "the Lady Moon" prompts a reconsideration: "no, we had not yet concluded with religion". In this sense, Michael Field were "profane" travellers as they converted the "mundane late-Victorian experience of travel into Bacchic revelry" (Murray 2019, 168). Moreover, "profane" retains its original connotation

of “before the temple,” denoting entities or individuals that exist outside a sacred realm, hence deemed unholy or impure (Murray, 184).

As mentioned in the Introduction, the late nineteenth century saw a notable increase in tourism. However, Bradley and Cooper exhibited a shared “anti-tourism” apprehension, seeking to differentiate their travels from others’ mundane experiences (Murray 2019, 168). The women’s discomfort with their status as tourists was not unusual in the late nineteenth century. As scholars noted (Buzard 1993; Pemble 1987), tourism and anti-tourism had existed in a mutually dependent relationship since the Romantic period. A hallmark of nineteenth-century literature was the impulse to portray one’s own travel as adventurous and culturally authentic, in contrast to the supposedly superficial and repetitive experiences of the average tourist. As Buzard explains, “Snobbish ‘anti-tourism,’ an element of modern tourism from the start, has offered an important, even exemplary way of regarding one’s own cultural experiences as authentic and unique, setting them against a backdrop of always assumed tourist vulgarity, repetition and ignorance” (Buzard 1993, 5). According to Buzard, Victorian women were often expected to be the most passive of tourists, whose role was simply to “demurely interest themselves in sightseeing while they await deliverance by a husband or father” (1993, 152).

Aligned with other pioneering women aesthetes such as Vernon Lee,²¹ Bradley and Cooper consciously distanced themselves from the commercialized world of organized tourism and challenged the narratives shaped by male art critics. They aimed to cultivate a truly Bacchic mode of travel, one that shifted focus away from museums and galleries toward the landscape and its inhabitants. As Stefano Evangelista has noted (2009, 121), the terms “aesthetic” and “Bacchic” became “almost synonymous” for them.

1.2 Aestheticism, Women Writers and the History of a Name

As Elizabeth Primamore notes, the figure of Michael Field emerged at the intersection of two overlapping discourses of the time: aestheticism and the gay male dandy (Primamore 2007, 137). To understand the phenomenon of Michael

²¹ Vernon Lee in her book *The Sentimental Traveller* (1908) on the modern ways of traveling writes: “trains de luxe, motors, and Cook’s hotels [were of] all modes of life the most sacrilegious to the Genius Loci” (Lee 1908, 4)

Field, we will find the conventional version of aestheticism, considered a predominantly male culture, most helpful. Bradley and Cooper were aesthetes who held onto aesthetic ideas associated with decadence. But they also abhorred sentiments that strayed too far away from the leading sentiment of Aestheticism: the primacy of art. In fact, Michael Field refused to be published in the *Yellow Book*. As Leighton (1992, 217) explains

They requested the return of one of their poems which had been accepted by the *Yellow Book*, in protest to its style. For all their daring in real life, they could be solemnly censorious about art, their commitment to Pater's "clean" aestheticism resulting in high-minded disapproval of the more perverse forms of decadence.

Bradley and Cooper were life-long devotees of Pater's aestheticism. In recent scholarship, this brand of Aestheticism has come to be regarded as gendered male, as well as implicated in the cultural history of gay male discourse. A brief overview of Victorian Studies through a queer lens must begin with the publication of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976), in which the philosopher identifies the nineteenth century as a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern conceptions of sexuality. Foucault situates the late nineteenth century as the period in which homosexuality comes to be defined as a distinct sexual identity, complete with its own representational codes and social networks. It was only in the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of Foucault's intervention, that literary critics began to explore Decadence and Victorian Aestheticism through a queer theoretical framework.

A foundational contribution in this area is Richard Dellamora's *Masculine Desire* (1990), which revealed male homosexual desire as a central component of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic, for instance. Dellamora went so far as to identify a homosexual canon at the heart of Victorian Aestheticism, comprising writers such as Walter Pater, Algernon Swinburne, John Addington Symonds, Alfred Tennyson, and, of course, Wilde. The scholar credits Pater with the formation of a "sexual-aesthetic awareness" in which he "begins to theorize a place for perverse sexual self-awareness in cultural formation and critique" (Dellamora 1990, 18). Building on this foundational work, later studies have examined Victorian literary strategies of homosexual self-representation, particularly the invocation of antiquity, and

Hellenism in particular, as a means of legitimising homoerotic desire by tracing it back to culturally prestigious origins in ancient Greece (see Chapter I).

In this direction, Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994) is especially significant. As anticipated, Dowling identifies in the classical references deployed by Pater, Symonds, and Wilde the formation of a coded language through which homoeroticism could be recognised and circulated among a network of homosexual intellectuals during the repressive climate of the 1880s, particularly following the passage of the Labouchère Amendment in 1885. Only with the publication of Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy* (1991) did scholarly attention begin to shift toward a broader redefinition of gender at the *fin de siècle*, considering both male and female subjectivities. Showalter also uncovers a hidden but potent link between the aesthetic writing of Pater and Wilde and the literature of the New Woman movement, suggesting an underexplored dialogue between male aestheticism and feminist literary culture.

However, it was not until the late 1990s that scholars began to investigate the literary production of Victorian women within Aestheticism through the lens of queer theory. These studies helped illuminate the complex ways in which female-authored texts articulated non-normative desires. Particularly influential in this regard is the work of Kathy Alexis Psomiades, whose *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (1997) was followed by the co-edited volume with Talia Schaffer *Women and British Aestheticism* (2000). These works decisively challenged the male-centred perspective that had long dominated the field, recognising women as active cultural producers within British Aestheticism. In the early 2000s, critical interest began to focus on several marginalised women writers, including Olive Custance (1874-1944), Ouida (1839-1908), A. Mary F. Robinson (1857-1944), and, most notably, Vernon Lee, who was re-evaluated not as a minor figure, but as a Victorian towering essayist, philosopher, art critic, and classicist. Within this broader project of recovering and reintegrating neglected Victorian female intellectuals and classicists into the literary canon, studies on Michael Field have emerged as particularly significant. These works have brought a distinctly lesbian and feminist perspective to *fin-de-siècle* literary studies, offering

new insights into the gendered and sexual dynamics of aesthetic writing at the close of the Victorian era.

In her groundbreaking study of 1997, Kathy Psomiades traces the negotiation that took place within aestheticism, between the aesthetic and the economic through the icon of the beautiful female body. Psomiades argues that “femininity allows for the difficult and vexed relation between the categories of the aesthetic and the economic in bourgeois culture to be represented and covered over by erotic relations” (Psomiades 1997, 3). While Psomiades acknowledges that some *fin-de-siècle* writers, including Michael Field, resisted the commodification of female beauty, she notes that, in contrast to figures such as Swinburne, Bradley and Cooper’s sustained engagement with the intersection of aesthetics and economics has received comparatively little critical attention (201-203). Primamore (2007, 140) argues that with the invention of Michael Field as a dandy persona, Bradley and Cooper play with gender and sexuality in ways like their male counterparts, but with a feminine twist. In the spirit of the dandy, they imitate the gender of the opposite sex through the mask of Michael Field, but to a different end, for the two women poets adopt the “masculine” to give new expression to what was traditionally associated with the “feminine” (Primamore 2007, 140). Bradley and Cooper fashioned a shared identity, body of work, and aesthetic way of life that embodied the androgynous figure of the dandy-writer, one that gradually transformed into the dandy-aesthete-artist by the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, they designed themselves with a dandy costume made of specially tailored hats and extravagant dresses. An image that was necessary to their performance of a highly stylized, pondered, constructed dandiacal self.

Indeed, Aestheticism both empowered and erased women writers. On the one hand, the aesthetes celebrated fashion, decorative art, and interior design, fields traditionally associated with women due to their connection to the domestic sphere, where women were largely confined. This association granted women a certain authority or familiarity with these subjects. On the other hand, lacking access to formal professional training, women’s expertise, rooted primarily in domestic experience, was often dismissed as merely amateurish. (Schaffer and Psomiades 2000, 1). However, women writers and artists contributed to aestheticism at every

stage. For instance, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddall produced poetry associated with Pre-Raphaelism, that may be considered an anticipation of aestheticism; Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915) popularised Pre-Raphaelite beauty in the 1860s with her sensation novels, and best-sellers authors like Ouida disseminated aesthetic taste in innumerable novels (Schaffer and Psomiades 2000, 3). As further evidence of women writers' productivity in the late Victorian period, Holly Laird notes that the editor's copy of the *Athenaeum* of the 1870s, the most reputable of literary journals of the time, disclosed "a significant growth in the number of reviews by women and ... a noticeable increase of reviews by women on a much broader variety of subjects" (Laird, *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880-1920* 2016, 6). As Laird explains, the anonymity of women writers, the masculine coding of literary criticism, and the failure of twentieth-century scholars to investigate women's contributions have all contributed to the neglect of their critical work.

Despite these limitations, late Victorian women writers engaged with a wide range of aesthetic discourses, blending natural landscapes²² with artistic practices, and reflecting the intellectual and cultural values of the bourgeoisie. Their work explored the intersection of cosmopolitan urban life, often adopting the role of the *flâneuse*, and questioned dominant norms by incorporating themes of alternative sexualities. This dynamic engagement not only reshaped the literary landscape but also subtly challenged conventional ideas about gender, art, and society. Experimenting with various genres – fiction, poetry, and non-fiction – British women writers began to argue for a rethinking of sexual norms through indirection rather than explicit argument, as language experimentation included the employment of epigrams or archaisms for the purpose of displacing or camouflaging forbidden topics (Schaffer 2000, 4). In the wake of Victorian precedents like Pater and Swinburne, several prominent women writers defied sexual norms. Michael Field, for instance, engaged in co-authorship and cohabitation – more likely life-long relationship, as it will be shown –, while Vernon Lee had a well-known love affair with Kit Anstruther-Thomson (Ehenn

²² As I will explain, women were not allowed to paint nudes or even study from nude models in art school and they were, therefore, limited to naturalistic subjects.

2008, 60). Others, like Amy Levy, Eleanor Marx, and Clementina Black, participated in friendship circles that challenged conventional expectations. These relationships and collaborations allowed these women to explore and subvert societal norms around sexuality and creativity. As has been noted (Laird 2016, 7), friendship among unmarried women writers was a practical necessity for survival, especially in London. Thus, the process of group collaboration was radically considered: “these women worked with and enjoyed each other. All this not only enriched their writing but gave that much more momentum to the larger socio-cultural movements of this time” (Laird 2016, 7).

In this regard, Michael Field can be fruitfully examined through Francesca Medaglia’s idea of “creolization” in collaborative authorship. Drawing on Édouard Glissant’s theory of cultural creolization,²³ Medaglia (2014, 94) states that “la scrittura a quattro mani creolizz[a] l’autore.”²⁴ The scholar argues that co-writing generates not just a fusion of individual identities (X1 and X2) but an entirely new and autonomous entity, which she designates as X3 (Medaglia 2014, 100-101). Within this framework, Michael Field is clearly not a mere composite of Bradley and Cooper but a distinct poetic voice that integrates their styles, backgrounds, and artistic sensibilities into a hybrid literary subject. This perspective reinforces the idea that Michael Field’s poetic persona embodies a deeply interwoven consciousness and shared literary experiences. The collaborative nature of Bradley and Cooper’s work produces a multiplicity of voices that transcends individual contributions, making it difficult – and irrelevant – to disentangle their distinct identities. Thus, Michael Field exemplifies how collaborative authorship can transcend individual voices, forging a unique and innovative literary presence that challenges traditional notions of authorship.

Michael Field/Bradley and Cooper’s naming and gendering has a complex history and is one of the most slippery and daunting aspects for a scholar who attempts to analyse these authors’ ambiguous, shifting and multiple identities. Early critics such as Lionel Johnson and Mary Sturgeon referred to Michael Field as “she”

²³ See Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995.

²⁴ “Co-writing creolise[s] the author”, my translation.

– a choice which highlighted the identity of Bradley and Cooper behind the public poetic persona. Sometimes, Bradley and Cooper have been referred to as “the Michael Fields,” “the Michaels,” or simply “Field,” however, all these approaches may be problematic in their representation of the authors. Indeed, in the expression “the Michael Fields” the dual nature of the literary persona is emphasised, contrary to Bradley and Cooper’s explicit wishes. The use of the single surname, Field, in turn disrupts the complete identity. As Thain states, Michael Field is “a bipartite name ... two names of two women authors” (Thain 2007, 4-5), with Michael being Bradley, and Field referring to Cooper. Following Thain’s observation, I will use the full name throughout when discussing the authors’ literary production, while I will use “Bradley and Cooper” when referring to biographical matters. While I will avoid using the pronoun “him,” I will use the plural “they,” as it accounts for the composite nature of the name, which includes Katharine Bradley, Edith Cooper, and Michael Field. The spelling of Bradley’s first name has also raised much confusion and variation over the years: since Bradley herself used both Katharine and Katherine, critics have variously used both. I have adopted the former spelling, following Mary Sturgeon, Marion Thain and others.

In their collaborative diary, *Works and Days*, Bradley asserted that publishing under the pseudonym Michael Field would afford them “real criticism, such as man gives man” (Field 1933, 6), however their secret was not maintained for long. Close friend and mentor Robert Browning, although profoundly captivated by Bradley and Cooper both personally and professionally, was the first to publicly disclose their literary deception: under the impression that Bradley and Cooper intended to obscure their collaboration rather than their gender, he outed them as a “she.” By the time the second edition of *Callirrhoe* was published later in 1884, critics were indeed addressing Field with that distinctive female pronoun. Over time, the revelation that two women adopted the pseudonym became widely recognised in literary circles. Bradley and Cooper persisted in writing under the pseudonym Michael Field, frequently self-financing their projects.

The most significant assessment of Michael Field’s work during the lifetime of Bradley and Cooper was written by Lionel Johnson in the introduction to excerpts from their work in his 1893 *The Poets and Poetry of the Century* (quoted

in Mitton 2008). Johnson stated that “It is upon her tragedies that Michael Field can most justly rest a claim to distinction” (Johnson 1893, 395 quoted in Mitton 2008), while the lyrics and sonnets “are apt to be too full of bold phrases and struggling thoughts, which cannot contain themselves within their bounds” (Johnson 1893, 401 quoted in Mitton 2008). Published in 1922, nearly a decade after the death of Bradley and Cooper, Mary Sturgeon’s biography and critical study *Michael Field* offers a more rounded and comprehensive overview of the *corpus* of poems and plays of the poetic duo. Despite facing opposition, Mary Sturgeon was determined to make the effort to dispute the notion of solitary writing through explanations and justifications of Michael Field’s career, as well as by citing numerous poems and passages from their plays where their love union is portrayed (Laird 2003, 196). Sturgeon aimed to challenge the prevailing belief that writing must be done alone, as evidenced by Michael Field’s following lines:

It was deep April, and the morn
 Shakespeare was born;
 The world was on us, pressing sore;
 My love and I took hands and swore,
 Against the world, to be
 Poets and lovers evermore. (quoted in Sturgeon 1922, 79)

Sturgeon quotes these lines also in a chapter on Field in *Studies of Contemporary Poets*, calling them “a precious record, being nothing less than the marriage testament of these two souls” (Laird 2003, 196). However, scholars agree that Sturgeon distanced herself from the romantic and sexual references shared between the two women poets, since, for historical reasons, lesbianism was more recognisable, therefore censorable, in the 1920s than in the 1890s (Mitton 2008, 21); thus, Sturgeon rather stressed the maternal aspects of the ostensibly romantic relationship between aunt and niece, giving fertile ground to scholars who rejected the vision of Bradley and Cooper as a couple, as will be shown.

The treasurable moment in the posthumous life of Michael Field was the publication, in 1933, of a selection of entries from *Work and Days* and some letters by Bradley and Cooper’s literary executor Thomas Sturge Moore. For the first time, readers and critics were given access to the apparently “private” side of the two poets’ creative life. However, after those years of excitement and full

acknowledgement of Michael Field's canonicity and modernity, the life and work of aunt and niece fell into an oblivion from which they wouldn't be rescued until the 1980s and '90s, thanks to the increasing interest in lesbian literary history. There was an attempt by Ursula Bridge in the late 1960s to write a comprehensive critical biography, but it remained unpublished and incomplete on her death in 1971, and it is now kept in the Bodleian Library (Treby 1998, 69, 124).

In 1981 Lillian Faderman offered a brief biographical examination of Michael Field in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, where she classified Bradley and Cooper's collaboration as an example of what she defined "romantic friendship." Faderman, unaware of the existence of the body of love letters, dismissed the matter of Bradley and Cooper's long-life commitment arguing that "if they saw something unorthodox about their relationship, they would have been more reticent in their poems to each other" (Faderman 1981, 210). However, Faderman had the merit of sparking curiosity for these forgotten women's lives and manuscripts, encouraging scholars to analyse Michael Field's oeuvre with fresh eyes. In the 1990s, a new line of inquiry positioned Michael Field as an exponent of transgressive Sapphic verse and framed Bradley and Cooper's companionship as a nineteenth-century model of creative and emotional unity. In this regard, Chris White's seminal article, "Poets and Lovers Evermore: Interpreting Female Love in the Poetry and Journals of Michael Field" (1990), openly criticized Faderman, arguing for "a more radical theory of lesbian desire and lesbian history" (White 1990, 197). White contended that Faderman's reluctance to interpret Bradley and Cooper's relationship as explicitly homosexual, despite the metaphors in Michael Field's poetry, was a betrayal of the lesbian and feminist cause (White 1990, 203-4). White further explored the Sapphic/lesbian aspects of Michael Field's work in two other studies (White 1996a & b), increasingly focussing upon the actual poetic body of texts.

Building upon White's first article, in 1992 Angela Leighton published a chapter on Michael Field in *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, which is the second significant achievement in Michael Field criticism, after Mary Sturgeon's biography. Leighton's work stands out as the most refined piece of biographical and literary analysis up to this point. Leighton's examination of Michael Field's entire poetic oeuvre, in fact, benefits from multiple sources,

including *Works and Days*, which were unavailable to Sturgeon. Leighton posits that the absence of a specific label for female-female relationships during Bradley and Cooper's time enabled them to bypass the prevailing norms of heterosexual affection and the subsequent anxiety experienced by later lesbian writers, adding that "the Victorian imagination was, perhaps, singularly free not to imagine, at least, until Freud named them or the law incriminated them, areas of experience not 'conventionally' immoralised" (Leighton 1992, 225-230). Although Leighton concentrates on presenting Michael Field as lesbian and strongly pagan poets, her critique differs from White's early study in terms of ideological intentions. Leighton's dismissive attitude towards Michael Field's post-conversion religious lyrics has contributed to a notable oversight in Michael Field studies, which has been rectified only during the past two decades. Virginia Blain's essay "Michael Field: The Two-Headed Nightingale," published in 1996, posited the risks of embracing the "myth" of Bradley and Cooper's collaboration as a "literary model of harmony", propagated by early biographers and by Leighton, a model which was instead crucial for Chris White. Blain argued that this belief "obscures the reality of the conflict in the lives of the women, which is hinted at in their poetry and confirmed in their letters" (Blain 1996, 244).

In the latter part of the 1990s, two authors not directly linked to the academia embarked on extensive original research into Michael Field and uncovered empirical evidence that made the direct attribution of lesbian identity to Bradley and Cooper more complicated. The first of these authors was the Irish Canadian novelist and literary historian Emma Donoghue, whose 1998 book *We Are Michael Field*, although written for a general audience and published as part of a non-academic series, is the result of thorough archival research. In fact, Donoghue's study, which is primarily biographical rather than literary, aims to present Michael Field as part of lesbian history. The writer provides new evidence that suggests that Bradley and Cooper were likely lovers, but her book also revealed for the first time that Cooper had a passionate, though unrequited, attachment to Bernhard Berenson for most of her life. Despite this discovery, Donoghue argues that Bradley and Cooper were committed to each other although they never used "the newly available words like "invert" or "lesbian" which described – and marginalised – women who

loved women” (Donoghue 2014, 21). Similarly to Leighton, Donoghue believes that Bradley and Cooper’s historical situation made them part of a “transitional lesbian generation, born too late to have full confidence in the innocence of romantic friendship, but too early to feel much need to either hide their love or assert it shamefacedly as ‘inverts’, like Radclyffe Hall’s generation of the 1920s” (Donoghue 2014, 20). According to Donoghue, this provided Michael Field with the opportunity to portray undisguised female homoeroticism in their poetry, which she refers to as an “unashamed evocation of desire” (Donoghue 2014, 21).

The second non-academic study of Michael Field’s work is the one by gay poet and activist Ivor Treby. In contrast with the feminist tradition and the women’s studies scholars mentioned above, Treby’s *Michael Field Catalogue* (1998) is overtly anti-feminist; however, this exhaustive catalogue of Michael Field’s poems, including unpublished material, is also a thorough, although eccentric, resource for biographical and publishing details about the poetic duo. Treby explicitly declares his dislike for feminist and lesbian interpretations of Michael Field’s writings in his foreword and in his comments throughout the text, in addition to his other edited publications (1999, 2000, 2002, 2006) of Michael Field’s poems and journal extracts. Treby was convinced of the need to refrain from analysing the erotic and sensual components of Field’s work, to the extent of referring to lesbian critics as “those who would anatomise Michael Field on a chilled slab as a uniquely monstrous fish” (Treby 1998, 11).²⁵

The chapter dedicated to Michael Field in Yopie Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* (1999), whose author was the first critic to recover Michael Field by valuing their texts rather than their lesbianism *per se* (Laird 2003, 196), and Marion Thain’s monograph *Michael Field* (2007) provided invaluable keys to read the eroticism of Field’s lyrics and started redefinition of the categories of aestheticism and decadence (Evangelista 2020, 109), which is still ongoing. Although Prins too is reluctant to assume Michael Field as a lesbian identity, she rightly underlines how the poets’ choice to write in the name of Sappho, as in *Long Ago*, surely implies

²⁵ Treby also addressed lesbian feminist scholars with derogatory expressions such as “the sweaty-sheet fantasies of certain modern tribades” (Treby 1998, 65). It is worth to note that “tribade” was a misogynist term dear to Victorian pornographic translations of Latin Classics such as the *Index Expurgatorius of Martial*, see Arcara 2019, 293.

some complications for readers and critics in defying the identities of the writers. Prins is not convinced that Bradley and Cooper could be named as lesbians, however she argues that the designation “lesbian” can be seen as constructed within their writing and asserts that various elements present in *Long Ago* anticipate or encourage a late twentieth-century “lesbian reading” of the poems. These elements include the creation of a female homoerotic *topos*, an implied erotic exchange between the female speaker and the female addressee, as well as a deconstructive repetition and excess that challenge the binary oppositions of male/female and subject/object.

Mary Sturgeon’s explanation of the derivation of the Michael Field pseudonym is straightforward:

[It] was chosen somewhat arbitrarily, ‘Michael’ because they liked the name and its associations, ‘Field’ because it went well with ‘Michael.’ But it is true that they had a great admiration for the work of William Michael Rossetti... and it is true, too, that ‘Field’ had been an old nickname of Edith. Their family indulged freely in pet names, and Edith was teased by a nurse, from her boyish appearance during a fever in Dresden, as the ‘little Heinrich.’ Thenceforth she became Henry for Katharine, and Katharine was Michael to her and to their intimates. (1922, 27)

As Bickle shows, the early letters between Bradley and Cooper do not support all aspects of this reading. Michael Field was not the first identity born from the prolific imagination of Bradley and Cooper. The earliest pet names they used to call each other were “Sim” or “Simiorg” or “All-Wise-Fowl” for Bradley, a name originating from pseudo-Arabic tales of an all-knowing bird, and “the Persian Puss” for Cooper (Bickle 2008, xiii). The name “Michael” can be traced back to 1884, though its early occurrence suggests it was used to encompass both identities of Bradley and Cooper. For instance, Bradley refers to herself as “this limb of Michael” (quoted in Bickle 2008, 125).²⁶ It was not until the mid-1890s that Michael became Bradley’s preferred nickname, as she began consistently signing letters with this name. Over time, she adopted it almost exclusively in the journals.

²⁶ Letter 85, from Katharine Bradley to Edith Cooper, April 1885.

Tracing the usage of “Field” is more difficult: Cooper preferred the nickname “Henry,” although she was also nicknamed “Field” from time to time. Bradley published a volume of poetry titled *The New Minnesinger and Other Poems* in 1875 (when Cooper was 13 years old) under the penname of “Arran Leigh.” In 1881, Bradley and Cooper published a play, *Bellerophon*, under the names “Arran and Isla Leigh”, a signature reminiscent of the eponymous protagonist of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic *Aurora Leigh*. Prins has remarked on the ambiguity of the construction of this pairing – held together with an “and” – and looks at how “it suggests various possible relationships between the two names: a pair of siblings, a parent and child, a married couple” (Prins 1999, 55).

Emma Donoghue explains the change from “Leigh” to “Field” pointing out that the work of Arran and Isla Leigh

got little critical attention. Therefore, like a rock group which keeps changing its name to shake off its reputation, three years later, in 1884, Katherine and Edith chose themselves a brand new pseudonym to mark the fusion of their talents: Michael Field. “Field”, with all its associations of nature and open spaces, is said to come from a childhood nickname of Edith’s, and “Michael” may come from the archangel. In an age when male pronouns were considered generic, and femininity and ambition were widely considered incompatible, adopting a man’s name seemed the best way for a woman writer to get her work noticed and to be taken seriously as a speaker on universal themes (Donoghue 2014, 36).

The choice of “Michael Field” as a pseudonym represented, in Bradley and Cooper’s terms, not only a “shelter” but, as I will show, an “expression” of their co-authorship (Field 1933, 3). As Laird has noted, “in this name, female is transformed into male, plural into singular, but paradoxically also, one author’s name is doubled by the other; two nicknames are yoked in marriage; in this marriage is figured the further yoking of heaven and earth; and a third thing infuses all these various dualities, polymorphously called ‘love’, ‘nature’, ‘God’, ‘song.’” (Laird 2003, 197).

The recognition Bradley and Cooper received from both critics and readers propelled them into the limelight, attracting the attention of the most distinguished male authors of the era. Many, including gay author Marc André Raffalovich, showered them with admiring letters, assuming he was corresponding with a young man. However, it was Robert Browning who would play a pivotal role in boosting

their confidence, while also inadvertently shattering their authorial illusion after being privy to their secret. After initiating some correspondence with him in 1884, Cooper wrote about Michael Field's real identity after dropping teasing hints to him:

My aunt and I work together after the fashion of Beaumont and Fletcher. She is my senior, by but fifteen years. She has lived with me, taught me, encouraged me and joined me to her poetic life. [...] Some of the scenes of our play are like mosaic-work – the mingled, various product of our two brains. [...] I think if our contributions were disentangled and one subtracted from the other, the amount would be almost even. This happy union of two in work and aspiration is sheltered and expressed by 'Michael Field.' Please regard him as the author. (Field [Cooper] 1933, 3)

When Robert Browning broke confidentiality and disclosed not the fact that they were coauthors, but that Field was female, Bradley admonished him in these terms:

Spinoza with his fine grasp of unity says: "If two individuals of exactly the same nature are joined together, they make up a single individual, doubly stronger than each alone," i.e., Edith and I make up a *veritable Michael*. And we humbly fear you are destroying this philosophic truth: it is said the *Athenaeum* was taught by you to use the feminine pronoun. Again, someone named Andre Raffalovich, whose earnest young praise gave me genuine pleasure, now writes in ruffled distress... I am writing to assure him the best authority is my work... We each know that you mean good to us: and we are persuaded you thought that by "our secret" we meant the dual authorship. The revelation of that would indeed be utter ruin to us; but the report of lady authorship will dwarf and enfeeble our work at every turn.... We must be free as dramatists to work out in the open air of nature. (Field [Bradley] 1933, 6)

As their dual authorship became more widely known, Field's reputation suffered further. Nevertheless, they remained committed to the Michael Field identity for most of their career. In their later years, however, the name itself became a hindrance to the success of Field's plays. Rather than adopting a new pseudonym, they chose to publish anonymously, which led to renewed critical appreciation (Laird 2003, 199). Works such as *Queen Marianne*, *The Tragedy of Pardon*, and *Diane* were released without attribution, while *The Accuser*, *Tristan*

de Léonois, and *A Messiah* were published under the designation “by the author of *Borgia*.”

For the Fields, collaboration represented a process of blending, where their distinct minds and personalities intertwined to form a complex, unified creation – a “mosaic” reflecting their intellectual and spiritual harmony. Bradley conveyed a similar idea in May 1886 when responding to Havelock Ellis’s inquiry about the authorship of their poems. She emphasized the inseparability of their work, stating: “As to our work, let no man think he can put asunder what God has joined. ... the work is perfect mosaic: we cross and interlace like a company of dancing summer flies” (quoted in Sturgeon 1922, 47). But I argue that duality and femininity become clear only if the reader knows the authors’ secret. In fact, White stated more directly that “Michael Field is not a disguise. Nor is it a pretence at being a man” (White 1990, 208), stressing the performative nature of the name. The true reason for the name “Michael Field” is to create a textual space where Bradley and Cooper’s voices can “interlace”, and one which will place them outside the boundaries of the patriarchal restriction on the female poetic voice (Mitton 2008, 60). As a genderless separate identity, Michael Field is “their” own person, “their” own voice.

1.3 *Works and Days*, the “Unbiographical” Biography

Most of the scholarship on Michael Field until recent years has focused on their early poetry and the published sections of *Work and Days*,²⁷ their joint journal, while the authors’ dramatic works, later poetry collections, and the extensive unpublished portions of their journal have been less explored. We do not have information from Bradley or Cooper about why they named the diary *Works and Days*; however scholars agree that Michael Field likely borrowed the title from Hesiod’s poem of 700 BC.²⁸

However, the first critical and most comprehensive edition of Michael Field’s journals has been published only in 2024 by Carolyn Dever with the title of *One*

²⁷ The original manuscripts are housed in the British Library – though much of this material has now been digitized by the *Diaries of Michael Field* project. For further information about the status of the digitisation project see <https://michaelfielddiary.dartmouth.edu/about>.

²⁸ Carolyn Dever claims there are interesting links between Hesiod and Field’s works, including some “important elements of formal experimentation” (Dever 2022, 214n8).

Soul We Divided. A Critical Edition of the Diary of Michael Field. Dever's volume includes selections from the two known diaries kept between 1867-68 by a young Bradley on her own, currently held at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and the twenty-nine volumes catalogued at the British Library as "The 'Michael Field' journals (1868-1914)." These diaries, covering almost five decades between 1868 and Cooper's death, offers much to engage both researchers and general readers. Beyond documenting the authors' aesthetic responses to contemporary and historically resonant events, the text of the journal provides a compelling historical account of queer identity formation – which can be traced through Bradley and Cooper's development of aesthetic paganism, conversion to Catholicism late in life, and, ultimately, the pathos of Cooper's death. It also narrates their close, often tempestuous relationships with John Ruskin, Robert Browning, and the American art critic Bernhard Berenson,²⁹ as well as their experiences within the cultural life of *fin-de-siècle* London and Europe. Their encounters with leading literary and artistic figures – including Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Walter Pater – further enrich the chronicle (Thain 2016, 228). As Dever notes (2024, 4), Victorian conceptions of women's sexuality, such as what did or did not constitute incest, or how an intense affective bond between women might be perceived or experienced, do not align neatly with twenty-first-century frameworks. *Works and Days* invites contemporary readers to critically distinguish between their own assumptions about the historical past and the ways in which two late-Victorian women chose to represent themselves and their relationship. Readers will find little in these pages to suggest that Bradley, Cooper, their family, or their social circle regarded the poets' same-sex union as scandalous, transgressive, or morally objectionable. Instead, the diary reveals that the poets recognized and acknowledged other same-sex couples, such as their friends "the Charles" – Ricketts and Shannon – that they felt the public humiliation, criminalization, and eventual death of Oscar Wilde as a source of profound grief; and that they took

²⁹ Although elsewhere spelled differently, in this work I retain Berenson's first name spelling as Bern/hard as reported in Michael Field's diaries, including the digitised versions.

quiet, deeply felt pleasure in their love, their marriage, and their shared domestic life.

By neither overtly declaring nor attempting to obscure the queer dimensions of their experience, Michael Field construct a world in which queerness appears unremarkable, indeed, even normative. This, perhaps, is what makes it so remarkable. In addition, what emerges when reading their diary is the feeling that Bradley and Cooper speak in different voices and, indeed, in different literary modes. Bradley appears to be the more accomplished poet, while Cooper, who was responsible for drafting most of Michael Field's verse dramas, emerges as a remarkable prose stylist. This contrast between poetry and prose underscores a deeper tension within the Michael Field collaboration: Michael Field as prose writer belongs to a different literary tradition than Michael Field as poet. The poetic voice of Michael Field aligns closely with the late-Victorian aesthetic movement, which marked a clear departure from the mid-Victorian association of literature with moral and social progress. For instance, Bradley's early mentor John Ruskin, envisioned art as a vehicle for both ethical instruction and social reform, or Charles Dickens, whose fiction sought to cultivate empathy for the poor and translate that empathy into moral action and the alleviation of suffering.

Michael Field, by contrast, deliberately rejected such a politicized view of art. "Dickens—that nightmare literature of a Humanitarian Age," Cooper scoffed in *Works and Days* in 1909. This disavowal is even more striking given that, in their earlier years, both Bradley and Cooper had engaged with progressive causes common among educated women of the time, including the suffrage and anti-vivisectionist movements. Despite this activist background, and despite their many friendships with socialists of the time, *Works and Days* displays little to no interest in what might be considered quintessential Victorian social concerns: poverty, child abandonment, labour exploitation, or sexual slavery. Bradley and Cooper's poetic persona, Michael Field, thus pointedly distanced themselves from literary models widely embraced by other Victorian women writers, choosing instead to position their work within a more rarefied, aesthetic tradition (Dever, "One Soul We Divided": A Critical Edition of the Diary of Michael Field 2024, 7).

Marion Thain argues that “the diaries enable the construction of the life-narrative into something much more aesthetically satisfying, and which links their own life events with much bigger temporal patterns and paradigms. This is no innocent record of their daily events” (Thain 2000, 32), suggesting that the huge corpus of the joint journals might have been intended for publication since the beginning. As Dever points out, another element that supports a reading of the diaries as a deliberately crafted literary text is the fact that the authors produced *Works and Days* on the cadence of an annual calendar. They framed each volume by marking New Year’s Day and New Year’s Eve. Also, when they travelled, they usually left the cumbersome White Book at home, taking instead tiny notebooks to make notes and drafts of entries to be written fully when they returned. “Judging from the neatness and polish of some entries, it seems probable that Michael Field wrote occasional drafts separately before copying them into the White Book” (Dever 2024, 9).

In fact, Chris White in 1990 was, possibly, the first scholars to point to a more literary approach to Michael Field’s journals:

It would be a mistake to assume that these journals offer anything like a straightforward access to the “truth” about the relationship or Katharine and Edith’s understanding of it, even given all the usual reservations about the mediated status of autobiography. The journals were left with instructions that they might be opened at the end of 1929, and the editors, Thomas and D.C. Sturge Moore, should publish from them as they saw fit. It hardly needs pointing out, therefore, that at some point the journals became directed towards publication. When that was, or whom the journals are addressed to, is never clear. There is, I must assume, no truly “private” record. (197)

Despite incorporating many features typical of the diary form, *Works and Days* ultimately challenges the conventions of the genre. Bradley and Cooper use the structure of the annual calendar as much as Dickens employed serial publication: as a framework for patiently unfolding long, intricate narrative threads. When read as both continuous and episodic, Michael Field’s text takes the shape of a *bildungsroman*, tracing the chronological and psychological development of its protagonists as they navigate adversity and move toward a semblance of stability. At the same time, it functions as a *künstlerroman*, documenting the evolution of

two gifted poets in relation to their artistic practice (Dever, "One Soul We Divided": A Critical Edition of the Diary of Michael Field 2024, 10). It is, of course, also a kind of biography, as Bradley herself once described it. However, I agree that the text is fundamentally novelistic, expansive, multi-plotted, and in many ways aligned with the structure and scope of the Victorian novel. When approached as a unified literary work rather than a fragmented record of daily life, *Works and Days* reveals its longitudinal complexity, an ambitious formal and thematic design through which Bradley and Cooper realized their most significant artistic aims.

1.4 *Long Ago*

As the two poets themselves explain in the Preface of the volume, the inspiration for *Long Ago* came from Henry Wharton's volume of Sappho's fragments published in English in 1885. As anticipated in Chapter I, the importance of Wharton's collection lies in the "revelation" to the British public of the original homoerotic content of Sappho's poems. The Fields arguably initiated a new tradition of women poets who were able to celebrate women who loved women, starting a genealogy which would lead to the overtly lesbian works of H. D. (Hilda Doolittle 1886-1961) and Natalie Clifford Barney (1876-1972), amongst others (Mitton 2008, 65). Michael Field in their Preface claimed: "Devoutly as the fiery-bosomed Greek turned in her anguish to Aphrodite, praying her to accomplish her heart's desires, I have turned to the one woman who has dared to speak unfalteringly of the fearful mastery of love" (Field 1889, iii).

To provide a context for Michael Field's engagement with the figure of Sappho and her importance in their work, it is necessary to refer to the brief overview of the reception of Sappho in British culture as outlined in Chapter I. We have seen how the figure of Sappho and her fragments encompass various translations, interpretations, and readings that date back to antiquity. Indeed, in his *Heroides*, Ovid presents Sappho in the verse epistle *Sappho to Phaon* as a tragic figure consumed by her unrequited love for a younger man, the boatman Phaon, which ultimately drove her to suicide. This depiction, though largely disconnected from Sappho's surviving poetry, became the dominant narrative shaping the predominant representations by artists and writers across the centuries. Among English literary works, Alexander Pope's 1712 translation of Ovid's monologue

played a particularly influential role, serving as a primary reference point for many authors engaging with the Sappho myth (see Chapter I). This was especially significant for women writers, who, lacking a classical education, had limited direct access to the original Greek fragments.

The interpretation of *Long Ago* in relation to lesbianism is complex and open to a variety of assumptions. Michael Field's first poetry collection explores desire and love between women through the relationship between Bradley and Cooper, as a couple, on the one hand, and the relationship between the poetic duet and Sappho, on the other, thus challenging the traditional notions of imitation and creation. Several critics have agreed on the idea that the volume signifies "the entry of Michael Field into lesbian writing" (Prins 1999, 79), and some have assumed that the poets found in Sappho a classical archetype of love between women (Cantillo Lucuara 2018, 186) and "a way of writing about lesbian love at a safe distance" (Donoghue 2014, 37). In addition, for Madden (2008, 80), "Bradley and Cooper find a model of love between women in Sappho"; for Angela Leighton (1992, 210), likewise, *Long Ago* constitutes a poetic effort "to recuperate a long-suppressed knowledge of Sappho as a lover of women and as the poet who dared express that love." In this regard, Cantillo Lucuara (2018, 205) uses the term *bricolage* to describe the composition and reconstruction of Sappho's heritage and "metaxological" aesthetic: according to the scholar, bricolage involves the transformative appropriation of Sappho's fragmented texts and the creation of new meanings and originals, while metaxological aesthetics refers to the process of composition and reconstruction.

Bradley and Cooper were writing in the context of the male dominated area of Victorian Hellenism, in a society where women had been traditionally denied access to formal education until the late nineteenth century. However, thanks to their unusual privilege of possessing independent means, the couple could lead lives entirely dedicated to their work and to each other. While male Victorian intellectuals used Greek language and culture as a reaction to the repression of homosexuality, Bradley and Cooper, who were excluded from the homosocial circles of Oxford-educated men, appropriated Greek language to both react against the patriarchal norms imposed on women and affirm a pioneering discourse of

lesbian desire in British culture. As Yopie Prins (1999a, 77) observes in *Victorian Sappho*, the two authors “enter into a domain often coded as masculine, and, by the end of the nineteenth century, increasingly homosexual.” Male Victorian Hellenists used Greek (and Latin) references to encode an idealised world of homoerotic desire and translated Greek texts to legitimize male homosexuality through the cultural prestige of the classics at the time of institutionalised repression. Isobel Hurst notes that women writers who used classical material were routinely “patronized by male scholars for mistakes in Greek accents or Latin quantities” (Hurst 2006, 12). There are no elements to believe that Bradley and Cooper were less knowledgeable about the classics than their, probably male, reviewer. However, double authorship, along with the rumours of at least one female hand behind the published works, was enough to assure the belittlement driven by prejudices about subjects considered not appropriate for women writers.

Each poem in Field’s volume is conceived as an extension of Sappho’s fragments into lyric form. These fragments, quoted in the original Greek, appear as epigraphs at the beginning of each poem, positioning the Victorian lyrics as variations or continuations of the ancient texts. As Cantillo Lucuara (2018, 187) points out:

as a result of this process of appropriation, *Long Ago* develops its own ontology of art that unsettles and remaps the limits between the English self and the Greek other, the translatable and the sublime ... *Long Ago* establishes itself in a liminal and experimental interspace where the imitative and the creative are intertwined, confused, and reconceptualised within the dynamics of a collaborative and dialogic model of *poiesis*.

As Field report in the Preface to *Long Ago* (1), Wharton himself wrote “I can scarcely conceive anything more audacious.” The volume is indeed audacious in its explicit representation of female sexual passion, but it is also an inventive and ambitious work in which Michael Field attempt to find space for the Greek language within a volume conceived with the aesthetic ambitions of a *livre d’art* (Evangelista 2020).

The multilayered density of meanings of this collection of poems can be detected even from the paratextual elements on the cover of the volume: what the

reader sees first is that the title hangs enigmatically above the roundel of a woman that must have existed in ancient times; under her chin are placed five Greek graphemes that read “ΠΣΑΦΟ” (Psapho). Therefore, on the cover lies the very first textual-visual reference, or as has been pointed out, the paradigm of intertextual theory that connects past and present (Cantillo Lucuara 2018, 189), and that I would say can be read as a *rebus*³⁰: the title of the book, *Long Ago*, must be interpreted as referring to the remote era when Sappho lived. We find the authors’ signature, Michael Field, at the bottom of the cover page. As Blain has noted “the signature ‘Michael Field’” carries a complex range of meanings. As a sign, it has been open to various presumptions and interpretations in the past and constantly opens itself to new areas as readers’ awareness changes. This signature forms a kind of palimpsest, writing over (without obliterating) earlier meanings with later ones, just as the poets themselves recognised that their work would be read with a different meaning by later generations” (Blain 1996, 241). Thus, as Yopie Prins puts it, “How shall we read these poems written by two women writing as a man writing as Sappho? Their volume ... proves to be a complex performance of the Sapphic signature: simultaneously single and double, masculine and feminine, Michael Field’s Sappho is a name that opens itself to multiple readings” (1995, 165). Furthermore, as Chris White points out: “The name contains a compelling contradiction: they (Bradley and Cooper) both deploy the authority of male authorship and yet react against such camouflage” (1990, 208).

At first sight, an abyss separates the three paratextual elements on the cover – the title, the image, and the signature – they hold no straightforward connection and represent entities far away from each other in terms of time, space and language: ancient Greece and Victorian Britain, Greek and English, Sappho and the Fields. In the pages of the volume the Greek script alongside the English verses makes the reader twirl around languages in a textual bilingualism that is also a piece of hybrid text for its visual components. Furthermore, the Greek text was printed in golden ink, probably, as has been noted, to symbolise the golden times of ancient

³⁰ A rebus is a type of puzzle that uses pictures, symbols, or letters to represent words or phrases, often in a clever or cryptic way. The term comes from the Latin phrase “non verbis sed rebus,” meaning not by words but by things. See Collins online dictionary entry <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/rebus>.

Greece (Arcara 2019, 295).³¹ All the images of Sappho in the volume anticipate a recurring theme in the lyrics: the cropped hair and a garland around Sappho's head point the reader to lyric I, which is quoted here in full:

Αὐτὰρ ὁραῖαι στεφανηπλόκευν

They plaited garlands in their time;
They knew the joy of youth's sweet prime,
Quick breath and rapture;
Theirs was the violet-weaving bliss,
And theirs the white, wreathed brow to kiss,
Kiss, and recapture.

They plaited garlands, even these;
They learnt Love's golden mysteries
Of young Apollo;
The lyre unloosed their souls; they lay
Under the trembling leaves at play,
Bright dreams to follow.

They plaited garlands—heavenly twine!
They crowned the cup, they drank the wine
Of youth's deep pleasure.
Now, lingering for the lyreless god—
Oh yet, once in their time, they trod/
A choric measure. (1889, 3)

The plurality of subjects in the lyric is evident: an unspecified pronoun “they” that develops its meaning through the actions it accomplishes. The opening poem establishes the recurring pattern of Bacchic vitalism. The idea of community given by the repetition of “they/theirs” is finalised by the “wine” that underlines the vitalism. The wine is also clearly a symbol of passion that enhances the trope of inebriation associated with “bliss”. Enclosed in the second stanza, and therefore lost among the Sapphic community, “young Apollo” is mentioned, namely the Apollonian singularity. The dynamic of the scene, an ecstatic remembrance of erotic Dionysian rituals, is reinforced by the repetitive kissing “and recapture” that follows the actions of plaiting and weaving.

The first line of the lyric, repeated at the beginning of each stanza, reprises Sappho's Greek fragment taken from Wharton's edition and translates into English

³¹ Evangelista (2020, 20) reports the titles of the poems as printed in red ink.

as “But in their time they plaited garlands.” The three repetitions of the phrase visually lie on the page as the three locks of hair from which the authors weave the verses together. Therefore, as Prins notes, the words are presented on the page garlanded as a poem and this poem anticipates the recurring theme of garlanding of all the poems included in the volume (Prins 1995, 177). The image of the garland is doubled by the repetition of the verb “to plait”. Furthermore, the regularity of the rhyme scheme couplet-single-couplet-single (AA-B-CC-B) in all three stanzas reflect the same idea of the verses as strings to be interlaced.

The violet in the first stanza is a reference to a description of Sappho by the poet Alcaeus who called her “Violet-crowned, pure, sweetly smiling Sappho.” In addition, according to *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* published in London in 1875, the violet symbolizes faithfulness, watchfulness, modesty, rural happiness (no author, 171). The “youth’s deep pleasure” of the last stanza reprises the “youth’s sweet prime” of the first stanza and adds another layer of lesbian sexual references.

The lyrics in *Long Ago* follow this interweaving and intertwining with each other through the images of garlanding, plaiting, crowning referred to the community of women in Sappho’s *θίασος* [thiasos]. Around Sappho gathered cultivated poets such as Erinna of Telos, to whom the short poem VI in *Long Ago* is dedicated:

Πάρθενον ἀδύφωνον
 ERINNA, thou art ever fair,
 Not as the young spring flowers,
 We who have laurel in our hair—
 Eternal youth is ours.
 The roses that Pieria’s dew
 Hath washed can ne’er decline;
 On Orpheus’ tomb at first they grew,
 And there the Sacred Nine,
 ‘Mid quivering moonlight, seek the groves
 Guarding the minstrel’s tomb;
 Each for the poet that she loves
 Plucks an immortal bloom.
 Soon as my girl’s sweet voice she caught,
 Thither Euterpe sped,
 And, singing too, a garland wrought
 To crown Erinna’s head. (1889, 9)

In this lyric the intertextual reference to the Greek fragment from Wharton's collection "A sweet-voiced maiden" is re-evoked in the final verses as "my girl's sweet voice". In this text the presence of flowers is dominant, completed with the theme of the garland just before the end: the verses create an imaginary circular movement, indeed like a garland, that starts with the invocation to Erinna and ends with the crowning of Sappho's pupil herself. As flowers are traditionally symbols of female sexuality, the whole lyric is a devoted representation of lesbian eroticism and a clear example of Bradley and Cooper's own poetic lesbian space. Again, the idea of collectivity – a private circle of women, perhaps in contrast to the Victorian male intellectual circles strictly forbidden to women – is central in the lyric: the poem starts with an indefinite "We" (the maidens? The authors?), followed by "the Sacred Nine" (the Muses). "The roses that Pieria's dew" is another intertextual reference to Sappho who famously addressed the Muses as "the roses of Pieria." The concluding image of Erinna's crown formally consecrates the Greek lyricist to lesbian desire, symbolized by the floral garland.

The recurring poetic image of garlanding translates an idea of sensual bonding between women but, most importantly, conveys the theme of a collectivity of women only. It may even be argued that, in a sense, it anticipates a political awareness of lesbianism and the practice of lesbian separatism – which would only emerge in the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, by reinterpreting Sappho's fragments and poetic image in their own terms as a lesbian space, Bradley and Cooper contributed to the transmission of the association of the colour violet (or lavender) as the symbol of love between women that will become common in the twentieth century.³²

1.5 *Sight and Song*

³² In this regard, the phrase "lavender menace" was coined by the leader of the National Organization for Women (NOW) Betty Friedan at a 1969 meeting, where she described outspoken lesbians as a threat to the feminist movement, claiming their presence diverted attention from the pursuit of economic and social equality for women. Friedan initiated a veritable campaign to purge lesbians from the feminist movement. The Lavender Menace group emerged in 1970 as a direct response to this exclusion; formed by women, many of whom were active in the Gay Liberation Front and the National Organization for Women, who were seeking to confront the marginalization of lesbians within second-wave feminism. See Ardilli 2018, 44; Villa 2024; Prager, "Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered", Jstor Daily, 29th January 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/>

We have seen how in *Long Ago* Michael Field produced a set of paratextual elements within the collection – the opening titles, the epigraph, the fragments of Greek heading each poem – to mark the poems as temporally distant from the nineteenth century, creating a space in which it was possible to insist on a timeless ideal that could operate in opposition to contemporary reality. The Fields employed the Preface to situate the collection in relation to the male-dominated culture of the nineteenth century and to outline the fundamental premise of the collection – that of their self-performance as Sappho.

Likewise, their second collection published in 1892, *Sight and Song*, offers a set of paratextual elements that establish a context marked by distance, in this case the distance between the world of everyday reality and the timeless world of art. While *Long Ago* was situated in the cultural milieu of Victorian Hellenism, *Sight and Song* can be positioned as a quintessential product of late-nineteenth-century aestheticism, even in the poets' choice of publisher and cover design.³³ Indeed, the volume was one of the first books to be printed by the London publisher Mathews and Lane, in good company with other titles by eminent literati of the time such as Oscar Wilde's *Poems*, John Gray's *Silverpoints*, and Arthur Symonds's *Silhouettes* (Ward 2008, 84). However, Hellenism is present also in this collection in the form of rewriting of Greek mythology with its new reading of gods, Venus in particular.

With this collection Michael Field intended "to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves" (Field 1892, v), as stated in the Preface to the volume. It is therefore evident that the synaesthetic complexity of Michael Field's language suggests the multidimensional sensory experience of looking at something and responding to what the image returns to the beholder (Fraser 2014, 83); something that Michael Field attempts to capture initially through the different modes of writing used as the preparatory drafts for *Sight and Song* – their shared diary, their intense correspondence as well as the verses themselves –. As has been noted, the poems that make up *Sight and Song*

³³ In this regard, Mary Sturgeon notes: "we may find, in [Michael Field's] correspondence with Mr Elkin Mathews [the publisher] about *Sight and Song* in 1892, one proof out of many which the poets' career affords of their concern for the physical beauty of their books. They desired their children to be lovely in body as well as in spirit; and great was their care for format, decoration, binding, paper, and type: for colour, texture, quality, arrangement of letterpress, appearance of title-page, design of cover" (Sturgeon 1922, 45-46).

can be considered a form of “resistant readings that critique Victorian ideologies” on sex, gender and aesthetics from what today might be called feminist and queer perspectives (Ehnenn 2004, 110). Thus, as I will attempt to show through some examples from the poems, the Fields, who “swore / Against the world to be / Poets and lovers evermore” (Field 1893, 4-6), can be seen as anticipators of the feminist critique of sexism and heteronormativity (Ehnenn 2004, 110).

The cover of the ornamental limited edition originally bore the inscription:

Written by Mi-
chael Field

typographically enunciating, in the bifurcation of the name, the dual authorship of the collection and the shared vision of the compositions encoded within it (Lysack 2005, 941) The division of the name “Michael” into syllables is also phonetically reminiscent of the expression “my call”, bringing the discourse back to a voluntarily univocal subject, in the singular, who has chosen to be the product of one narrator only. This typographical device of the broken subject returning to itself recalls the strategy of the oblique slash in the “j/e” of *Le corps lesbien* by the 1970s French feminist writer Monique Wittig. In my opinion, Deborah Ardilli’s reading of the oblique slash in Wittig’s text as a “frattura intenzionalmente provocata, come deliberate volontà di non-coincidenza di “i/o” che invece di fissarsi sul registro privativo della mancanza, si apre in un soggetto infinitamente variato e sufficientemente potente da riassorbire, trasfigurare e all’occorrenza, risputare il corpo mitico di una tradizione costituita sulla sua cancellazione,”³⁴ may provide a key to reading not only the name spelled out on the cover but the poetics that runs through the entire volume of *Sight and Song*. Indeed, in this regard, Jill Ehnenn writes that Michael Field’s poems “gesture toward a series of infinite erasures only to critique them.”³⁵

In the following paragraphs, I intend to demonstrate how the ekphrastic poetry of *Sight and Song* challenged the male gaze – well over half a century before

³⁴ “Intentionally provoked fracture, as a deliberate will of non-coincidence of “j/e” that, instead of fixing itself on the privative register of lack, opens up into a subject infinitely varied and powerful enough to reabsorb, transfigure and, if necessary, spit out the mythical body of a tradition constituted on its”, Prefazione, Ardilli 2023, 38, my translation. In the English translation, David Le Vay opted for *I* in italics, see *The Lesbian Body*, Trans. By David Le Vay, 1975.

³⁵ See J. Ehnenn, *On Art Objects and Women’s Words: Ekphrasis in Vernon Lee (1887), Graham R. Tomson (1889), and Michael Field (1892)*, www.branchcollective.org [visited 10/01/2023].

Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* – within a predominantly male-dominated artistic landscape. Analysing *Sight and Song* through the lens of gender studies will underscore Bradley and Cooper's significant contribution to the history of lesbian literature. In this regard, Ehnenn argues that

foreshadowing the kind of political weapon Mulvey calls for, Field's poems invoke agency and power against traditional readings of the paintings; and the poems accomplish this specifically via the creation of speaking-spaces for female characters and artist's models – spaces to be perceived by women readers and spectators. (2008, 77)

As I anticipated, the Preface to *Sight and Song* announces the (apparent) intention of the authors to look at art by evoking that “innocent eye” theorised by John Ruskin in his *Elements of Drawing* (1857).³⁶ In fact, the authors state:

The aim of this little volume is, as far as may be, to translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves; to express not so much what these pictures are to the poet, but rather what poetry they objectively incarnate. Such an attempt demands patient, continuous sight as pure as the gazer can refine it of theory, fancies, or his mere subjective enjoyment. [...] The effort to see things from their own centre, by suppressing the habitual centralisation of the visible in ourselves, is a process by which we eliminate our idiosyncrasies and obtain an impression clearer, less passive, more intimate (1892, v-vi).

Although the ekphrasis of Michael Field's volume might recall that of earlier works such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Sonnets for Pictures*, *Sight and Song* is in fact an original experiment that looks more to Walter Pater's critique of the subjectivity of aesthetic experience and offers a pioneering response to the historical representation of women in art, which has often catered to a male public (Lysack 2008, 21). However, the initial intent very soon leaves room to personal interpretation. Influenced, in fact, by the words of *The Renaissance* in which Pater, states “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me” (Pater 1873, vii), Michael Field end their Preface with:

When such effort has been made, honestly and with persistence, even then the inevitable force of individuality

³⁶ See Gully Anthony 1992

must still have play and a temperament mould the purified impression:

“When your eyes have done their part,
Thought must length it in the heart” (1892, vi)³⁷

As Ana Parejo Vadillo, who has described the lyrics in *Sight and Song* as “transparent translations,” notes in the Preface to the volume, there is a movement of “objective enjoyment ... followed by subjective *jouissance*” by which the authors succeed, on the one hand, to declare impossible the neutrality of the gaze proposed by Ruskin and, on the other, to criticise the subjective aesthetics conceived by Walter Pater that erases the experience of other observers. In this way, continues Parejo Vadillo, Michael Field propose a two-stage aesthetic to allow the autonomy of both the art object and the beholder (Parejo Vadillo 2000, 24). It is precisely in the aesthetic experience that lies the fundamental difference between Pater’s theory and Michael Field’s poetics. Indeed, according to Vadillo, although Field’s admiration for Pater is well known and it is undeniable that they share with him an interest in the figure of the spectator, the poets reject the way in which, according to Pater, the spectator/critic experiences art. Furthermore, for Michael Field, visual art can be “translated” into literature: and it is the notion that art forms can be translated across the media divide that places the authors in a position diametrically opposed to Pater’s. In his *School of Giorgione*, Pater states that “it is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting – all the various products of art – as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities” (Pater 1873, 130). However, despite Pater’s view, *Sight and Song* can be clearly placed among those ekphrastic works that draw inspiration from the classics (for example, the ekphrastic verses describing Achilles’s shield in Book 18 of *The Iliad*),³⁸ from Renaissance

³⁷ I retained the spacing as in Field’s volume.

³⁸ The term ekphrasis itself originates in classical rhetoric where it referred to graphic description in general. Via Latin from Greek *ἐκφρασις* ‘description’, from *ekphrazein* ‘recount’, from ek- ‘out’ + *phrazein* ‘tell’. OED https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ecphasis_n?tab=factsheet#5970975 visited 10/11/2022.

literature, and nineteenth-century works as well (such as Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*), when the so-called "sister arts" began to dialogue with each other again (Fraser 2014, 84). In his pioneering study *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism from Dryden to Gray* (1987), Jean Hagstrum pays close attention to the interchangeability between poetry and painting as "good art also imitates other art, both in the same and other media" (Hagstrum 1987, xx). What interests him most is how the visual aspects of poetry in the seventeenth century and beyond were achieved drawing from an intense knowledge of the practices of the visual arts. The author uses the term "pictorialism" rather than ekphrasis: "in order to be called 'pictorial' a description or an image must be, in its essentials, capable of translating into painting or some other visual art. It need not resemble a particular painting or even a school of painting. But its leading details and their manner and order of presentation must be imaginable as a painting or sculpture." (Hagstrum 1987, xxi-xxii). In 1995 John Hollander defined two main types of ekphrasis in *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking Silent Works of Art*: the "notional" and the "actual". Notional ekphrases deal with imaginary works of art, and feature in many famous novels of the nineteenth century, whereas actual ekphrasis obviously attempts to recreate actual works:

... actual ecphrastic [sic] poems entail engagements with particular and identifiable works of art, and they are obviously of great interest when the works so addressed are still extant. Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there is a good deal of such poetry, addressing a wide range of good and bad, great and obscure, unglossed or overinterpreted works of art, and taking up a range of stances towards their objects. These include addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it and so forth. (1995, 4)

Considering this wider definition, poetic translators have more freedom of expression as they can give images voice, question their meaning, and even give images movement rather than simply record pictorial details in words. Furthermore, in the seminal study *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993) by James A. W. Heffernan, we read: "Ekphrasis speaks not only about works of art but also to and for them. In so doing, it stages – within the theatre of language itself – a revolution of the image against the word" (1993, 7). Heffernan also caught a fundamental point to be applied to nineteenth-

century poetry and prose which commonly featured a masculine voice controlling and shaping feminine images, namely the struggle within ekphrasis for the power of representation: “a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image” (Heffernan 2004, 1). This gendered struggle, obviously, is complicated by Bradley and Cooper’s dual femininity, which is also compromised by Michael Field’s singularity and “his” masculinity (Mitton 2008, 92). The theories of ekphrasis that I have referred to so far are crucial for grasping the nature of Michael Field’s engagement with the transformation of visual objects into verbal expressions. Clearly, all the poems in *Sight and Song* can be inscribed into the category of actual ekphrasis.

I agree with Fraser’s claims that *Sight and Song* is a work that delves into the realm of lesbian sexuality, using the field of vision as a starting point (Fraser 2014, 84). It offers a unique perspective on lesbian desire, as enacted by two women who write under the guise of a man. The persona of Michael Field is a cultural space that facilitates the creative translation between different art forms and the juxtaposition of subjectivities.³⁹ In the poetry of Michael Field, the act of looking at art is likened to the three-dimensional, stereoscopic gaze that was a popular scientific pursuit in the 1830s. The binocular gaze, which operates almost but not quite from one viewpoint, creates a specular proximity that holds particular significance for the shared visual experience of same-sex lovers. As has been noted, in fact, Michael Field’s poetry in *Sight and Song* adopts a dynamic stereoscopic gaze that intersects with lesbian desire and enables a decentring of the observing subject and the radical destabilisation of the gender binary (Fraser 2014, 84).

The thematic affinities between Pater’s essays on the Renaissance and Field’s poetry collection can also be found in the fact that both works present a kind of “time travel” through European culture. In fact, Pater’s analysis of the Renaissance moves from medieval France to eighteenth-century Germany via sixteenth-century Italy. Similarly, Bradley and Cooper’s ekphrastic poems mostly translate Renaissance paintings (by artists such as Correggio, Leonardo da Vinci,

³⁹ As already mentioned, in a letter to Robert Browning, Bradley and Cooper described their collaborative writing as “like mosaic work – the mingled, various product of our two brains” (Field 1933, 3).

Botticelli, Tintoretto and Giorgione),⁴⁰ and take the poetic duo around Europe through museums and art galleries.

Field's volume comprises thirty-one poems on thirty-one paintings hosted in British collections such as the National Gallery, Hampton Court, the Burlington, and in Continental museums (the Accademia in Florence, the Accademia in Bologna, the Grand Duke's Palace at Weimar, the Dresden Gallery). Significantly, the absence of illustrations in *Sight and Song* was a deliberate artistic choice, reinforcing Michael Field's commitment to rely solely on language in their ekphrastic project. Nevertheless, several of the paintings referenced in the collection were widely known. Indeed, readers may have already been familiar with some of these images from their visits to museums or galleries, which would have shaped their engagement with the accompanying poems. However, Fraser also points out that not all the paintings were widely known and easily accessible. Therefore, the reader would for the most part have been encountering the pictures, perhaps for the first time, via the medium of the poems (Fraser 2014, 84).

To better understand how the power of the glance is used effectively by Field, I quote here, as an example, the poem inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, titled as *La Gioconda* in *Sight and Song*:

Historic, side-long, implicating eyes;
A smile of velvet's lustre on the cheek;
Calm lips the smile leads upward; hand that lies
Glowing and soft, the patience in its rest
Of cruelty that waits and doth not seek
For prey; a dusky forehead and a breast
Where twilight touches ripeness amorously:
Behind her, crystal rocks, a sea and skies
Of evanescent blue on cloud and creek;
Landscape that shines suppressive of its zest
For those vicissitudes by which men die. (1892, 8)

By accentuating the distance between object and subject (which in this case is the "translator"), Field transcribes into verse describes as the impossible combination of space and time which is a characteristic of the ekphrastic poem. The painting, as Thain points out, is a matter of spatial organisation (synchronic),

⁴⁰ Jean Antoine Watteau's (1684-1721) paintings stand as an exception in the volume.

whereas the poem is typically associated with a narrative or linear structure (diachronic); thus “the impossible combination of timelessness and temporality is the paradoxical key to ekphrasis” (Thain 2007, 80). The emphasis of the composition on objects – static – as opposed to the movement of the narrative suggests the disappearance of the authors from the scene. In fact, the first verse begins with the description of the subject of the artwork, with its “historic, side-long, implying eyes”. The word “historic” creates a distance between the object, far back in history, and the translator-poet in the present. By enumerating the Petrarchan series of body parts, the eyes, cheek, lips and hands, Bradley and Cooper reveal the ideological construction of gender and present the viewer with a *femme fatale* in which the *femme* does not exist except as a constellation of formal devices. In this way, Field’s poetry imitates, with a subtle irony, that centuries-old cultural tradition that sees the Mona Lisa as a concentration of male fantasies, rather than as a real woman. As Deborah Ardilli explains in the Preface to the Italian edition of Monique Wittig’s *Le Corps lesbien*: “decomporre il corpo in parcelle infime, s/marcarlo dalla valorizzazione selettiva (labbra, seno, glutei, apparato riproduttivo) che compongono il mito della Donna, equivale a rianimarlo, a restituirgli una”⁴¹ outside the heterosexual symbolism constructed by patriarchal culture. In the second part of the composition, the focus shifts from the description of the forehead and chest to the surrounding landscape of “crystal rocks, a sea and skies / of evanescent blue on cloud and creek” (ll. 8-9). This detailed list of objects lacks both active verbs and predicates; instead, the poem offers verbal phrases and descriptions of objects. For example, the composition does not give an account of the Mona Lisa in the act of smiling, rather the verses render an image of the Mona Lisa with lips that “leads upward” (l. 3). It is precisely these verbal phrases that give us that sense of temporal absence, of stillness in the poetic translation. It follows that the poem sings of events that have already happened independently of the observer who is rendered invisible and inactive to favour the visibility of the protagonist of the painting:

⁴¹ “decomposing the body into inferior parcels, s/marking it off from selective enhancement (labia, breasts, buttocks, reproductive apparatus) that make up the myth of Woman, is tantamount to reanimating it, to restoring a vitality to it”, Prefazione a *Il corpo lesbico*, Ardilli 2023, 50, my translation.

thus, the Mona Lisa is no longer reduced to a ‘disturbing’ mystery – as it was in the male accounts of Pater and Symonds.

In her 1975 famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey elaborates a fundamental critique of the visual representation of women in which she demonstrates how the images shape the cultural unconscious by disempowering women themselves: “The woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which the man can live out his fantasies and obsessions ... imposing them on the silent image of woman... bearer, not creator of meaning” (Mulvey 1991, 433). I share Jill Ehnenn’s political point of view when she affirms that we can apply this methodological perspective to the reading of the lyrics of *Sight and Song*, which in fact anticipate Mulvey’s analysis and denote Bradley and Cooper’s proto-feminist consciousness: the poets realised that questioning the dominant tradition. Dynamics of the male gaze represented an effective political weapon against the patriarchal gaze to which women are subjected. Writing with awareness and irony, on 11th May 1892, about the release of *Sight and Song*, Katharine Bradley noted in her diary: “The Sight is fussy & assertive, & the Song soon fades away... We have written the queerest little book in the world. Our teeth chatter with fear” (quoted in Treby 2006, 127).

In opposition to the traditional interpretation of visual arts, Michael Field constructs speaking spaces for the female characters and the artists’ models, spaces especially conceived to be perceived by an audience of female readers and spectators. Speaking of artists’ models, Linda Nochlin documents how, between the Renaissance and the end of the nineteenth century, the study of the nude was a fundamental part of the art courses for young artists, especially in the production of a work of art that aspired to gain a prominent place in the history of painting – considered the highest of the arts. In that period, consequently, both individual artists and art schools made extensive use of nude models, males and females. However, aspiring female artists were not allowed to study the body from life through nudes, so women were denied the opportunity to create works of art. Most female painters were consequently relegated to painting subjects deemed minor, yet more appropriate for women, such as still life, landscapes, or portraits

(Nochlin 1989, 158). It will therefore come as no surprise to learn that in the nineteenth century, and until 1907 when it was closed for reasons of public order, the Paris morgue, La Morgue, became a fundamental stop not only for writers – including Dickens and Browning⁴² – but for female artists and writers who wanted to study the anatomy of bodies from life. That theatre of anonymous corpses waiting to be identified was also visited by Bradley and Cooper in 1891, just as they arrived in Paris to begin their Continental tour that would later give birth to *Sight and Song*. The significance of the visit to the Morgue is underscored by Edith Cooper's entry in the joint journal, which includes a comprehensive and detailed account of the bodies examined on that day:

... It has been our worship; that temple of death, to us the temple of the living God. Liberte, egalite, fraternite – true there – realised – the gray marred faces within laid brotherlike freed from the mesh of life & equal at last in their destiny – bound all these voyages for God (Cooper 1891 quoted in McLarren Caldwell 2017, 189).

The extent to which the observation of corpses in the Paris morgue influenced Bradley and Cooper's poetic creation is evidenced by the fact that a third of the poems in *Sight and Song* concern biblical stories of martyrs and mythological torture, including: *The Death of Procris*, *St. Jerome in the Desert*, *Apollo and Marsyas*, *The Blood of the Redeemer*; there are also two lyrics dedicated to St. Sebastian pierced by arrows and one on the passion of St. Catherine at the wheel, to name but a few. According to Hollander's theory of notional ekphrasis (description of an imaginary artistic object), in these lyrics Michael Field's ekphrastic strategy becomes a revitalising instrument in the effort to give prominence to the death of mythological characters or ahistorical narratives of martyrs recreated by the artists' mind. Although this may recall the rhetorical figure of the prosopopoeia, in the sense in which Robert Browning uses it, as a description of imaginary objects, we should not forget that Field's lyrics have actual existing paintings as a reference. Moreover, far from the necrophiliac spirit of Decadent poets, the Fields venture into the verbal description of death, knowing that it represents the most challenging part of the ekphrastic project. In representing death

⁴² On English literati visiting Paris' morgue see Vita 2003; Martens 2008; Tredennick 2010.

in scenes of saints, martyrs and the like, the artists place a fixed point in a precise spatiotemporal narrative: this moment of death is a moment of immobility which becomes impossible to translate into the dynamism of a verbal discourse. This represents a philosophical problem of which the Michael Fields are aware (McLarren Caldwell 2017, 195). So why, the scholar continues, do the Fields insist quixotically on the written elaboration of something that at best can only evoke the memory of bodies made fully physically present only in painting? (2017, 192). I believe the answer may be found in the peculiar perception of death and corpses in the nineteenth century, as documented by Vanessa Schwartz (1999, 150). This period, indeed, saw the inclusion of the Morgue in English guidebooks for tourists,⁴³ which may have influenced Field's approach. Renaissance artists used the death of the body as a metaphor for faith and myth (Evangelista 2009),⁴⁴ but the Fields placed the lifeless body in the context of spectacular death, beyond biblical, mythological, or hagiographic narratives. They transformed the eternal into the ephemeral, the normal, and something the public was already familiar with through newspapers, police reports, and wax museums.⁴⁵

Another important presence in *Sight and Song* is that of the figure of Venus which appears in no less than six of the collection's thirty-one compositions, and which constitutes the centre of the ekphrastic experiment of the volume (Parejo Vadillo 2000, 31). This also demonstrates the commitment of the authors to position independent female figures at the centre of their "translations." Three poems are dedicated to Botticelli's paintings observed in the Uffizi and the Galleria dell'Accademia: *The Birth of Venus*, *Spring* and *The Venus in Botticelli's Spring*; the poem *The Sleeping Venus*, instead, translates Giorgione's painting observed at the Dresden Gallery. These poems are accompanied by *Venus and Mars* and *Venus*,

⁴³ See A. Soth, 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/the-paris-morgue-provided-ghoulish-entertainment/> visited 20/11/2022.

⁴⁴ Renaissance artists and writers drew inspiration from classical myths, such as the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, where the power of music and love was tested by death. These narratives often explored the relationship between life and death, and the enduring power of art and memory. Also, the central Christian narrative of Christ's death and resurrection was a dominant theme. His sacrifice on the cross was not just a physical event but a metaphor for humanity's redemption and the promise of eternal life. See Vardal, 2019.

⁴⁵ One of the main attractions of London's Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum, opened in 1835, was the so-called Chamber of Horrors, which reproduced executions from the French Revolution as well as bloody scenes of murder and crime.

Mercury and Cupid. The Italian journey marks an important moment in the lives of Bradley and Cooper, who were eager to see with their own eyes a whole series of works of art recommended to them by their friend Bernhard Berenson. They spent many days at the Uffizi in “patient, continuous” looking at the *Birth of Venus* before making “a special study” of the *Primavera*. Field’s diary functioned “as both travel journal and notebook for the poems” (Thain 2007, 67), since they recorded their initial visual response to the pictures in a series of jottings that were then reworked as the poems in *Sight and Song*. It is important to note that in the early correspondence from Bradley to Cooper, we read that Bradley’s first visit to the art galleries of Italy dated back to the summer of 1880, when she was thirty-four years old (Cooper was eighteen). At the time, Bradley was keen to see the iconic statues of classic Italian art, and in particular the representations of the goddess of love: Venus of Milo, the Capitoline Venus, and the Medici Venus: “I think of writing 3 sonnets one to each Venus” (Bradley, letter to Cooper 21 August 1880, quoted in Bickle 2008, 82), a comment that clearly anticipates of several years the intentions behind *Sight and Song*. Bickle also specifies that although “there is no evidence to suggest that the physical love affair between the two women had begun at this early stage, these letters do indicate that a confidential relationship was already well established”, especially because in the correspondence with her niece, Bradley articulates a direct appreciation of the female body. This appreciation becomes more evident in the letter where Bradley recounts her visit to Lucca Cathedral, where she saw the tomb of Ilaria del Carretto, wife of Paolo Guinigi, Lord of Lucca: “I bear on my lips the marble of Ilaria’s brow! I walked straight to the left transept, and saw her, and by and bye they all left me, and I kissed her on the calm forehead, the tremulously sweet lips, the sweet round chin. And I saw the breast “heaving like a low wave of the sea,” the softly-folded hands; and it seemed as if I were again at Ivythorpe, looking above the Master’s head [Ruskin]. I will tell you all about Pisa in a big letter. You will see the pulpit in Val d’arno” (Bradley, letter to Cooper August 1880, quoted in Bickle 2008, 84). Bradley was also struck with desire for the “real beauty of the waist” and “all the circling beauty of the loins” of the Capitoline Venus (Bradley, letter to Cooper August 1880, quoted in Bickle 2008, 83):

The Venus of the Capitol is a perfect woman. Most happily her garments are beside her, not on her, and the lovely form from throat to foot is unmutated The dimpled back – the real beauty of the waist is only seen in the back – made me long again and again for the attendant Scott or Blythe [her travel companions] to turn the statue for me; and all the circling beauty of the loins kept me in lingering adoration; but for the bosom heave Milo's Venus is to me unrivalled. The face is innocent and fair, not majestic.

Cooper's replies do not show any discomfort the way her aunt recounts the sightseeing; on the contrary, they demonstrate Cooper's eagerness to participate in Bradley's (erotic) fantasies. In these lines from 1880, Evangelista traces the early signs of a Sapphic aestheticism that would later culminate in the composition of *Long Ago* (Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* 2009). This attraction to classical, statuesque bodies also informs the notes and reflections that Bradley and Cooper recorded for *Sight and Song*, where verses infused with Sapphic eroticism reappear, this time inspired by the sinuous curves of Renaissance representations of Venus. What emerges is a lesbian reimagining of the Greek myth of the goddess of love, reframing Venus as a figure of homoerotic desire.

As one can imagine, the figure of Venus in this context is emblematic of the homoerotic pleasure that circumvents the heterosexual norm and, as Olverson (2009b, 774) notes: "[Field's] erotic Hellenism can be seen to be philosophically, physically, and spiritually fulfilling and socially progressive, particularly in terms of gender and sexual politics." In *The Birth of Venus*, for instance, one notices a crescendo of sensual terms from the second half of the first stanza to the homoerotic image of the second stanza in which Flora enters to cover Venus with a light fabric:

Coiling hair in loosened shocks,
Sways a girl who seeks to bind
New-born beauty with a tress
Gold about her nakedness.

And her chilled, wan body sweet
Greets the ruffled cloak of rose,
Daisy-stitched, that Flora throws
Toward her ere she set her feet
On the green verge of the world:
Flora, with the corn-flower dressed,
Round her neck a rose-spray curled

Flowerless, wild-rose at her breast,
To her goddess hastes to bring
The wide chiton of the spring. (1892, 13-14)

The originality of the lyric lies in its shift from the initial sensual portrayal of Venus to the encounter with Flora, reinterpreted through a lesbian lens as an erotic exchange between the two female figures. Rather than focusing solely on Venus, the poem explicitly highlights lesbian desire (Lysack 2005, 951). Flora, the Roman goddess of spring, embodies the floral symbolism often associated with female genitalia. As previously noted, one of the prevailing themes in *Long Ago* is floral symbolism, particularly garlands as representations of lesbianism. The Fields effectively reimagine this floral symbolism in their interpretation of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, powerfully expressing lesbian desire through the figure and gesture of Flora, who rushes to cover Venus. Flora almost appears as if she intends to protect Venus by covering her nakedness, against Zephyrus and Borea "breathing hard"; the pairing of the two male deities simultaneously blowing "one in wonder, one desire" on the shell on which Venus reaches the shore suggests the idea of the dominant male collectivity under which the goddess of love is "born", a symbol of that very heteronormative femininity from which Bradley and Cooper escape. In 1890 Edith Cooper wrote in the joint journal a comment by Katharine Bradley on Botticelli's Venus in which we read: "... she does not even by amorous bend of the head indicate her knowledge of that lusty swelling male force on the left. ... Zephyrus is covetous and blundersome."⁴⁶ Between the two types of desire, male and female, in Field's reinterpretation, the homoerotic female desire prevails, accompanied by floral images and embodied by Flora with her welcoming gesture. The idea of movement given by the encounter with Flora ends at the end of the poem with a sad and motionless Venus showing "Tearful shadow in her eyes" and devoid of love: "by the sea-wind scarcely moved / She is Love that hath not loved" (l. 40). Flora, like the passing of the seasons, has already gone, leaving the other goddess alone and melancholic. Michal Field's interpretation of Botticelli's painting is quite different from that of contemporary authors and critics. For example, Bernhard Berenson in his

⁴⁶ The Diaries of Michael Field <https://michaelfielddiary.dartmouth.edu/page-view/3/8> .

Florentine Painters of the Renaissance writes: “the movement is directly life-communicating. The entire picture presents us with the quintessence of all that is pleasurable to our imagination of touch and of movement. How we revel in the force and rashness of the wind, in the life of the wave” (1901, 71). Similarly, John Addington Symonds also expresses his enthusiastic view of Botticelli’s painting: “it would be impossible for any painter to design a more exquisitely outlined figure than that of his Venus, who, with no covering but her golden hair, is wafted to the shore by the zephyrs” (1888, 253).

Another figure of Venus is at the centre of the lyric inspired by Giorgione’s *The Sleeping Venus*. As Angela Leighton notes, the poem “shows the extent to which ‘art for art’s sake’, with its implication of pleasure for pleasure’s sake, free[s] Michael Field from a female heritage of repressed or displaced eroticism” (Leighton 1992, 215). Indeed, if in the other compositions the gaze of the painted subjects is turned towards the other subjects participating in the scene or actively establishing a dialogue with the viewer, in this case Venus’s gaze is directed at herself, extraordinarily overcoming the economy of the traditional phallogocentric vision (male observer, female object of the gaze) (Parejo Vadillo 2000, 30). Pioneeringly, Michael Field chose the longest poem of the collection to describe an act of female autoeroticism, but far from using a voyeuristic perspective, the potential female audience can instead read in this Venus figure a desired subject that they desire in turn. Thus, Michael Field’s experiment leads to a double triangulation between the two authors who observe the painting and the reader, and then again between the reader, the painting and the poem, and so on in multiple combinations (Fraser 2006, 556). The *mise en scène* of the pictorial reference is given by the lines “the verdant swell / Of a soft country flanked with mountain domes” (l. 98). The subject is described in simple words as if it were a natural landscape: in fact, in this regard, the poets noted in their diaries the words “as simple as our fields”. The experiment with the gaze is taken to extremes if we think that both the reader and the beholder enter into the process of meaning-making. “No one watches her”, the poets write in their journal, but of course the poets do watch her, and our gaze is mediated by theirs. Moreover, metaphorically, the sight too is linked to sexuality, in fact Venus’s closed eyelids are compared to

“full buds that stay / Through the tranquil, summer hours, / Closed although they might be flowers” (l. 102) as sensually allusive as the red lips that “shut in / Gracious secrets” that are part of the “oval space” of the face leaning against the cloak described as “ruddy pomegranate”.

Michael Field, as a duo of lesbian poet-viewers embodying the perspective of a single male author, presents a radically different model for engaging with the bodies depicted in art (Fraser 2006, 556). The gaze of lesbian desire appropriates the figure of Venus through the fiction of the male pen, almost parodying the phallogocentric male observer/female observed power dynamics, and making Venus the goddess of love between women. Lesbian sexuality, therefore, bursts into the field of vision, emerging from the invisibility of the male gaze in which it was reclude. A very clear example of how Michael Field places at the centre of the composition the self-determination of Venus through autoeroticism is found in the central passage, which leaves little room for misinterpretation:

Her hand the thigh's tense surface leaves,
Falling inward. Not even sleep
Dare invalidate the deep,
Universal pleasure sex
Must unto itself annex –
Even the stillest sleep; at peace,
More profound with rest's increase,
She enjoys the good
Of delicious womanhood (102, ll. 62-70)

As Ehnenn (2008, 50). notes, these verses show perhaps the only positive example of a description of female masturbation in the Victorian era. Michael Field accomplishes this without enumerating body parts or, despite the sensual details in other stanzas, resorting to obscene imagery. However, some scholars, such as Mitton, have criticized the poem for its perceived excessive length, complex versification, and unconventional spelling, which includes terms that may have been unusual even for its time. These factors have led to debates regarding the composition's overall effectiveness (Mitton 2008, 109-110). I disagree with this position, firstly because it is, indeed, the length of the poem and the irregularity of the metrics and rhythm, almost hiccupping due to the variety of accents and cadences, to effectively render the rewriting, in the terms of an autoerotic act, of Giorgione's painting and the imaginary sexual

gratification. Secondly, because, as Schaffer noted, aestheticism's "elaborate language allowed [women] to write the pretty visual descriptions that critics liked, yet it was also avant-garde enough to permit a new range of daring topics" (Schaffer 2000, 5); furthermore, they "situated a woman's desires in the unreal space of 'dream' or 'fantasy,' thereby preventing the reader from criticizing the character according to everyday nineteenth-century sexual norms" (Schaffer 2000, 51). Field's poem is not a pornographic and hasty description for the consumption of a male audience; rather, it is the autoerotic manifesto of two – possibly – lesbian women rewriting art history outside the heterosexual dogma of the male-dominated literary canon. Moreover, although Venus is always the object/subject of the gaze, she never becomes an exchange commodity. Indeed, when Bradley and Cooper note in their diary that no one looks at her, they specifically mean that no man looks at her, since they, as authors-lovers-spectators (and therefore potentially also other women, other lesbians), are nonetheless present in the poem without intrusiveness: "while we gaze it seems as though / She had lain thus... [since] the ages far ago" (ll. 114-116). The poem goes on to promise that Venus, both as a real woman and as a symbol of homoeroticism and autoeroticism, will continue to rest "In communion with the sweet / Life that ripens at her feet" (ll. 119-120).

1.6 Affinities with Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*

Deborah Ardilli states that Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) is "una sollecitazione radicale alle nostre facoltà percettive, mobilita l'udito – se scegliamo la lettura a voce alta – ma anche la vista perché è costruito sulla base di una strutturazione tipografica rigorosa in cui ogni segno, ogni spazio bianco ha un significato preciso."⁴⁷ Drawing on the scholar's synesthetic interpretation of Wittig's experimental text, I have observed certain affinities with Field's *Sight and Song*. The research question that drove me to compare the two texts is whether Field's ekphrastic collection can be considered part of the extensive range of hypotexts that appear throughout Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*.

⁴⁷ "a radical strain on our perceptive faculties, it mobilises our hearing – if we choose to read aloud – but also our sight because it is constructed on the basis of a rigorous typographic structuring in which every sign, every white space has a precise meaning." D. Ardilli, oral communication at *Some Prefer Cake Lesbian Film Festival*, Bologna, 2023, my translation.

In this paragraph, I propose that Michael Field's *Sight and Song* might be considered a hypotext for Monique Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*. Despite being separated by nearly a century, these works share significant thematic and stylistic affinities that suggest an intertextual relationship. In fact, *Sight and Song* employs ekphrastic poetry to articulate a lesbian gaze, transforming visual art into a medium through which the poets explore the complexities of desire and subjectivity. Similarly, *Le Corps lesbien* disrupts conventional narrative forms to depict the female body as both a site of eroticism and a locus of political resistance. By framing *Sight and Song* as a hypotext, I argue that Wittig's radical reimagining of the lesbian body, language, and subjectivity in *Le Corps lesbien* can be seen as a transformative extension of Field's exploration of female homoerotic desire. This hypothesis opens a new avenue for understanding the continuity of queer feminist thought across distinct literary and historical contexts. Moreover, my hypothesis emphasizes the extent of Michael Field's legacy into the twentieth century, despite the poets' disappearance from anthologies until the nineties.

The strategy of split subjectivity – visually encoded in the division of “Michael Field” into two syllables on the cover of *Sight and Song* – finds a conceptual parallel in Monique Wittig's fragmented pronoun “j/e” in *Le Corps lesbien*. Both works disrupt conventional notions of singular authorship and identity, using linguistic fracture to challenge gendered subjectivity.

In *Sight and Song*, Bradley and Cooper's deliberate separation of their pseudonym underscores their dual yet unified artistic voice, queering traditional authorship by resisting a singular, gendered identity. Similarly, Wittig's “j/e” (e.g., “j/e me défais, j/e m'invente”) embodies both rupture and reinvention. As Shaktini notes, this radical syntax “annihilates the heterosexual contract” (Shaktini 1990, 294), destabilizing linguistic norms to construct an identity that is both singular and plural, autonomous and relational.

Both texts use fragmentation to resist patriarchal constraints and articulate fluid, non-binary subjectivities. Michael Field's pseudonym becomes a site of multiplicity, blurring distinctions between self and other, while Wittig's syntax dismantles oppressive structures, opening space for a queer reimagining of

selfhood. Through these strategies, *Sight and Song* and *Le Corps lesbien* not only challenge fixed identities but also propose alternative modes of being that privilege multiplicity over singularity.

Michael Field's poem inspired by Jean-Antoine Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, the final work in their 1892 collection *Sight and Song*, offers a fascinating aesthetic and thematic connection with Monique Wittig's fragment 11 in *Le Corps lesbien*. Namascar Shaktini, in her essay *A Revolutionary Signifier: The Lesbian Body* (1990), argues that Wittig drew inspiration from Watteau's painting, but it is plausible to suggest that Wittig's engagement extended to Field's poetic "translation" of the painting. Using Gérard Genette's concept of the hypotext it is worth exploring the potential for Field's poem to have served as a hypotext for Wittig's radical lesbian feminist reinterpretation.

Field's poem animates Watteau's *fête galante* by crafting imagined dialogues between the figures in the painting, foregrounding themes of seduction, coercion, and resistance. The young gentlemen in the scene attempt to persuade the women to join them on the journey to Venus's Island. When words fail, one man exclaims: "it is a god's command / and I by rape will bring thee to thy bliss" (ll.111-112). This striking moment disrupts the serene and idyllic surface of Watteau's painting, exposing an underlying tension between the social pressures of compulsory heterosexuality and the more authentic connections between women. The recurring motif of heterosexual Eros as disruptive, threatening the purer, yet no less erotic, bonds between women, further highlights Field's critique of heterosexuality. The position of *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* as the collection's closing poem enhances its resonance, leaving readers with a contemplative meditation on the painting's encoded gendered dynamics and the subversive potential of lesbian relationships.

Wittig's fragment 11 in *Le Corps lesbien* also reimagines Watteau's Cythera, but through a radical lens of lesbian liberation. Wittig's invocation of embarkation "le flot montant débouche dans le ciel adieu continent noir de misère et de peine adieu villes anciennes nous nous embarquons pour les îles brillantes et radieuses pour le vertes Cythères pour les Lesbos noires et dorées" (Wittig 1973, 84) – transforms Cythera into a utopian space where patriarchal oppression is left

behind. Her explicit naming of Lesbos as a site of radiant possibility reclaims this mythological and cultural symbol for lesbian identity. Wittig's imagery not only parallels Watteau's composition but also builds on Field's interpretation, deepening the feminist critique of heterosexual norms and foregrounding lesbian love as an act of resistance.

The bodily imagery in Wittig's text, such as "tes lèvres qui me broient les hanches, tes dents dans ma chair" (Wittig 1973, 85), celebrates the visceral intimacy of lesbian relationships. This contrasts starkly with the coercive physicality depicted in Field's heterosexual male figures. However, both texts reject the heterosexual frameworks encoded in Watteau's painting. Field and Wittig centre women's relationships and desires, lesbianizing the scene to offer alternative visions of love and power.

The chronological gap between these texts, along with Wittig's known engagement with literary and cultural traditions invites, in my opinion, the hypothesis that Field's *SS* could have served as a hypotext for *Le Corps lesbien*. While Shaktini's work highlights Wittig's engagement with Watteau, my analysis advances the intertextual relationship between these works, positing that Wittig's text not only engages with Watteau's painting but also builds upon Field's earlier subversive interpretation of *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*. Both texts reimagine Cythera as a contested space, transforming it from a site of heterosexual romance into a tableau of lesbian feminist resistance.

By employing Genette's framework, this analysis underscores the transformative power of intertextuality in bridging Victorian and radical feminist discourses. Both Field and Wittig invite readers to reconsider the cultural and artistic assumptions encoded in Watteau's painting, offering a shared vision of liberation through art and literature. In doing so, they articulate a subversive aesthetic that challenges patriarchal narratives and celebrates the possibilities of lesbian desire.

Michael Field's pioneering reinterpretation of the scene in the painting is ascribable to the escape from compulsory heterosexuality, hence of rejection of the heterosexual norm, since the young gentlemen who try to seduce the women to leave for the island of Venus in Field's poem are unsuccessful and resort to the use

of force: “it is a god’s command/ and I by rape will bring thee to thy bliss” (ll.111-112); “Give me more vows; oh bind thee to me fast” (l.114). The poem invites the reader/viewer to focus on the female figures of the three couples to the right of the painting scene. One wonders “What terror holds these noble damsels back?”; hearts full of “strange distaste” (l. 38), “they sigh estranged” (l.40) and “defer their fate” (l.44). Field establish that the woman in the barley-coloured robe is aware of “what she wins and what she loses” (l.55), clarifying in the text what is at stake: a key homoerotic moment where the woman looks at the other woman to her right “she doth bend her/Arched, amorous eyelids to commend her” (l.63). Codified within this poem as well as in others in the collection, there is a disruptive heterosexual Eros who threatens the purer, but no less erotic, love that flourish between women.

Le Corps lesbien is an experiment in the poetics of desire that plays with the forms of narrative and language, fragmenting the text and fragmenting the body, yet constructs both a text and a body – in the sense of a literary *corpus* – in their entirety and complexity. In this sense, the invocation of the blazon is particularly significant – a poetic genre that at first glance seems to praise the object of the gaze, in its detailed enumeration of body parts. And yet, the blazon is inscribed in that literary tradition in which women’s bodies are described only as objects desired by men and deprived of subjectivity and thus reduced to silence. Wittig proudly blazons the lesbian body while moving democratically between the lesbian protagonists of the text; Wittig’s blazons, moreover, are not mere enumerations of attributes, but are living parts of the lovers’ bodies. The two lovers metaphorically tear each other apart, but lesbianism takes the authorial reins by embodying itself simultaneously as object and subject of desire. In this way, the apparent evocation of the medieval blazon positions Wittig’s text in the history of lesbian literature.

As I have already shown, the use of the blazon is also present in Michael Field’s *Sight and Song*, in the poem inspired by Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, where the poets meticulously catalogue her features, breaking down the enigmatic expression of the female figure into distinct elements that evoke desire, mystery, and aesthetic contemplation. This detailed enumeration aligns with the blazon’s traditional function of fragmenting the female body into a series of idealized parts,

yet Michael Field's approach subverts the conventional male gaze dynamics by reclaiming the act of looking through a female poetic voice.

Bradley and Cooper's "Greek love," as male homosexual literati used to code it, was embodied in Sappho's verses celebrating female eroticism between women. However, at the time of its publication, *Long Ago* was praised by contemporary eminent intellectuals who believed that its author was a young male poet named Michael Field. The critical fortune of the volume changed when the authors' identity was revealed. It became apparent that Michael Field, initially hailed by the critics as a new literary talent, would find a wholly different response once it became known that 'he' was not a male, single author, but a double, female one. Only Robert Browning, who was Michael Field's friend and mentor, encouraged them in a letter to "wait fifty years" for fame to come. His prediction, although a little later than he imagined, has finally come true in the twenty-first century: today we can appreciate Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper as fine lesbian poets and pioneers in the cultural history of lesbianism.

Yet their engagement with classical antiquity and Mediterranean culture extends beyond *Long Ago* and profoundly shapes their poetic project in *Sight and Song*. Their devotion to classical and Renaissance art provided them with an aesthetic and ideological framework through which they could articulate their queer desires and challenge the dominant narratives of their time. By immersing themselves in the masterpieces of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, they sought a lineage of beauty and eroticism that transcended Victorian norms. *Sight and Song* represents a radical experiment in ekphrastic poetry, one that not only seeks to capture the essence of visual art but also reclaims the female gaze, destabilizing traditional patriarchal readings of the female form.

Through their engagement with classical mythology, sculpture, and Renaissance painting, Bradley and Cooper cultivated an identity that was both self-consciously aesthetic and defiantly queer. Their poetic voice, filtered through Sapphic longing and classical refinement, allowed them to craft a unique artistic persona – one that was neither wholly male nor female, neither singular nor divided, but fluid, hybrid, and transgressive. Their legacy, once obscured by the prejudices of their time, now stands as a testament to the power of literature to challenge and

reshape cultural history. Today, Michael Field's work is rightfully recognized not only as an important contribution to *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism but also as a foundational text in the history of lesbian literary expression.

Chapter III

Amy Levy's (Anti-)Heroines Xanthippe and Medea

... a real literary gem: a story, one page long! sent to me by a girl whom I have never seen, but who has *a touch of genius* in her work.

Oscar Wilde, letter to Helena Sickert, October 1887.⁴⁸

1.1 The first Jewish woman in college education

A Cambridge-educated scholar, Amy Levy (1861–1889) gained a solid foundation in Greek and Latin during her studies at Newnham College, which she skilfully wove into her literary works. Her poetry often shows an affinity with classical motifs, referencing Greek mythology and philosophy to explore love, loss, and identity. For instance, as we will see in this chapter, in poems such as *Xanthippe*, Levy adopts the voice of Socrates' wife to critique gender norms and the limitations placed on women's intellectual aspirations. Her nuanced portrayal of classical figures and her ability to reimagine their stories through feminist lenses demonstrate her prowess as a classicist and her commitment to challenging the patriarchal traditions embedded in ancient and contemporary cultures.

Amy Levy was born in Clapham, in London's Lambeth district, the second daughter of Lewis and Isobel Levy (née Levin). Her parents were English Jews who, like most native Jews by the mid-nineteenth century, strongly identified with English culture and values. Scholars report that, like many other middle-class Jewish families, they were not religiously observant at home. Although they held seats at the West London Synagogue of British Jews, Britain's first Reform congregation, they did not attend services regularly (Hetherington and Valman 2010, 3). However, they maintained close social ties within London's Jewish community. As their economic and social status improved, they moved across London, settling in areas increasingly populated by middle-class Jews. For a period, Lewis Levy operated an export business in Brighton, a city with a significant Jewish

⁴⁸ My emphasis. Wilde's reference is to a short story titled "The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum" by Amy Levy, which appeared in the first number of the *Woman's World* when Wilde was the editor. See R. Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 1962, p. 208.

population. At fifteen, Amy Levy was sent to Brighton High School, part of the Girls' Public Day School Company, an institution founded by the feminist reformers Maria Grey and Emily Shirreff that advocated for women's rights (Olverson 2010, 112). Here, Levy was formally educated in Latin and completed her Local Highers exams before continuing her education as the first Jewish woman attending Newnham College, where she specialised in modern languages but also received formal tuition in ancient Greek from 1879 to 1881 (Olverson 2010, 112). Although Newnham College was one of the newly opened colleges for women and was renowned for pioneering women's education (Evangelista 2009, 97), Amy Levy felt isolated by the anti-Semitism she encountered in the two years she attended the institution before leaving without taking her final exams (Hurst 2006, 80). As a young girl, Levy recorded the names of her favourite poets in her *Confessions Book*, which included several accomplished Hellenists, such as Swinburne, Robert Browning, Goethe, and Shelley (Hunt Beckman 2000, 16). However, Levy's literary admiration extended beyond male writers. At just thirteen, she reviewed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* for the children's journal *Kind Words*, addressing the inequality in women's education. Levy criticised Barrett Browning for "a very common fault" – "that of introducing too many learned allusions" in her work – but acknowledged that "it is perhaps more excusable in a woman than a man," as "it is only natural that she should wish to display what public opinion denies her sex – a classical education" (quoted in Olverson 2010, 112).⁴⁹ Notably, at such a young age, Levy recognised Barrett Browning's classical references as a sophisticated act of feminist defiance.

By the time of her death, Levy had authored three novels, three poetry collections, and numerous translations of German and Hebrew poetry. Her work also included social satire, literary criticism, and many short stories. She published her first poem, "The Ballad of Ida Grey," when she was only thirteen years old in the feminist journal *The Pelican*. By fifteen, she had begun experimenting with the dramatic monologue, a form she increasingly used to explore the intersections of

⁴⁹ Olverson quotes Levy's unpublished essay, which is held, along with letters and other manuscripts, in the Camellia Collection: Amy Levy Archive, privately owned by Camellia PLC in Kent, England. Camellia PLC no longer permits members of the public to consult Levy's papers. Linda Hunt Beckman was given access to this archive for her biography of Levy.

race, gender, and class. One such piece, “Run to Death,” is narrated by a gypsy woman fleeing with her child from aristocrats in pre-revolutionary France. It was published in *Victoria Magazine* (Hetherington and Valman 2010, 4).

In her final year at Brighton (1879), Levy made her debut in *The Jewish Chronicle* with a lengthy letter, appeared on the 7th of February, titled “Jewish Women and ‘Women’s Rights,’” written in response to a correspondent who had addressed the subject of women’s rights, stating that “marriage has been defined in Parliament as the principal means of livelihood at present open to women” (quoted in Levy 1879, 5). In her reply, Levy writes that “the great ground of complaint among women” are “the obstacles which are placed to hinder ‘from attaining higher culture,’ and ‘sharing in the sterner struggles of life,’ those women, who, from circumstance or temperament, do not marry” (Levy 1879, 5). Also, continues Levy within the same page: “with regard to working-women, “ו”⁵⁰ suggests, for ‘the higher classes’ the ‘imparting of education’ (in plain words, ‘governessing,’ a notoriously ill-paid drudgery, for which only peculiar minds are really fitted), and, ... the medical profession; which latter is barred and blocked to the sex (in this country) by about every means which the ingenuity of man could devise” (Levy 1879, 5). In emphasizing the importance of education and paid professional work for women, not only, as Beckman Hunt argues (2000, 17), Levy “brings together her Jewish and feminist identities,” but she also anticipates, to some extent, key concepts of materialist feminism that Virginia Woolf would articulate decades later in *A Room of One’s Own*.⁵¹ More importantly, Levy mentions “those few cases where women have had equal chances of developing”, such as Caroline Herschel⁵² and Jeanne Pascal⁵³ who “shared in the highest of their brothers’ calculations; Mrs

⁵⁰ A letter in the Hebrew alphabet pronounced either “shin” or “sin”; correspondents of *The Jewish Chronicle* often signed with an initial, either Hebrew or English (Bernstein 2006, 171). Levy signed her letters with her full name without a title (neither “Miss” nor “Mrs”).

⁵¹ See Chapter IV.

⁵² Caroline Herschel (1750-1847), the first woman credited with discovering a comet. She assisted her brother William, astronomer at Cambridge, and in her career she discovered a total of eight comets and three nebulae. Despite being awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1828, her status as an astronomer was not accounted because of her sex (Bernstein 2006a, 172 n1).

⁵³ Bernstein claims that Levy might be referring to a sister of the seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal; however, I did not find any accounts of a Jeanne Pascal among his siblings.

Soverville⁵⁴ ...; Miss Osborn,”⁵⁵ before making a remarkable feminist comment on the material conditions of women which, once again, anticipates Woolf’s arguments: “we have, besides, to consider the *great disadvantages* under which most women labour, and the comparative smallness of the number of those who have, as yet, tried to cast off the yoke remaining from ages when physical power was almost always in the ascendant” (Levy 1879, 5 my emphasis).

In the issue of the *Jewish Chronicle* of the 21st of February 1879, the initial – anonymous – correspondent speculated about Levy’s identity, writing: “She is, I presume, an elderly lady who has seen much of the world, and whose grave experience gives weight to her expressions of opinion on this most important subject.” The writer went on to question women’s intellectual and creative capacities,⁵⁶ asking: “Why did not a woman discover electricity or the manifold uses of steam, and why does she not even improve upon previously existing developments of science? Why has no female composer ever enriched the world with sweet strains? Beyond Mrs. Browning, what great poetess has the sex produced? Lady novelists we have in plenty, but only one has belonged to the first rank, and even she has been largely assisted by her constant association with two of the greatest thinkers of the age, Herbert Spencer and G.H. Lewes” (anon. 1879, quoted in Bernstein 2006a).

In her reply published on the following week’s issue of the magazine, Levy advocates for expanding Jewish women’s horizons beyond their traditional roles as wives and mothers in the domestic sphere: “[...] there has sprung up a large class of intelligent, capable women who are willing and able to perform work from which they find themselves shut out by the tradition of ages – women [...] whose aims lie outside the circle which convention has marked out for them” (Levy 1879, 5). Levy also underlines that society is changing by “beginning to acknowledge the justice

⁵⁴ Mary Fairfax Somerville (1780-1872), a prolific science writer of the nineteenth century. Apparently, the first known published use of the word “scientist” was in a review of her 1834 book *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* (Bernstein 2006a, 171 n3).

⁵⁵ Emily Mary Osborn (1828-1925), Pre-Raphaelite painter, exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Grosvenor Gallery.

⁵⁶ There is an interesting similarity with Virginia Woolf’s *boutade* on the intellectual status of women with “Haffable Hawk” in the *New Statesman*, see chapter IV.

of [women's] claims" meaning the demands for the rights to access equal formal education, indeed Levy mentions the recent openings of women's colleges.

While at Newnham, Levy regularly contributed poems and translations to *The Cambridge Review*. Her first poetry collection, *Xantippe and Other Verse*, was published in 1881, when she left Cambridge to travel across the European Continent. Upon returning to London, she released a second collection, *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884). The title character's suicide – driven by isolation and exclusion from the literary establishment – reflects the collection's broader concern with marginalised and dispossessed voices. Around this time, it appears that Levy started to establish herself as a professional writer, earning an independent income by publishing short stories in women's and society magazines. Many of these stories satirised middle-class sexual morality and the limited opportunities available to women for meaningful employment and financial independence outside of marriage. The launch of *Woman's World* in 1888, under Oscar Wilde's editorship, provided a progressive platform for women writers, and Levy's work found a receptive audience. Two of her essays appeared in the magazine's first volume: "The Poetry of Christina Rossetti" and "Women and Club Life," the latter celebrating women's clubs as vital spaces where women could meet and work free from domestic obligations (Hunt Beckman 2000, 141). That same year, Levy published her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop*.

As an established literary figure, Levy began engaging with the Jewish publishing market. Her translations of Heinrich Heine and Jehudah Halevi featured in *Jewish Portraits* (1888), a collection edited by Lady Katie Magnus, a Jewish philanthropist who founded the first club for Jewish immigrant girls in London's East End. Levy is also widely believed to have authored anonymous articles on Jewish topics that appeared in the *Jewish Chronicle* between March and November 1886. These articles both commented on and satirised various aspects of contemporary Jewish identity and culture (Hetherington and Valman 2010, 5). For example, in "Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day," Levy applied her feminist perspective to her community and portrayed contemporary Anglo-Jewry as an "overdetermined version of Victorian patriarchy" (Valman 2010, 91), where a preoccupation with wealth and social status led to the moral decline of many

women. Levy's second novel, *Reuben Sachs* (1888), brought her critique of Bayswater Jewry to a broader English readership. Published by Macmillan, it was praised in the mainstream press for its realistic depiction of Jewish life. Her third novel, *Miss Meredith*, was serialised the following year in *The British Weekly*. A light-hearted romance, it follows an English governess working for an aristocratic Italian family. It playfully imitates the familiar literary trope of the genteel governess who ultimately marries into the upper class.

At the time of her death, Levy had just completed the final proofs for her third volume of poetry, *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* (1889), which was found on her desk. This collection, which Ana Parejo Vadillo has called "one of the most inventive and vanguard collections of lyrical poetry of the late nineteenth century" (Parejo Vadillo 2005, 1), marks a departure from the author's signature use of dramatic monologue, embracing instead short, compact lyrics that reflect the fast rhythm of urban life. Dedicated to her closest friend in adulthood, Clementina Black, the volume was published posthumously through Black's efforts (Hetherington and Valman 2010, 6).

Following her submission of "The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum" for the first issue of *Woman's World*, Levy received a letter from Oscar Wilde, who wrote enthusiastically: "I hope you will send me another short story. I think your method as admirable as it is unique."⁵⁷ Wilde also offered a passionate and respectful tribute to Amy Levy, recognizing her literary talent and intellect while also valuing her role as a frequent contributor to his magazine. Wilde penned Levy's obituary in the third issue of *Woman's World*, in November 1889. He included in the volume another of her short stories along with her poems. In the obituary, Wilde also quoted verses from Levy's *Xantippe*, adding:

This poem — surely a most remarkable one to be produced by a girl still at school — is distinguished, as nearly all Miss Levy's work is, by the qualities of sincerity, directness, and melancholy. In expression it is less simple and lucid than some of her later verse, far less so, for instance, than the two short poems which we publish in this issue; but its spirit is the same, and no intelligent critic could fail to see the promise of greater things. (1889, 52)

⁵⁷ Letter to Amy Levy, October 1887 in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1962, 208).

Wilde also described Levy as “a poet of no mean excellence” (Wilde 1889, 52) before proceeding, in the same pages, to offer both an account of and praise for her fiction. Concluding Levy’s obituary, *The Woman’s World’s* editor remarked that “to write thus at six-and-twenty is given to very few” (1889, 52).

Through her work, Levy bridged the classical and modern worlds, positioning herself as a vital voice in the literary dialogue on tradition, reform, and self-expression. This chapter intends to focus on Amy Levy’s choice of female figures from Greek antiquity, Xanthippe and Medea, as examples of the poet’s attempt at entering the male-dominated milieu of late-Victorian Hellenism in a very personal and politicised way: through Xanthippe and Medea Amy Levy poetically expressed issues related to gender and ethnicity. Levy’s reworking of the figure of Xanthippe and of her anger is strictly linked to the author’s own experience as a female intellectual in a male-dominated society. The poem subtitle “A FRAGMENT,”⁵⁸ is particularly significant, both as a reference to the cultural recovery of an imaginary lost text about Xanthippe, and as a hint to Sappho’s fragments.⁵⁹

The final part of this chapter will examine Levy’s rewriting of Medea’s tragic story by focusing on the racial issues connected to the objectification and dehumanisation of the foreign woman by Corinthian citizens – themes explored by Levy in relation to her own multiple marginalisation as an Anglo-Jewish New Woman in late-Victorian Britain. Acutely aware of the need to express herself in Greek, Levy’s Medea manages to overcome one of the key difficulties of assimilation: the ability to speak the language of the dominant culture. However, the author resists Euripides’ representation of Medea as semi-divine, and in her poem the outcast and isolated protagonist, condemned to exile, becomes a female Wandering Jew of the ancient world (Olverson 2010, 130).

1.2 Identity issues

Amy Levy’s engagement with classical literature reveals a profound understanding of antiquity. Some of Levy’s poetry suggests a sexual orientation

⁵⁸ Capital letters in the original text, see A. Levy, *Xanthippe and Other Poems*, 1881.

⁵⁹ In 1882, the same year of *Medea*, Levy translated from German a work by F. Grillparzer titled *Sappho*. See M. Villalba- Lázaro 2018, 2.

that might today be identified as lesbian, positioning her work – alongside that of Michael Field – within a “deviant” economy of desire (Funk 2017, 191), further underscoring her opposition to the heteronormative values of Victorian society (Hughes 2009). The patriarchal influence of the Victorian mindset is noticeable in Enrico Nencioni’s 1890 review of Levy’s *A London Plane-Tree and Other Verse*, where he also comments on the young author’s death:

[Amy Levy] si è uccisa benché la famiglia e l’arte, gli affetti, la fortuna e la fama le sorridessero: si è uccisa, per sottrarsi alla visione del male trionfante ed irreparabile, che ella vedeva e contemplava fissamente, disperatamente, nella società umana, e nella natura (1910, 420).⁶⁰

The Italian critic and translator appears to have misinterpreted the context and implications of Levy’s suicide, failing to fully grasp its underlying complexities and significance, within the broader framework of her life and work as a Sephardic Anglo-Jewish woman in a Christian male-dominated society. Indeed, while praising Levy as “una delle più belle intelligenze contemporanee” [one of the finest contemporary minds], and the poetry in *London Plane-Tree and Other Verse* as “accenti originali, penetranti, che arrivano al cuore come le note passionate di un violino” [original, penetrating notes that reach the heart like the passionate notes of a violin] (Nencioni 1910, 421), the critic asserts his unwarranted assumption:

se invece di tutti quei pessimisti, prosatori e poeti, di cui essa nutriva l’anima amareggiata e l’agitata sua mente, ella avesse amato e ammirato qualche grande poeta religioso, un Wordsworth, un Lamartine, un Manzoni [...] la povera Amy sarebbe anche oggi vivente e felice nello amplesso materno. (1910, 420)⁶¹.

The novelist Grant Allen (1848-1899) exploited Levy’s suicide as an example for his theory of the uneasiness suffered by educated women: “A few hundred pallid little Amy Levys sacrificed on the way are as nothing before the face of our

⁶⁰ “[Amy Levy] killed herself even though family and art, affections, fortune and fame smiled upon her: she killed herself to escape the vision of triumphant and irreparable evil, which she saw and contemplated fixedly, desperately, in human society and in nature.” My translation.

⁶¹ “If instead of all those pessimists, prose writers and poets, whose bitter soul and agitated mind she nourished, she had loved and admired some great religious poet, a Wordsworth, a Lamartine, a Manzoni [...] poor Amy would still be alive and happy today in her mother’s embrace.” My translation.

fashionable Juggernaut. Newnham has slain its thousands and Girton its tens of thousands; the dark places of the earth are full of cruelty” (Allen 1890, 56)

Even as late as the 1960s, Hoxie Neale Fairchild’s groundless diagnosis in *Religious Trends in English Poetry* (1962), arguing that “Amy Levy desired to be loved by a man” (Fairchild 1962, 55), to explain the insecurity and self-doubt often present in Levy’s characters, perpetuated a patriarchal – and homophobic – interpretation of the poet’s complex life and unease. Notably, the title of the chapter in Fairchild’s work, “Slight Deviations,” underscores this biased perspective.⁶² Later in the twentieth century, the sexism and homophobia that dominated critical readings of women’s poetry was successfully challenged by feminist and lesbian critics in the 1980s and 1990s. In Levy’s case, this has highlighted not only her lesbian identity, but also her position within the pessimistic tradition of English poetry (Hetherington, Valman 2010, 11).

As explored in the previous chapters, late-Victorian reimagining of Sappho, especially through Wharton’s 1885 volume of translations and Michael Field’s *Long Ago* (1889), played a formative role in shaping a modern, lyric tradition of women poets. In this context, Susan Bernstein’s (2006, 18) observation that Levy’s poetics were profoundly influenced by this reoriented Sapphic lineage underscores the continuity between Levy’s work and the broader late-Victorian Hellenist revival. In her *Woman’s World* essay on Christina Rossetti (1888), Levy situates her subject in this newly accented Sapphic tradition: “A woman poet of the first rank is among those things which the world has yet to produce. Even the broken, beautiful strains which float up to us from Lesbos, tell of a singer whose lyre had few strings; whose voice, exquisite as it must have been, but few notes” (Levy 1888, 178). For Levy and her contemporaries, Sappho served as a catalyst for new directions in women’s poetry, as this “lyre” of female erotic poetics began to assume more diverse and expressive forms. Within this revitalized Sapphic framework, many of Levy’s lyric poems are addressed to a feminine beloved, such as in “London in July” (1889), where the speaker longs for “My love, she dwells in

⁶² Fairchild openly despises A.E. Housman and Walt Whitman’s homosexuality in the same book chapter.

London town” (l.7). In other poems, the gender of both the lyrical voice and the object of desire remains deliberately ambiguous, inviting interpretations that foreground same-sex longing. Among Levy’s circle of women writers, Vernon Lee and A.Mary F. Robinson were lovers; Levy knew them both, and possibly was herself in love with Lee (Hunt Beckman 2000, 119-122). As Bernstein notes, the language of sexual liberation permeated Levy’s literary London (2006a, 19).

Moreover, Levy’s letters to her sister Katie during her years at Brighton show Levy with developed, romantic attachments to other women (Hunt Beckman 2000, 221). Perhaps the most significant letter, however, is the one in which Levy tells Katie that she envisions they will have very different futures to one another, since Katie express her affection for men. This admission comes after reflecting on time Levy spent with Miss Creak, the teacher she was in love with:

Today that blessed woman mounted guard for 4 hours — so you may imagine my eyes were not bent solely on my paper — She did look sweet — just working mathematics contentedly to Herself. She has flung out minute crumbs of sweetness lately to her wormy adorer, who bagged a divine passion-inspiring — whenever I think-of-it — embrace today at the sanctum door. Frankly I’m more in love with her than ever — isn’t it grim? I don’t believe it will go for ages; and I can never care for anyone or anything else while it lasts. Don’t you like these egotistic outpourings? Of course this is quite confident-like. I make such different future pictures to what I used to-you married maternal, prudent & [illegible] with a tendency to laugh at the plain High School Mistress sister who grinds, lodges with chums and adores ‘without return’ (quoted in Hunt Beckman 2000, 224).

Levy imagines her future outside the traditional, patriarchal family structure by contrasting it with Katie’s vision of a ‘married maternal’ life. This vision comes after a long recount of her feelings for Miss Creak, suggesting that Levy’s hope for a future as an independent, namely unmarried, career-focused woman is shaped not only by goals like autonomy, education, or professional success. Instead, she links the idea of family closely with heterosexuality. Levy shows an awareness that her romantic feelings do not align with heterosexual norms, and she sees this as a reason to imagine a new kind of future with different possibilities. Although she does not openly identify as lesbian in her letters, her writing can be seen as an effort to

explore an alternative to heterosexual life, using the ideas and language available to her in late nineteenth-century London (Lake 2014, 245).

1.3 New perspectives

Although Levy did not begin publishing works on Jewish themes until the last three years of her life, she was first reclaimed by literary scholars as a Jewish writer. However, the recovery of her work has been accompanied by persistent ambivalence regarding the strength of her critique of late-Victorian Anglo-Jewry. Addressing the Jewish Historical Society of England in 1927, Beth-Zion Lask observed how quickly Levy had been forgotten – just a generation after her death – and declared her “our greatest contributor to English literature” (Lask 1927, 179). For Lask, the tension between Levy’s critical portrayal of Anglo-Jewry and the desire to celebrate her within a specifically Jewish literary tradition

it was not a malicious representation She knew the Jewry of her day; she was aware, inherently, subconsciously if you will, of the qualities that had gone to make up the glorious traditions of the Jewish people. She saw the void that stretched between the real and the ideal; and her soul, like those of the Prophets before her, burned in anguished indignation (Lask 1927, 180).

Hetherington and Valman note that with these words Lask initiated the critical tradition of casting Levy as a misunderstood visionary (2010, 6).

Levy’s scholarly and creative writings demonstrate a sharp awareness of contemporary literary and cultural movements, often anticipating feminist and modernist discussions that would emerge only after her death. Critical evaluations of Amy Levy’s work often centre on two primary aspects. First, her role as a vocal critic of the Anglo-Jewish community, a stance most prominently articulated in her novel *Reuben Sachs* (1888) and several prose essays. This critical engagement has, at times, led to controversial interpretations of her work as exhibiting anti-Semitic tendencies.⁶³ Second, Levy is frequently associated with the New Woman movement and regarded as a proto-feminist writer. Her work challenges traditional notions of women’s confinement to the private sphere of domesticity, instead

⁶³ See Linda Hunt Beckman, “Leaving ‘The Tribal Duckpond’: Amy Levy, Jewish Self-Hatred, and Jewish Identity”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol.27, No.1, 1999, pp. 185-201.

placing her female characters within the public realm of economic and social activity. For instance, her first novel, *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), narrates the story of four sisters who establish a photographic business after their father's death and the subsequent loss of financial stability, though the venture ultimately closes, and the sisters marry.

Although Levy's work faded into obscurity shortly after her death, it was rediscovered in the 1980s by scholars who mostly highlighted her identity as a Jewish woman writer. A pivotal contribution to this revival was Edward Wagenknecht's 1983 collection, *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women*. Then, in 1990, Levy was further recontextualized as a New Woman novelist through Deborah Epstein Nord's article "'Neither Pairs nor Odd': Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London." Much of the subsequent scholarship continued to focus on these early analyses of Levy as a minority figure, whether as a woman or as a Jew. As Sarah Minsloff notes in her review of Levy criticism: "minority identity was the reason for Levy's exile into literary obscurity; it was the means by which she was recovered to critical attention, and it has remained the crux of critical work on Levy's writing" (Minsloff 2007, 1318). Melvyn New's 1993 publication of *The Complete Novels and Selected Writings of Amy Levy* brought a significant portion of Levy's work back into print and circulation for the first time in nearly a century. Linda Hunt Beckman's 2000 work, *Amy Levy: Her Life and Letters*, stands as a foundational text in Levy scholarship, offering a synthesis of biographical detail and nuanced literary analysis. Beckman's access to Levy's private archive – comprising unpublished papers, manuscripts, and other previously inaccessible materials – provides a depth of insight that significantly enriches the study of Levy's life and works. Hence, Beckman's research sheds light on the complexities of Levy's identity and her place within the literary and cultural landscape of her time. Levy's political views, her associations with figures such as Olive Schreiner, Eleanor Marx, and Vernon Lee, and her status as a Cambridge-educated professional writer position her within the cultural and social transformations that shaped the independent women of the late nineteenth-century imagination: thus, she is included in Linda Hughes's 2001 anthology of *New Women Poets*. Iveta Jusová's chapter on Amy Levy in *The New Woman and*

the Empire (2005) builds on existing analyses of Levy as both a New Woman and an Anglo-Jewish writer. However, Jusová broadens conventional perspectives on identity formation in literature, exploring how a multilayered identity can offer deeper insights within a specific social context. The scholar points out Levy's sympathy with New Woman arguments for gender equality in her analysis of Levy's early dramatic monologue, *Xantippe*. As the poem has long been a favourite among critics discussing Levy's feminist politics, Jusová's perspective is distinctive not in its focus on the subject matter, but in its analysis of the poem's tone and language, which present a compelling case for sexual equality highlighting Levy's "unequivocal critique of the conventions of the entire Western philosophical tradition, which views Socrates as its founding father" (Jusová 2005, 140-141). A decade later, Christine Pullen expanded the field of Levy scholarship with *The Woman Who Dared: A Biography of Amy Levy* (2010). While Beckman's study benefited from exclusive archival access, Pullen's biography builds on this foundation, offering new perspectives on Levy's life and literary career through additional contextual analysis and historical framing. Although "beautifully written" (Stetz 2011, online), Pullen's biography "is marred throughout by its author's determination to prove that Levy was hopelessly in love with the mathematician and proponent of eugenics, Karl Pearson (1857-1956), and that his engagement to another woman was what drove Levy to suicide at age twenty-seven" (Stetz 2011). Pullen relies heavily on events and people depicted in Levy's poetry or fiction, shared acquaintances, indirect and unsupported evidence and, I would say, a vivid phantasy. As Porter argues, there is no mention of Levy in the index to the massive and well-catalogued Pearson archive (Porter 2012). Levy's name is mentioned only in one letter by Pearson, however Pullen is convinced that he is the reason of Levy's final bout of depression, dismissing, for instance, all the evidence about Levy's sentimental attachment to the openly lesbian author Vernon Lee.

Caroline Baylis-Green's (2015) analysis of Levy's Hellenic texts is rather on the role of marriage and its value for educated women. According to the scholar, through the figures of Xantippe and Medea, featured together in the collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884), Levy directly challenges patriarchal figures

and institutions in a highly political manner (Baylis-Green 2015, 240). A unifying theme across the poems in *Minor Poet and Other Verse* is, of course, the struggle to find or restore a voice to those marginalised in cultural history – individuals affected by misogyny, racism and the pathologizing gaze. In Levy's work, these overlooked figures are elevated to a central position, where they reclaim their place as significant muses.

In an earlier article on Amy Levy, Joseph Bristow (1999) highlighted the limitations of feminist criticism that positions Levy as representing a fixed form of female identity. He argues that Levy's critique of gender goes beyond advocating for women's social equality with men; instead, it challenges the very binary structure of sexual division. Bristow notes that Levy often deliberately avoids gendering the speaker in her poems, suggesting that her lyric 'I' seeks a "third, 'sexless' position from which to speak" (Bristow 1999, 88), resisting rather than reinforcing the rigid sexual binary. Consequently, categorizing Levy uncritically as a '(New) Woman writer' risks perpetuating the very binary she sought to dismantle.

Bristow also raises a broader concern about feminist criticism's attempts to integrate women's literature into the canon. He argues that advocating for its inclusion risks reaffirming the same evaluative standards that originally shaped the canon, rather than challenging them. According to Bristow, Levy is not concerned with shedding her minor status but with *transvaluing* it, shifting the concept of minority from a position of repression to one that critiques dominant value structures (Bristow 1999, 80). His groundbreaking work encourages critics to recognize Levy's investment in the possibilities of 'minor' subject positions and her efforts to deconstruct binary conceptions of identity. In doing so, Bristow laid the groundwork for much of the recent Levy scholarship discussed here.

As Paula Guimaraes has noted, the significant critical divergence regarding Levy's queerness, or potential queerness, and how her work expresses queer poetics makes the topic of sexuality particularly complex (Guimarães 2019, 8).

1.3 Rebuilding Xanthippe's reputation

In 1881 Amy Levy, then a student at Cambridge, published a dramatic monologue centred on Socrates' wife in the collection *Xanthippe and Other Verse*.⁶⁴ Writing from Xanthippe's perspective, Levy gives voice to a subject who was denied access to knowledge and culture because of her sex and was unable to express her opinions in a patriarchal society. Traditionally depicted by misogynistic discourse as the philosopher's intractable wife, the figure of Xanthippe in Levy's poem implicitly denounces women's confinement to the domestic sphere in the ancient world, as well as in Victorian society. Levy's interest in classical studies, in line with late Victorian Hellenism, also prompted her to adapt and rewrite the Greek myth of Medea. Written as a "fragment in dramatic form" and included in the widely acclaimed collection *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884), Levy's rewriting of Euripides's tragedy voices the author's own "Otherness" – marginalized both as an Anglo-Jewish woman in British society, and as an Anglicized Jew in the orthodox Jewish community – by emphasizing Medea's foreignness and alienation from Greek culture.

One of the first manifestations of Levy's poetic talent was published in 1879 in the *Dublin University Magazine* in the form of a long dramatic monologue with the title *Xanthippe. A Fragment*. The poem then became also the title poem of Levy's first volume of poetry, published in 1881 with the title of *Xanthippe and Other Verse* while Levy was still a student at Newnham. The work generated significant attention: *The Literary World* praised the volume, asserting that *Xanthippe* demonstrated Levy's "training and opportunities," with "hardly a line which will not pass muster in the most rigorously critical examination."⁶⁵ The poetry reviewer for *The Literary World* also recognized Levy's work as emblematic of a "new movement" which, whilst potentially heightening "the antagonism of discordant natures," was seen as one that would "deepen the insight and intensify the sympathies of others" (qt. in Olverson 2010, 113). *Xanthippe* exemplifies this "new

⁶⁴ Modern convention spells the name of Socrates's wife as "Xanthippe", in this work I will instead retain Levy's spelling "Xantippe" when referring to the character in her poem.

⁶⁵ The review, "A Newnham Student's Poems", was published in *Literary World*, 5 August 1881, pp. 90-91. See Olverson 2010, 131n14.

movement” by engaging directly with questions of representation and cultural power, particularly in relation to intellectual women (Olversion 2010, 113).

Xanthippe’s name is widely recognized, though its associations are far from flattering. It has even been included in the *OED*, which defines the term as “an ill-tempered woman or wife, a shrew, a scold.”⁶⁶ While Plato, the most meticulous chronicler of Socrates’ life and ideas, offers no negative commentary on Xanthippe,⁶⁷ Xenophon’s *Symposium* presents a contrasting perspective. In Xenophon’s work, Antisthenes describes Xanthippe as *chalepotatê*, meaning “the most difficult,” though he does not specify in what regard. Interestingly, the Victorian classicist H.G. Dakyns, the first to translate Xenophon into English, rendered the term as “the most shrewish,” reflecting the nineteenth-century biases that have contributed to the enduringly negative portrayal of Xanthippe (Funk 2017, 191). An early appearance of Xanthippe in English literature can be found in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, where the author references the famous story of the woman who, in anger, poured a pot of water over the philosopher’s head. However, Chaucer chose to replace the vessel with a chamber pot,⁶⁸ thereby amplifying the offensiveness of Xanthippe’s actions. In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the character Petruchio describes Kate “as curst and shrewd as Socrates’ Xanthippe or a worse” (Act 1.2, ll. 69–70). This comparison not only highlights Xanthippe’s iconic status as the archetypal shrew but also reflects the cultural persistence of her association with unruly femininity. Xanthippe’s portrayal as a nagging and domineering hothead, contrasted with Socrates’ long-suffering stoicism, not only reinforced misogynistic assumptions about women’s intellectual inferiority but also, in some instances, further vilified her image by incorporating elements of grotesque obscenity. This is exemplified in John Smith’s (1652–1743) mezzotint, which depicts the aged Socrates crouching on all fours while being ridden by a half-naked Xanthippe wielding a whip.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ See “Xantippe, n.”, OED online <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=Xantippe>.

⁶⁷ Xanthippe appears briefly in Plato’s dialogue the *Phaedo*, which takes place in Socrates’ prison cell, recounts the conversation about death and immortality and then reports the hemlock drinking of the philosopher and his consequent death. In this Platonic dialogue Xanthippe speaks only one sentence.

⁶⁸ “How Xantippa caste pisse upon his heed”, l. 729, see <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/wife-baths-prologue-and-tale-0>.

⁶⁹ John Smith, *Socrates and Xanthippe*, Wellcome Collection, London. Reference 27731i.

There is, however, an alternative tradition that seeks to reinterpret or revise Xanthippe's story, challenging the conventional roles of hero and villainess typically assigned to Socrates and his wife. Christine de Pizan's (1364–1430) *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405) inscribes itself in this tradition which attempts to revise the patriarchal canon. De Pizan offers a pioneering reinterpretation of classical sources, suggesting a possible justification for Xanthippe's actions, which, she implies, may have stemmed from feelings of neglect by her husband (Funk 2017, 194). Scholars cannot definitively assert whether De Pizan's text served as a source for Levy's version. However, many agree that Levy's dramatic monologue draws inspiration from James Thomson's 1866 essay *A Word for Xanthippe*, which reevaluates the character of Socrates' wife in a sympathetic light. Thomson challenges the traditional portrayal of Xanthippe as a shrewish figure, instead emphasizing her intelligence, resilience, and humanity. Moreover, in his essay, Thomson invites Victorian women writers "to judge whether Xanthippe had or had not the right to scold and rage, and even to pour out vessels of wrath" (Thomson 1881, 226). Notably, Thomson considered George Eliot the only writer truly suited for the task, though she never accepted the implicit challenge. Instead, the young Amy Levy, whose liberal education included ancient Greek philosophy and drama, demonstrated her knowledge and insight by first writing an essay on Thomson, her favourite poet, in 1883, and later composing the monologue *Xanthippe*. Levy builds on Thomson's reinterpretation, crafting a narrative that not only explores Xanthippe's perspective but also addresses broader questions of intellectual and cultural agency for women. By transforming Thomson's critical essay into a poetic monologue, Levy gives voice to a historically silenced figure, situating Xanthippe as both a symbol of and participant in the struggles faced by intellectual women in patriarchal societies. This interplay between Thomson's essay and Levy's work demonstrates how the former provided a foundation for Levy's imaginative reworking, allowing her to explore themes of representation, gender, and power.

As previously mentioned, in the character of Xanthippe Levy dramatizes the figure of a woman who is very aware of herself, her abilities and the wrongs she has suffered, and for this reason is unwilling to resign herself. In the city of Athens, the beautiful and talented young Xanthippe imagines a happy future. Confidently

following her father's wishes – "my father told me all/That I should wed me with great Socrates" (ll. 73-74),⁷⁰ she agrees to marry the philosopher, overcoming the physical repugnance in the hope that he will open the doors of knowledge and philosophy for her:

I, guided by his wisdom and his love,
Led by his words, and counselled by his care,
Should lift the shrouding veil from things which be,
And at the flowing fountain of his soul
Refresh my thirsting spirit. (ll. 88-92)

Socrates is incapable of satisfying both the material desires of his young wife and her intellectual aspirations, so the marriage turns out to be a failure and sanctions the woman's exclusion from the philosophical debate in which her husband is instead the protagonist. After a vain attempt at rebellion, Xantippe withdraws into silence and domestic activity – the only sphere she is allowed to govern as a woman: "grasp the barren shape/Of what the Fates had destined for my life" (ll. 128-129). However, Xantippe's acquiescence is charged with revolutionary potential that calls into question the traditional reputation of the philosopher's wife and of the other famous male characters around her. The "insufferable shrew" of antiquity appears to be a woman humiliated and frustrated in her deepest desires, forced into silence by a despotic and selfish husband, with the complicity of other philosophers more petty than wise, including Plato. The strategy of "playing with reputations" (Olverson 2010, 119) alludes to the very construction of the story, which is inevitably marked by a male point of view and shows what would happen if a voice were given to subjects who are socially marginalized.

As she nears death, Xantippe retraces her past, from the youthful aspirations of her Athenian years to her inevitable confrontation with a fate that affords no escape. The poem opens and closes with images of darkness and light. The darkness that surrounds the speaker in the first lines is representative of Xantippe's mood in the final stage of her life: "The lamp burns low; low burns the lamp of life" (l. 4). Now that "all should be at peace" (l. 11), Xantippe gathers her maids around her

⁷⁰ The following quotations refer to the edition of the poem included in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (Levy 1884). Line numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

and proceed to deliver an account of her life, perhaps in an attempt to come to terms with it. Reviewing her life the speaker recalls her will to seek no less than the truth about Heaven and Earth: “My soul which yearned for knowledge, for a tongue/That should proclaim the stately mysteries/Of this fair world, and of the holy gods?” (ll. 37-39). Xantippe’s story is one of misinterpretation, a condition imposed upon women across historical contexts, whether in the V century B.C. or in Victorian England, subjugated by an oppressive system that exerts power through language and culture, defining and judging their existence. The protagonist’s pursuit of knowledge is met with scorn, as it is deemed both useless and detrimental to the female intellect (“such are not woman’s thoughts” l. 44), already regarded as inferior.⁷¹

The notion that women are incapable of bearing the burden of knowledge is reinforced by the misogynist words that Xantippe overhears her husband say about Aspasia, the mistress of the Greek patriarch Pericles:

Her body rarely stands the test of soul;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws
The laws of custom, order, ‘neath her feet,
Feasting at life’s great banquet with wide throat.
(ll. 173-176)

Clearly, as Olverson notes: “Instead of the open-minded philosopher-hero that Plato seeks to represent in his dialogues, Levy presents Socrates as a racially intolerant misogynist, who is fearful of cultural diversity and female political power and influence (Olverson 2010, 119). Moreover, Socrates presents a distasteful image of Aspasia depicted as someone who voraciously consumes knowledge and wisdom, juxtaposed with Xantippe’s intellectual deprivation.

As a “heroine of liminality” (Di Nisio 2016, 119), Xantippe occupies the threshold between the traditionally feminine sphere and the masculine domain, even in her moment of rebellion. The misogynist discourse about Aspasia is what makes Xantippe step forward into the arbour violating also a social taboo: she dares to speak in public and question the wisdom of the great Athenians with “perhaps the

⁷¹ Virginia Woolf would later challenge this assumption in a heated exchange with the editor of the *New Statesman*, see Chapter IV.

most satisfying scene of women's anger in all of Victorian dramatic monologues" (Harrington 2020, 188):

Lit by a fury and a thought, I spake:
'By all the great powers around us! Can it be
That we poor women are empirical?
That gods who fashion us did strive to make
Beings too fine, too subtly delicate
With sense that thrilled response to ev'ry touch
Of nature's, and their task is not complete?
That they have sent their half-completed work
To bleed and quiver here upon the earth?
To bleed and quiver, and to weep and weep,
To beat its soul against the marble walls
Of men's cold hearts, and then at last to sin! (ll. 180-191)

Levy's reintroduction of a female presence into this symposium (which is the recreation of Plato's *Symposium* homosocial coterie) highlights the absence of an authentic female voice in Plato's dialogue. Furthermore, Xantippe's interjection disrupts the male-dominated discourse that silences both her gender and her voice. Determined to challenge the biological essentialism upheld by the male philosophers, she strategically employs their own language to dismantle their reasoning. Through eloquent argumentation, Xantippe deconstructs Socrates' dubious claim that women are mere failed experiments of the gods. As she suggests, in assessing women's capabilities, the philosophers once again reveal their failure to heed their own teachings. In addition, by his own standards Socrates should be viewed as an unsuccessful citizen since he failed in his role as a pedagogue and *pater familias*.

After Xantippe's speech, Plato's face "half did smile and half did criticise" (1.198), an image which highlights even more the contradiction and ambivalence of his attitude toward women, as preached in his texts (Olverson 2010, 117). Xantippe's outbreak generated silence among the unsurprised men; Socrates sarcastically replies:

I thank thee for the wisdom which thy lips
Have thus let fall among us: prythee tell
From what high source, from what philosophies
Didst cull the sapient notion of thy words? (ll. 211-214)

Socrates' words momentarily "crushed [Xantippe] with all that weight of cold contempt" (l. 216), before the woman angrily threw the wineskin that she was holding upon the "marble, where it lay/Spouting red rills and fountains on the white" (ll. 220-221) in one last act of rebellion. The spilling of wine in front of the scornful philosophers constitutes a semantically dense act: it alludes to the sacrifice of life and talents in the marriage to Socrates; the wine spilled also on Xantippe's robe, symbolically indicating the sacrifice of the silenced woman "to ensure the continuity of male social dominance" (Olverson 2010, 121). The red-stained robe is also allusive of menstrual blood, confirming the gendered symbolism of the passage. The broken wineskins also remind the popular anecdote of Xantippe throwing water (or urine) upon Socrates head, as mentioned earlier, in what Thomson called "a vessel of wrath" (Di Nisio 2016, 121). Di Nisio argues that the recurring metaphor of the "vessel of wrath" appears in various forms and meanings throughout the poem, emphasizing Levy's ability to navigate both poetry and popular culture with ease. Particularly significant is the moment when the vessel symbolizes the traditional female position in the patriarchal family: "He wished a household vessel – well! 'twas good,/For he should have it!" (ll. 242-243).

After the dramatic commotion, Xantippe resigns herself permanently to a life of housekeeping, devoid of both marital and intellectual fulfilment, which ultimately leads to her legendary shrewdness. Xantippe decides to dedicate her life to her loom: "And spun unceasing from the morn till eve" (l. 247), and "I spun away/The soul from out my body, the high thoughts/From out my spirit" (ll. 250-252). In this case, the spinning and weaving have a completely different meaning from what we have seen in Michael Field's *Long Ago* and Sappho's community of women analysed in the previous chapter. Xantippe does not welcome sympathy from her female companions, and the activity of spinning is evoked here as a mere household task, a mechanical process which numbs the intellect rather than a positive one that recalls the artistry and female power associated with weavers like Penelope (Hurst 2006, 170), or the educated women of Lesbo.

However, there is a positive note in the last lines of the poem as Xantippe gazes toward the morning light. As already mentioned, the poem ends with an image of light:

The gods forgive me! Sorely have I sinned
In all my life. A fairer fate befall
You all that stand there. ...
Ha! The dawn has come;
I see a rosy glimmer – nay! it grows dark;
Why stand ye so in silence? throw it wide,
The casement, quick; why tarry? – give me air –
O fling it wide, I say, and give me light! (ll. 279-287)

With her attempt to rewrite the classical canon and rescue the silent and silenced heroine Xantippe from the patriarchal tradition, Levy powerfully dramatizes the frustration and despair of female intellect. As Olverson has noted, “Xantippe is a worthy precursor to Levy’s next Hellenic (anti-)heroine, Medea” (2010, 121).

1.4 Nineteenth-century Medeas

The well-known plot of Euripides’ tragedy centres around Medea, daughter of Aeta, king of Colchis, and niece of the Sun, who with her magical arts helps Jason to overcome the potentially fatal trials imposed by the king to conquer the Golden Fleece (such as harnessing bulls that breathe flames from their nostrils, sow dragon teeth and face armed men sprouting from the earth, to mention some); Jason, originally from Iolco, arrived in Colchis together with many companions on the ship Argo, after his uncle Pelias, who had usurped his brother Aeson’s throne, ordered him to do this feat as a condition for returning the kingdom to the rightful heir. For Jason’s love, Medea betrays her father, abandons her homeland and kills her brother Absyrtus. Once in Corinth, Jason leaves Medea, by whom he had two children, and marries Glauce, the daughter of King Kreon, for political reasons.

In modern times, Euripides’s Medea has seen a certain degree of success on stage. Among others, the version by French dramatist Pierre Corneille (1635), the opera-comique version by the Italian composer Luigi Cherubini with the libretto by François Benoit Hoffmann (1797), and Austrian writer Franz Grillparzer’s drama, the third episode of *The Golden Fleece* trilogy (1821). In Britain, even though in the early decades of the nineteenth century Euripides had fallen out of favour among classicists (Behler 1986), the figure of Medea became famous in popular culture thanks to theatre dramas and burlesques which brought her back to the British stage. “Euripides’ popularity actually increased throughout the nineteenth century”,

observes Olverson, “as testified by the many translations, reproductions, and appropriations of his work” that appeared during this time (2010, 124): the two burlesques *The Golden Fleece; or Jason in Colchis* and *Medea in Corinth* by James Robinson Planché (1845) and *Jason and Medea: a Comic. Heroic. Tragic. Operatic. Burlesque-Spectacular Extravaganza* by Jack Wooler (1851) and, after the success of Ernest Legouvé’s *Médée*, translated into Italian and performed at the Lyceum Theatre in London (1856), two dramas entitled *Medea in Corinth*, the first by John Heraud (1857) and the second by William Gordon Wills (1872), and three more burlesques, Robert Brough’s *The Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband* (1856), *Medea; or, a Libel on the Lady of Colchis* by Mark Lemon (1856) and *Jason and Medea: A Ramble after a Colchian. A Classical Burlesque* by J. Addison and J. Howell (1878). During the Victorian era, the figure of Medea captivated writers as a powerful symbol for examining women’s oppression. In recent years, scholars have highlighted how stage adaptations of Medea provided audiences with a lens to reflect on shifting perceptions of gender, agency, and violence. Victorian authors utilized Medea as a vehicle to probe the constraints and frustrations that shaped women’s lives.⁷² The myth of Medea proves to be emblematic for its representation of women’s desire for social and political emancipation: the character, antithetical to the images of the faithful daughter, devoted wife and nurturing mother that constitute the cornerstone of Victorian ideology, radically questions the patriarchal values of subordination and passivity, bearing feminist claims. As Josephine McDonagh (2003) notes, Medea features in George Eliot’s fiction as a means for examining not only women’s anger but also their position as outsiders within the worlds they inhabit. Similarly, Shanyn Fiske (2008) argues that Medea’s marginalization among classicists enhanced her ability to reflect critical socio-political issues of the Victorian era. Fiske explains that “the general neglect of Euripides’ work and the disfavour into which Medea had fallen in the mainstream Hellenism from the early to mid-nineteenth century made this a particularly useful

⁷² For an exploration of music hall and burlesque renditions of Medea that engage with debates about marriage legislation during the years surrounding the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, see Fiona Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed: Burlesque and Gender on the Mid-Victorian Stage’, in *Medea in Performance 1500–2000*, ed. by Oliver Taplin and Edith Hall (Oxford: Legenda, 2000). See also Olverson (2010, 124), on an 1876 adaptation of Grillparzer’s Medea: ‘[u]nlike the burlesque productions of twenty years earlier’, she argues, ‘this Medea was not played for laughs.’

vehicle for the conveyance of controversial ideas in the latter half of the century, when the illusion of a Golden Age revival became more difficult to sustain.” (Fiske 2008, 38)

In this regard, studies exploring late-Victorian Medeas usually link together the work by Augusta Webster (1837-1894), *Medea in Athens* (1868), and Amy Levy’s *Medea (A Fragment in Drama Form, After Euripides)* (1884) as they both offer examinations of Medea’s perspective (Armstrong 2019; Armstrong and Blain 1999; Fiske 2008; et al). Isobel Armstrong (Armstrong 2019, 375), for instance, views both as inquiries into feminine dispossession and destruction, and Fiske argues that both works

offer a glimpse of how women writers in the latter part of the century appropriated Medea’s powerful yet conflicted persona to articulate their experiences of a pivotal moment in women’s history when social changes were granting women greater opportunities for independence and self-assertion but also provoking intense frustration at the traditions and institutions that still limited their minds and lives. (Fiske 2008, 49)

To contextualize the literary landscape in which Amy Levy was writing, it is essential to give also a brief outline of Augusta Webster. Webster studied Art and Modern Languages in Cambridge, Paris and Geneva, but she was self-taught on ancient Greek – like many other Victorian women writers of the time, as we have seen in the previous chapters. Despite her lack of formal education in the classics, Webster translated Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* in 1866 and Euripides’ *Medea* in 1868, and both works were praised for their quality by her contemporaries (Fiske 2008; Hardwick 1999; et al.). Webster’s play is a dramatic monologue in blank verse (the only voice is Medea’s), staging the continuation of Euripides’ tragedy: married to Aegeus in Athens, Medea is informed by a stranger of Jason’s death, which she relives in a kind of dream-like vision, and imagines she is addressing his ghost, a mute interlocutor. Webster’s *Medea in Athens* was published in her poetry collection titled *Portraits*, which includes the other dramatic monologue dedicated to the Homeric classical figure of Circe. As Hardwick noted, Augusta Webster utilized the dramatic monologue as an extension of her engagement with Greek texts, employing the form to reconfigure the representation of Medea. In her hands,

Medea is no longer constrained by Victorian archetypes as a wronged wife or a marginal alien but emerges as a fully articulated subject, intellectual, vocal, and emotionally complex. By doing so, Webster interrogates both the cultural appropriations of Greek texts within the Victorian imagination and the inherent complexities of the source material itself, unveiling the ways in which these ancient narratives simultaneously facilitated and resisted their ideological recontextualization (Hardwick 1999, 74). In addition, to foreground the intellectual relevance of Webster, it is worth mentioning that she also wrote essays about the translation process, one of which criticised with caustic wit Robert Browning's acclaimed version of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (Hardwick 2000, 37).

By the 1870s, Medea had garnered a reputation among popular audiences as a troubled yet sympathetic figure, a woman wronged by her patriarchal husband and society. Meanwhile, shifting perspectives on Euripides among classicists and academic audiences were beginning to reveal new interpretative possibilities for her character: "The 1870s," observes Yopie Prins, "were a turning point in England for the revaluation of Euripides" (Prins 2017, 259). The evolving reputation of Euripides can be attributed in large part to the work of John Addington Symonds. In his 1873 *Studies of the Greek Poets*, Symonds defends Euripides against the critical tradition that has denounced him. Nietzsche, for instance, condemned Euripides for destroying the classical tradition in his 1872 *Birth of Tragedy* (Prins 2017, 259). Symonds' work played a pivotal role in reshaping perceptions of the playwright, challenging earlier critiques and highlighting the complexity and decadent modernity of Euripides' portrayal of human experience:

It is hard, while still beneath the overshadowing presence of so great master as Euripides, to have patience with the critics and the scholars who scorn him – critics who cannot comprehend him, scholars who have not read him since they were at school. Decadence! is their cry. Yet what would they have? Would they ask for a second Sophocles, or a revived Aeschylus? (Symonds 1873, 230)

Rejecting the assessment of this "malevolent generation of critics ... who do not understand [Euripides]", Symonds contextualizes the playwright's decadence following the age of Aeschylus and Sophocles:

In passing to Euripides we feel how much we have lost. The religious foundation has been broken up; the clear intuitive morality of Sophocles has been exchanged for sophistry, debate, hypothesis and paradox. (Symonds 1873, 198)

1.5 Levy's fragmented Medea

Having studied Greek at Newnham College, Levy would have been well-acquainted with both the traditional critiques of Euripides and the evolution of his reputation. It is likely that she encountered Symonds's widely read study either during her time at Cambridge, during her travels to Dresden and Lucerne – where she continued her Greek studies and completed a draft of *Medea* (Hunt Beckman 2000, 77) – or after her return to London. There, she engaged with the vibrant intellectual community of the British Library Reading Room and participated in the city's literary salons.⁷³ *Medea* and *Xantippe* demonstrate Levy's meticulous engagement with Webster's dramatic monologues, as well as those of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. However, *Medea* also highlights her deliberate interaction with the rise of decadence in late nineteenth-century British literary culture. Paula Guimarães contends that Levy's *Medea* is a hybrid verse drama that merges elements of high and popular culture to challenge conventional perceptions of femininity and motherhood. The character of Medea lingers in the Western imagination, embodying the ultimate fear of the unfaithful man, the wife who takes revenge by killing her husband's lover and the mother who commits the unthinkable by murdering her own children. Medea stands, remarkably, as one of the rare ancient female protagonists who is neither killed, subdued, nor forced into oblivion (Guimarães 2019, 10).

The subtitle to Levy's "Medea" states that the dramatic fragment is "After Euripides," and as such there are many similarities, as well as important differences, between the dramas. Levy offers an interpretation of the ancient Greek play, proceeding through its major events as they lead to Medea's violent murder – as reported by Nikias and Aegeus – of her own children. Apart from the most obvious difference of form, Levy's text contains a few stage directions, two main scenes and only four main characters. The first scene takes place before "Medea's House",

⁷³ See Hunt Beckman (2000), chap. 6

suggesting Medea's agency and subjectivity (Olverson 2010, 122). By keeping a humanistic approach (Levy eliminated the spectacular *deus ex machina* on the golden chariot that "rescues" Medea at the end of Euripides' play), Levy resists Euripides' representation of Medea as semi-divine. Since Levy was well-educated and accomplished in the classics, her choices of departing from classical forms seem deliberate; the omission of the Chorus of Corinthian Women might demonstrate that Levy's verse-drama was not intended to be performed on stage (Olverson 2010, 122).

A possible interpretation of Levy's rewriting of *Medea* relies more on extra-textual evidence than on explicit textual references. This reading is largely informed by the author's Jewish experience and employs a postcolonial critical framework to examine Levy's identity conflicts as a Jewish woman in the Victorian era. It argues that Levy's *Medea* subtly intertwines the poet's personal experiences as a Jewish woman seeking to decolonize her mind. Additionally, this close reading positions Jews as subjects colonized by Western universal "truths" and shaped by the Victorian dichotomy between the Christian literary canon and Jewish writing. While Levy does not explicitly address her Jewish identity in her *Medea*, the underlying text and various contextual clues suggest its presence. Her Jewishness is never overtly mentioned, yet it can be inferred not only from Levy's own background but also from Medea's physical features and other clear markers of her ethnicity – including references to language, spirituality, the Greeks' fear of Medea as a contaminating force, and her fate as a Jewish wanderer (Villalba-Lázaro 2018, 3). As Fiske has noted, unnatural, decadent aesthetics do not sit easily in classical morality tales (Fiske 2008, 50); and, indeed, *Medea* has traditionally been viewed as a drama centred on the horror of a woman committing the ultimate transgression, killing her own children. In Levy's adaptation, Medea is explicitly positioned as an abject and potentially racially other, an otherness which is emphasized through the repeated use of the term "creature." She is marked as both a potential threat and a victim of prejudice, a duality that becomes particularly evident when she directly addresses the Athenians:

This strong, fair people, marble-cold and smooth
As modelled marble. I, an alien here,

That well can speak the language of their lips,
The language of their souls may never learn.
(Levy 1884, 36)⁷⁴

Medea's social isolation and eventual exile highlight the challenges of sustaining a diasporic identity within a seemingly hegemonic culture. Despite her alienation, Medea successfully navigates one of the major obstacles to assimilation: mastering the language of the dominant society. As Olverson notes, a defining trait of the ancient Greeks was their advanced use of language, distinguishing them from non-Greek-speaking "barbarians" (Olverson 2010, 128). Levy's Medea is acutely aware of the necessity of self-expression in this cultural context, declaring, "I, an alien here / That well can speak the language of their lips / The language of their souls may never learn" (36). Her inability – or refusal – to adopt "the language of their souls" not only underscores her distinct moral framework but may also allude to religious differences. As an immigrant figure, Medea asserts a powerful statement of resistance, one that carries implications for later forms of agency. Medea's ethnic difference is emphasized from the opening of the drama. As a native of Colchis, a land the Greeks believed lay on the eastern edge of the Black Sea, she is frequently depicted through imagery of blackness. Her gestures and speech are described as "wild," her eyes as "fierce" and black, and her abundant, untamed hair as inky black. In addition, the overt objectification and dehumanization of Medea by Nikias, a Corinthian citizen and supporter of Jason, align with the broader late-Victorian artistic and literary portrayals of the Oriental female:

I like not your swart skins and purple hair;
Your black, fierce eyes where the brows meet across.
By all the gods! When yonder Colchian
Fixes me with her strange and sudden gaze,
Each hair upon my body stands erect!
Zeus, 'tis a very tiger, and as mute! (38)

Medea's blackness is the opposite of the Corinthian citizen which are "as modelled marble" (36), a description that also refers to the physical and emotional impassivity of the Greeks towards Medea. Although not overtly disclosed in the drama, the

⁷⁴ The following quotations refer to the edition of the poem included in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (Levy 1884). Page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis.

association of otherness with Jewishness becomes evident early in the story through Medea's sufferings as a victim of anti-Semitism. Through her veiled language, Levy offers sufficient clues to identify Medea's Jewish ethnicity, particularly as she is depicted through what we might consider the anti-Semitic Christian gaze of the Corinthian citizens. Their discourse reveals her stereotypically Jewish appearance and their fear of her supposedly pathogenic race. Medea's blackness, in fact, might be perceived as a "pathological sign" (Olverson 2010, 127). As Valman notes, in nineteenth-century culture the Jewess was "ubiquitously conflated with the Oriental woman and recognized by her stylized sensual beauty: her large dark eyes, abundant hair and languid expression" (Valman 2007, 4). Levy builds on this visual economy by representing Medea with the stereotypical motifs of the Jewess, although rejecting the traits of oriental feminine sensuality and beauty. Moreover, for many eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientists the "blackness" of Jewish people was not only a mark of inferiority but also indicated the pathologized nature of "the Jew." In Levy's drama, the dark-skinned protagonist is a threat for the health and purity of the Corinthian body, both in racial terms and in terms of infection (Olverson 2010, 127). As is well known, these theories of pathological inferiority will provide the "scientific" basis for the anti-Semitic ideology of the twentieth century.

At the opening Levy's play, Medea stands alone at her doorstep and, in a soliloquy, voices a deep unease that foreshadows the impending catastrophe: "TO-DAY, to-day, I know not why it is,/ I do bethink me of my Colchian home./ To-day, that I am lone and weary and sad" (35). The capitalization of the first word emphasizes the immediacy of the moment, the day in which she anticipates – perhaps unconsciously – the sorrow to come. Medea's inexplicable apprehension marks a departure from Euripides' version, where she first appears on stage already consumed by rage over Jason's abandonment. In Levy's drama, the presence of tragic forebodings still looms over Medea, as seen in her words about Jason: "I know not why, whene'er his name is spoke, / Once name of joy and ever name of love,/ I wax white and do tremble; sudden seized/ With shadowy apprehension" (37). Her emotions resonate with feminist critiques of gendered suffering: "for this indeed is woman's chiefest curse/ Through all time and all chances; while the man/

Is caught with newness; coldly calculates,/ And measures pain and pleasure, loss and gain” (38). These lines depict Jason as a pragmatic and calculating figure, echoing the famous speech in Euripides’ *Medea* on the plight of women (Villalba-Lázaro 2018, 15). However, Levy positions this passage before Medea learns of Jason’s betrayal, which is euphemistically and repeatedly referred to as “this thing.”

The treachery is first introduced by Nikias, who justifies Jason’s decision: “I, in this thing, do hold our Jason wise;/ Kreon is mighty; Glaukê very fair” (38). Here, power and beauty are presented as the decisive factors that, in the Greek worldview, outweigh any prior commitments made under oath. The perspectives of Aegeus and Nikias embody patriarchal power, which scrutinizes and evaluates. However, Medea refuses to remain a passive object; instead, she actively responds to their gaze, unsettling the observers and intensifying their judgment. Throughout the drama Medea is defined by her alienation and *abnormality*: “By all the gods! When yonder Colchian/Fixes me with her strange and sudden gaze” says Nikias, “Each hair upon my body stands erect!” (38). “Tis certain that the woman’s something strange”, replies Aegeus, and Nikias reinforces Medea’s otherness:

Gods, spare me your strange women, so say I.
Give me the gold hair, lithe limbs and gracious smiles,
And spare the strangeness. (39)

Again, a contrast of colours between the ideal feminine beauty of “gold hair” compared to Medea’s blackness with “fierce eyes”. It is important to note that Medea’s hair, defined as “Unbound” (40), “unveiled, unfiled” (44), confirm her reputation not only as a bad woman, but as the prototype of the monstrous madwoman, the negation of the ideal femininity. These physical traits of Medea, combined with the racist prejudices about poisoning and threatening people’s health, are traceable elements of Victorian culture. Indeed, “throughout much of the nineteenth century, upper- and upper-middle-class women were often characterized as “sick” [frail, ill], while working-class women were labelled as “sickening” [infectious, diseased] (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, 54). Given this context, it is unsurprising that Amy Levy infused her rewriting of *Medea* with elements of her own personal experiences. As someone whose social position aligned with one of

these categories and who faced both mental health struggles and deafness⁷⁵ - a condition that worsened over the years, especially in 1888 (Hunt Beckman 2000, 150), Levy herself embodied many of the defining traits of “Otherness.” In addition, as New observes, Levy’s preoccupation with the connection between physical appearance and happiness is a recurring theme in her writings (New 1993, 10). According to New, Levy’s fiction consistently describes her characters’ physical traits, portraying those who fall below conventional beauty standards as sympathetic, while those who judge based on appearance are depicted as unsympathetic (New 1993, 10). This recurring motif suggests that Levy may have internalized feelings of inferiority, shaped by perceptions of her Jewish features and her distinct cultural and religious identity. However, as Hunt argues, the novel *Reuben Sachs* reflects Levy’s progress in overcoming much of her negativity toward her heritage (Hunt Beckman 1999, 195). This transition from self-hatred to self-acceptance is mirrored in Medea’s transformation following Jason’s abandonment. Although Medea initially senses impending betrayal, she first learns of Jason’s infidelity when she overhears Nikias and Aegeus discussing how she will “bear the tidings” (39). Aware of her presence, they acknowledge that “by her looks / our idle talk has reached her listening ears” (40). Despite their euphemistic language, Medea seems to have anticipated Jason’s betrayal, as in Euripides’ version, and she directly confronts him upon learning of his actions:

O strong you were; but not of such a strength
To have escaped the doom of horrid death,
Had not I, counting neither loss nor gain,
Shown you the way to triumph and renown. (41)

Jason reacts violently, insulting her, and blames her for catching him “in the close meshes of the magic web/ Wrought by your hand, dark-thoughted sorceress” (41). On his part Nikias comments that “the icy drooping of his lids ... tells me he hates her” (42). In the absence of actual acting, Nikias’s gaze provides the reader with a description of a supposed theatrical performance that helps visualize some

⁷⁵ Sarah Parker notes as in posthumous descriptions of Levy a recurring feature is their emphasis on her silence; the Fields, who never met Levy, allude to this element of her character when visiting Dollie and Ernest Radford in 1891: “The husband and wife knew Amy Levy & a delightful silent smoking companion she could be. She was deaf and often quiet” (quoted in Parker 2022).

of the scenes. While Jason has not yet acknowledged his treachery, Medea foresees what is to come:

Is it for this, for this that I have striven?
Have wrestled in the darkness? Wept my tears? ...
Lo I who strove for strength have grown more weak
... and am grown
No woman, but a monster. What avail
Charms, spells and potions, all my hard-won arts,
my mystic workings, seeing they cannot win
One little common spark of human love? (42)

In *Medea*, Levy employs the dramatic form to explore the dynamics of sympathetic identification, highlighting the expressive poetics that its speakers – particularly female speakers – rely upon. Armstrong links Levy to Webster, placing both authors within the “now powerful tradition” of women’s expressive poetry (Armstrong 2019, 372), a genre that emphasizes the overflow of private, intense emotions articulated through song, breath, or tears. However, this expressive approach is ultimately inadequate for Levy’s *Medea*. In Levy’s text, Medea interprets Jason’s betrayal and the disintegration of their marriage as a rhetorical failure – a deficiency in the expressive mode as a means of persuasion, whether directed at Jason, the people of Corinth, or even the gods, who might have recognized her as Jason’s wife. Levy’s tragic heroine now uses “the power of lamentation to create a kinaesthetic performance that amplifies the emotional depth and resonance” (Kincal 2023, 553) of the narrative, and demands of Jason with a refrain:

Is it for this, for this that I have prayed
Long prayers, poured out with blood and cries and tears?
Lo, I who strove for strength have grown more weak
Than is the weakest. I have poured the sap
Of all my being, my life’s very life,
Before a thankless godhead; and am grown
No woman, but a monster. (42-43)

Medea, while reflecting on her “long prayers”, vividly describes them by emphasizing the blood and tears she has “poured out”, the very “sap / Of all her being”, in her attempts to reach out.

At this point in the drama, Medea’s transformation has begun, marking a pivotal moment in her psychological and emotional evolution. She first calls upon

the gods, lamenting the curse they have placed upon her. It seems she has fully internalized Nikias's portrayal of her as a figure of fear and absolute isolation. She now regrets that her unwavering devotion to Jason has not shaped her into a woman but rather turned her into a monster:

From natural human fellowship cut off,
And yet a woman sick and sore with pain;
Hungry for love and music of men's praise,
But walled about as with a mighty wall,
Far from men's reach and sight, alone, alone. (43)

Instead of eliciting sympathy from her immediate audience, Medea's attempts at self-expression have only deepened her isolation. She is left not only physically and emotionally drained but also entirely severed from "human fellowship", finding herself "far from men's reach and sight, alone, alone." Medea fails to persuade the citizens of Corinth, not because she lacks the power to do so, but because the power she wields is undermined by her status as an outsider, a woman marked by the racial differences from those around her. In this regard, drawing on Judith Butler, Helen Luu argues that women speaking in Victorian dramatic monologues must grapple with the issue of "feminine speakability," ensuring that their speech is recognized as "the speech of a woman" (Luu 2019, 253-254).

In a climax of loathing, Nikias and Aegeus follow Medea's shift in stance by increasing their misogyny. They look at Medea as progressively more aggressive, threatening in her sexuality, and deviant in her gender: "The tall shape/ Stands there erect and still. This calm, I think,/Is filled with strangest portent" (46) says Aegeus; "She is a pregnant horror as she stands," declares Nikias ominously. In a concise yet impactful manner, Levy intertwines the imagery of masculine potency with the notion of femininity symbolized by pregnancy, thereby highlighting the profound revulsion experienced by the two men towards Medea's corporeal form. This synthesis effectively establishes a gothic and decadent atmosphere, enriching the exploration of bodily perception within the narrative.

As an exile, Medea mourns her victimization while exhibiting a distorted awareness of her own monstrosity, one that she suspects is not her true self but rather an image imposed upon her by the gaze of Corinth's citizens. Her profound isolation and desperate longing for love become especially apparent as she awaits

Jason's confirmation of the news. During their agon, the citizens, as if directing the drama themselves, narrate the characters' actions and emotions in a manner reminiscent of spoken stage directions: "Jason speaks low and smooth ... the icy dropping of his lids" (41-42); "behold her, how she waves about her arms / And casts her eyes to Heaven" (43); "her voice sounds as a sound far off" (46).

Jason is also described with a "gold curled head, crisped like a girl's" (46) in a continuous fast shifting of voices, as in grim "foreplay", before the two apical moments in which all the ill-fated connotations in the previous verses sum up: "monster" (43), before the tragic events, and "essence of all evil" (54). The sequence in which Jason pragmatically justifies his decision to abandon Medea in favour of marrying Kreon's daughter remains largely faithful to Euripides' version (Villalba- Lázaro 2018, 22). In his attempt to manipulate her, Jason employs a calculated rhetoric, stating: "you say you love me. Can I deem it so, when what does most advantage me and mine / You shrink to hear of?" (44). However, Levy's portrayal introduces a significant departure from previous versions, as Jason not only offers the conventional assurances of financial security, "for you all fair provisions I have made" (44), but also outright deceives Medea. In an effort to pacify her emotions, he falsely promises her the crown of Corinth: "Medea, too, if she do but control / Her fiery spirit, may yet reign a queen / Above this land of Corinth" (45). This deception does not go unnoticed by the citizens, as Nikias approvingly remarks, "Well said" (45), only for Aegeus to counter with, "But none the better that 'twas false" (45), underscoring Jason's dishonesty.

Initially, Medea reacts calmly expressing her virtues: "A woman some deemed fair and all deemed wise;/ A woman, yet not simply a thing nor slight" (47); later she adds: "Yet pause a moment .../... as this your thoughts run on" (47), and finally she imagines Jason's voice:

I loved this woman for a little space;
Alas, poor soul, she loved me but too well_
It is the way with women! Some, I think,
Did deem her fierce; gods! she was meek enough,
Content with what I gave. (47)

The passage enters another *crescendo* of tension. Aegeus and Nikias foreshadow that something is about to happen and comment on Medea's physical

reaction; she stands still, her hands “are together clasped” and “her wild eyes” now “moved not”, inferring that “this calm I think, is filled with strangest portent” (47). By the end of the first scene, Medea brings herself under control, but her decision has been taken: “Ah, Jason, pause. / You never knew Medea. You forget,/ Because so long she bends the knee to you,/ She was not born to serfdom” (49). Then comes the terrible prophecy:

Woe upon woe, red blood and biting flame;
Most horrid death and anguish worse than death
Deeds that shall make the shores of Hades sound
With murmured terror; with an awful dread
Shall move the generations yet unborn;
A horror and a horror in the land. (49)

In Scene II of Levy’s drama, which takes place on the evening of the same day, the stage directions indicate “A street. A crowd of people running to and fro” (49): Medea’s prophecy has taken place. The ubiquitous Nikias shouts: “O horror, horror have you heard the tale?” (49).

With the decadent notes in her drama, Levy enters the conversation with the discourse of decadence prevalent in the 1880s, a movement focused on exploring deviation and deviance. However, by presenting a decadent Medea, Levy succeeds in pushing the logic of expressive poetics to its extreme, examining it through a hyperbolic lens. The scene is about to become a bloodbath. In this case, there is no metaphoric blood to voice the woman’s anger in a single disruptive act as we have seen in *Xantippe*. Instead, Nikias recount the murders of Kreon and Glaukê first, who are “both caught up in sudden toils of torment” (50), then he describes a tableau flooded in human blood:

... She spake:
‘I will not have ye, for I love ye not!’
Then all her face grew alien. Those around
Stood still, not knowing what she planned.
Then she
Forth from her gathered garment swiftly drew
A thing that gleamed and glinted; in the air
She held it poised an instant; then – O gods!
How shall I speak it? on the marble floor
Was blood that streamed and spurted; blood that flow’d
From two slain, innocent babes! (53)

The blood of Medea's children, hence, her own blood, spurts and splashes so much that it stains the Corinthian precious cold white marbles, as if this act were a powerful response to the city's hostility. At the same time, Levy seems to use self-irony in rewriting Medea's previous prayers "poured out with blood and cries and tears" (43). Villalba-Lázaro notes how "Levy also represents Medea's supernatural pain and rage after the filicide: 'A fierce long shriek, that froze the blood i' the veins,/ Rang out and rose, cleaving the topmost cloud', an image that reinforces the power that Medea now wields and connects her with her mythical divine world" (Villalba- Lázaro 2018, 25).

The rest of the scene amplifies its decadent elements and reinforces Medea's role as a *femme fatale*. As Nikias recounts, the people of Corinth erupt in curses, wails, and anguished cries, their fury reaching a deafening roar, while Medea vanishes mysteriously, leaving only the lingering traces of disease in her wake. The poem leaves Medea's guilt deliberately unresolved. The acts of violence central to the myth emerge only in Nikias's account to Aegeus, as he recounts the murders of Kreon, Glaukê, and the children. By omitting both the scene of the killings and Euripides' speeches in which Medea conceives her revenge, Levy preserves an unsettling ambiguity around her culpability. Is Levy's Medea a grieving victim or a triumphant avenger? The author does not provide a clear interpretation of this aspect of Medea's character, leaving the reader with the burden of the final judgement. Also, it could be argued that the author deliberately avoids having her protagonist admit to the murders on scene: perhaps this choice is the author's strategy not to deal with the ethical difficulties of identifying with a morally detestable character. However, while Medea's moral position remains ambiguous, the poem's exploration of women's expressive poetry finds resolution in its final lines. Exiled to the wilderness, 'beyond men's eyes, beyond / The city's hissing hate' (56), Medea reflects on her final moments in Corinth:

This is the end:
I have dash'd my heart against a rock; the blood
Is drain'd and flows no more; and all my breast
Is emptied of its tears.
Thus go I forth
Into the deep, dense heart of the night — alone. (57)

Medea's departure from Corinth remains unexplained, as the poem neither confirms nor denies her guilt in the murders of Glaukê, Kreon, or the children. Instead of offering a closure through narrative certainty, Levy achieves a symbolic resolution. With her blood "drain'd and flow[ing] no more" and her breast "emptied of its tears," Medea embarks on a new beginning, devoid of anything left to express. Yet, through her transformation and the spectacle of excessive bloodshed that follows, the poem suggests that a language of sharp irony and deliberate excess, a decadent poetics, possesses the power to challenge the status quo and provoke change.

Levy's focus is on Medea's actions as proof of the alienating and destructive effects of institutionalized sexism and racism (Olverson 2010, 130). The outcast is condemned to live out her exile, embodying, according to Olverson, the Wandering Jew of the ancient world: "Thus I go forth / Into the deep, dense heart of the night — alone" (57). Unlike Euripides, who withholds a definitive explanation for Medea's actions, Levy clearly implicates the sexist, racist, and morally corrupt Corinthians in her crimes. In this portrayal, Medea's attempts at assimilation or transformation are doomed to failure because the dominant society refuses to accept an "Oriental" woman as a fully integrated member of the state. By denying her civil and human rights, Levy suggests, the Corinthians unleash chaos upon their own Hellenic society.

Drawing on Olverson's analysis of *Medea*, which suggests that demythologization often requires remythologisation (Olverson 2010, 130), it can be argued that Levy's strategically merged classical scholarship with a subversive intent. Her Hellenic poems can thus be interpreted not only as cautionary narratives about the marginalized and disenfranchised but also as progressive contributions to the practice of revisionist mythmaking. Both Xantippe and Medea's acts of rebellion share the chromatic isotopy of the colour red: the wine spilled on Xantippe's robe and marble in the poem becomes the blood of Medea's victims in the drama. Both classic heroines claim their right to knowledge and to the affirmation of their desire, representing the rebellion of oppressed Victorian women. Levy's choice of the dramatic form to give voice to characters from the past is her own original attempt at questioning the patriarchal interpretation of tradition through radical poetry.

Chapter IV

On Not Knowing Virginia Woolf

Greek is the golden bough; it crowns its lovers
with garlands of fresh and sparkling leaves.
Virginia Woolf, *The Perfect Language*.⁷⁶

1.1 An overview

The idea of Greece, its myths, its language, its intellectual legacy, has long held a double meaning for women writers. At once a symbol of timeless beauty and humanist aspiration, it is also a site of exclusion, where “Woman” appears primarily as object, muse, or associated to tragic sacrifice. For Virginia Woolf, Greece functions as a cultural and imaginative inheritance both vital and alienating: an archive of thought and form from which she draws, and simultaneously a terrain to which women have historically been denied access. In Woolf’s engagement with Hellenism, one encounters a deep ambivalence that mirrors the larger feminist struggle with classical education, an institution that defined intellectual legitimacy but was rarely open to women in its full rigour or scope.

Throughout her work, Woolf returns to the languages and images of Greek antiquity, not to idealize them, but to interrogate the structures of authority and tradition that shaped her intellectual world. Greece, for Woolf, is never a settled place; it is imagined, translated, misremembered, and resisted. As Rowena Fowler (1999) highlights, Woolf occupied a distinctive position within the classical tradition: her access to Greek was often mediated and incomplete, yet this very limitation paradoxically enabled a form of intellectual freedom. In Fowler’s insightful article “Moments and Metamorphoses: Virginia Woolf’s Greece,” the scholar interprets Woolf’s classical references as part of a “mythical method” that is less concerned with reverence than with processes of reconstruction, fragmentation, and critical distance, enacted “in a spirit of celebration, tragedy and irony” (Fowler 1999, 233). According to the scholar, these elements, alongside superimposition, pastiche, and allusion, are central to the aesthetic of Modernism,

⁷⁶ Woolf’s review of *The Greek Anthology*, a volume of translations of Greek epigraphs published in the Loeb Classical Library, appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 24 May 1917; it anticipates many ideas found in “On Not Knowing Greek.”

in which metamorphosis, understood as the transformation and coexistence of unassimilated forms, becomes a defining trope. Modernism, Fowler notes, is often seen as an elegiac gesture toward the classical tradition: a gathering of fragments in a final effort to resist cultural decline. However, Fowler argues that Woolf's engagement with Greece neither mourns the disappearance of ancient myths nor attempts to preserve them. Rather, through imaginative dexterity and precise control, Woolf reanimates the past in the present, transposing Athens into London (Fowler 1999, 239). Angeliki Spiropoulou (2002) likewise, argues that Woolf's classical references are best understood not as nostalgic gestures but as "revolutionary re-inscriptions" of the past within a radically feminist and modernist aesthetic. In this context, the classical becomes a means of both critique and invention, a way to expose the masculine genealogies of education and simultaneously to sketch out alternative models of knowledge. In particular, Spiropoulou clarifies that Woolf "does not share the elitism, suffering nostalgia or 'mythical method' of other modernist writers" (Spiropoulou 2002, 2). Instead, Woolf's approach involves problematizing Greek and its ties to traditional authority structures, whether based on gender, class, intellectual elites, or imperial power. Woolf aims to reclaim Greek for the present and for the common (woman) reader/writer, embracing "outsideness" and "democracy" (Spiropoulou 2002, 2)

Recent scholarship has traced the complexity of Woolf's classical inheritances with increasing nuance. Theodore Koulouris's *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf* (2011) represents the first in-depth exploration of Woolf's engagement with Greek culture and literature. Utilizing Woolf's unpublished Greek Notebook, Koulouris contends that the writer's familiarity with Greek texts contributed to the development of a textual strategy that articulated the various forms of "loss" she experienced. This study firmly situates Woolf within the broader framework of nineteenth-century British Hellenism, offering meticulous analyses of her notes and reflections on canonical Greek works, alongside persuasive close readings of *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), and *Orlando* (1928). Despite the term "Hellenism" appearing in the book's title, Koulouris predominantly refers to Woolf's engagement with Greek literature as "Greekness", arguing that "Hellenism" is largely associated with "academia and

male homosociality” (Koulouris 2011, 7). Observing the persistent presence of Greek themes throughout Woolf’s textual development, Koulouris undertakes an inquiry into “Virginia Woolf, the Greek” (2011, 3). The scholar explores Woolf’s poetics of loss as deeply entwined with a personal, individualized, and solitary form of Hellenism, an aesthetic sensibility shaped by her acute awareness of the dominant nineteenth-century discourse, specifically the “specialized domain” in which classical Greece was absorbed into “a certain academic discipline: the ‘Greats,’ the classics” (Koulouris 2011, 6). Koulouris also identifies “a fruitful trope of significations” in Woolf’s tendency to mention her Greek studies in connection with “loss,” revealing both “the pervasiveness of death in her familial environment” and “a comprehensive account of ‘dispossession’ in relation to female struggle at the turn of the twentieth century” (2011, 71). In *Virginia Woolf, Jane Ellen Harrison and the Spirit of Modernist Classicism* (2014), Jean Mills reads the work of Cambridge classicist Jane Ellen Harrison alongside Virginia Woolf’s fiction and political writings. A comparable spectral motif appears “leaping” through the spring garden of Woolf’s fictional Fernham College in *A Room of One’s Own*, a feminist manifesto unmistakably committed to recovering the lives and stories of women. Mills identifies Woolf’s simultaneous attraction to and estrangement from the classical canon as a “double gesture” of resistance and reclamation. Mills’s study, which seeks to position the Harrison-Woolf connection along a “transpersonal” lateral axis of women’s intellectual friendship, also represents an effort to recover and re-evaluate Jane Harrison, an intellectual, as we have seen already,⁷⁷ whose work and legacy had long been dismissed, undervalued, and, until relatively recently, largely forgotten or overlooked.

Building on these perspectives, this chapter examines Woolf’s dialogues with Greece in the context of feminist issues about education, authorship, and cultural belonging. It explores how Woolf’s writing both critiques the masculinist legacy of classical pedagogy and reclaims elements of Greek myth and history as imaginative resources for women’s intellectual autonomy. In doing so, it pays particular attention to Woolf’s representations of learning: not only what women are taught,

⁷⁷ See “Women’s Education and the Classics” in Chapter I.

but how they are positioned in relation to the structures of institutional knowledge. Focusing on *A Room of One's Own*, selected diary entries and essays, including “On Not Knowing Greek” and Woolf’s letters to *The New Statesman*, this chapter examines how Woolf enacts a feminist interrogation of the classical tradition. Her engagement with Greece is neither direct nor reverential; instead, it is mediated through irony, fragmentation, and strategic appropriation. In addition to these non-fictional texts, the analysis includes fictional works such as Woolf’s early short story *A Society*, as well as references to Greek tragedy woven throughout her novels. The chapter argues that this complex engagement enables Woolf to articulate a feminist pedagogy that reclaims the classical tradition from the margins, not to reproduce its authority, but to radically reimagine the terms of cultural inheritance, particularly in relation to women’s education and feminist thought.

A comprehensive analysis of Virginia Woolf’s entire body of work lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Instead, the focus here is on tracing the feminist *fil rouge* that weaves through her writings, linking her critique of Victorian Hellenism to her broader condemnation of patriarchal structures. To situate Woolf’s feminist engagement with the classical tradition, the discussion outlines the historical and cultural context of Victorian women’s education and their access to the Classics. It then turns to Woolf’s own experience of classical education and her relationship with Greek, the language of male “class and cultural power” (Marcus 1987, 76), as a site of both exclusion and creative resistance. As anticipated in Chapter I, the subject of women’s contribution to nineteenth-century classical discourses has been the focus of ongoing research by scholars such as Rowena Fowler in the 1980s and, later by Isobel Hurst, with her *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006), and by Yopie Prins with her *Ladies’ Greek* (2017), to name only a few. Hurst challenges the idea that only women with exceptional, namely “masculine,” intellects could achieve fluency in the classical languages and demonstrates the variety of women’s Latin and Greek knowledge received and processed also through popular channels, such as public lectures, theatre, classically themed historical novels and so on. Hurst also highlights the fact that the non-traditional ways in which women got in touch with classical culture “made women’s responses to the classics distinctive” (Hurst 2006, 2). Nineteenth-century

women who cultivated a passionate reading of Greek were taught by private tutors or did their own independent reading on their brothers' books. However, as Hurst points out, it was undeniably more difficult for a girl to study Latin and Greek at home, or later in the century at school or college, than for a boy who followed the traditional path from public or grammar school to university (Hurst 2006, 2). As Yopi Prins underlined in her *Ladies's Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy*, many of the women who embarked in the study of the classics seemed exceptional in their own way:

... in their diaries, correspondence, autobiographies, biographies, and other narratives, we encounter again and again a narrative of desire for ancient Greek that has its own predictable *topoi*: an early encounter with the Greek alphabet, a primal scene of falling in love with the language, a pedagogical experience that revolves around the pain and pleasure of learning to read Greek, an attempt to translate and incorporate Greek into a body of writing, an idea that the woman writer herself might be the very embodiment of Greek letters (2017, 5).

The importance of classical knowledge for women cannot be overstated: over the course of the nineteenth century, learning Greek increasingly served as a rite of passage to becoming a "woman of letters". The phrase is a late Victorian invention, but "women of letters flourished throughout the century, as women increasingly conceived of their literary careers and constructed their public personae in a professional mode" (Prins 2017, 6). Moreover, knowledge of the classics served as a gateway into hitherto closed sections of societal influence: for nineteenth-century women writers, translation from classical languages was a means of engaging with, and even entering, a male dominated world of scholarship, criticism, and sometimes political influence.

1.2 Woolf on education

As previously noted, while the late Victorian era is frequently cited as a time of expanding access to education, conversations around gender were notably missing from both policy and institutional agendas (McClellan 2008, 3). Even by 1912, women made up a mere two per cent of the student population in higher education, and those who did progress beyond secondary schooling were overwhelmingly from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds (Anderson

1963, 12). Despite some gradual shifts in perception, likely influenced by wartime portrayals of women in professional roles, institutions such as Cambridge and, to a lesser degree, Oxford remained reluctant to fully embrace the inclusion of women. Although women were granted degree honours at both universities during the 1920s, Cambridge withheld full university membership from its female graduates until as late as 1948. It is important to reiterate that the proliferation of women's colleges during this period should not be mistaken for genuine parity with male institutions. In practice, women's colleges continued to receive significantly less financial support and resources compared to their male counterparts.

Anna Snaith notes: "Virginia Woolf was a complex and progressive thinker on education" (2021, 345). As mentioned in Chapter I, Woolf's feminist argument about women's poverty in *A Room of One's Own* was deeply rooted in the material and cultural milieu of early twentieth-century Britain, a society marked by rigid gender roles, limited educational and professional opportunities for women, and systemic economic inequality. Woolf's call for financial independence and personal space as prerequisites for creative freedom was not merely theoretical but a direct response to the social and institutional constraints that shaped the lives of women in her time, including her own experiences within a patriarchal literary establishment. Woolf's critique thus emerged from both personal insight and a broader engagement with the structural forces that perpetuated women's exclusion from intellectual and artistic life. In her 2021 study, Anna Snaith highlights how Woolf focused on the gendered inequalities in access to education in early twentieth-century Britain, as well as the structural limitations faced by the girls and women who did enter educational institutions. Woolf's reflections on education are deeply interwoven with her feminism, pacifism, and resistance to authoritarianism. Woolf's two major essays, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938), centre on the institutions of higher education and expose multiple forms of gendered exclusion, ranging from restrictions on admission, to the content of curricula, the physical and architectural spaces of universities, and the long-term effects of academic training on both men and women. In Woolf's novels, young male characters are frequently depicted within the familiar spaces of studies or university quadrangles, while female characters are often positioned at a distance or portrayed

as uneasy within academic settings. Like the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf had personal ties to Cambridge, delivering lectures and visiting friends and family members affiliated with the university,⁷⁸ yet she largely remained outside formal academic institutions. Notably, she declined honorary degrees from Manchester and Liverpool in 1933 and 1939, respectively (2021, 345). Despite her position as an outsider, Woolf engaged deeply with questions about how institutions of higher education might be reimagined and reformed, both internally and externally. Her commitment is evident in her extensive research into early female educators and her reading of memoirs and biographies that reflect on educational experiences in Victorian and early twentieth-century Britain.

On the subject of Virginia Stephen's home education, biographers and scholars agree on the idea that the strongest familial opponent to women's higher education was, probably and possibly not surprisingly, Woolf's own father Leslie Stephen. Indeed, an interesting anecdote sees Leslie Stephen, in 1897, refusing to place his vote on the day when votes were being cast to allow women membership of the University of Cambridge (McClellan 2008, 2). In this regard, Spiropoulou's view of the centrality of Greek culture in Woolf's formation as a woman of letters is especially interesting. Far from being simply an "educated man's daughter," according to Spiropoulou, Woolf developed her "double-edged attitude": on one side, Woolf "problematizes Greek and its implication in the enforcement and perpetuation of traditional authority structures" and, on the other, she "seeks to reclaim it for the present time and for the common (woman) reader/writer in the name of outsideness and democracy" (Spiropoulou 2002, 2).

Regarding the lack of formal education, Koulouris argues that Woolf's "Greekness" is "a distillation of her own understanding of canonical Greek texts, filtered through an intricate network of gendered socio-cultural and political structures, into what he calls 'the poetics of loss'" (Koulouris 2011, 8). Furthermore,

It must be stressed that Woolf never sat a formal exam, never competed against a peer, and that although Dr Warr and Clara Pater were gifted scholars, their relationship with Woolf never

⁷⁸ Her cousin, Katherine Fisher, was one of the first Vice-Principals of Newnham College, and her friend, Pernel Strachey, was also appointed to Newnham in 1905 (Woolf 1990: 243).

transcended the level of amateurism that was expected under the circumstances. ... Woolf lacked what for her brothers ... was an everyday occurrence: camaraderie, homosociality, and intellectual exchange (2011, 43).

However, while most of Woolf's family supported the traditional arguments against women's education, I argue that this should by no means imply that Woolf was unfamiliar with the university system or prominent thinkers of the period. Woolf did attend classes at King's College Ladies' Department between 1897 and 1901 and had hopes of becoming eligible for "the first B.A. degree – if the ladies succeed" (Woolf 1990, 87). In addition, contrary to what Koulouris states, Woolf did sit formal exams (in German language) while at King's College, and her results suggest a sound understanding of the tools of grammar (Jenkins 2021, 25). However, in my opinion, Woolf's own ambivalent approach to formal education confirms the controversial nature of this matter for scholars. In fact, while Woolf once stated that there were some advantages to being educated at home rather than at university, she was also very sensitive to the shortcomings of home-schooling; having missed the camaraderie and community of a university education, Woolf described her own self-education as "delv[ing] into books, painfully and alone" (Woolf 1990, 77). Also, in a letter to Ben Nicholson, Woolf wrote: "I never went to school or college. My father spent perhaps 100 pounds on my education" (Woolf 1975, 419). In relation to education, what interests me here is the fact that in *A Room of One's Own* the author will refer to the material and economic dimension of patriarchy to demonstrate the subalternity of women in society, what she called "a condition of half-civilised barbarism" in her letter to "Affable Hawk" (Woolf 1978, 342). Woolf's central thesis is that women need financial independence, symbolized by "a room of one's own" and "five hundred pounds a year" to produce significant creative work. These conditions would allow women the freedom to pursue their intellectual and artistic ambitions without relying on male patronage or conforming to societal expectations.

Woolf's concern with women's intellectual inheritance often emerges through subtle, almost whispered gestures. In *A Room of One's Own*, one such moment occurs when the narrator reflects on the atmosphere of Fernham, the fictional women's college. Here Woolf introduces the ghostly presence of a female

scholar who once occupied these academic spaces dedicating her a particularly meaningful passage:

Somebody was in a hammock, somebody, but in this light they were phantoms only, half guessed, half seen, raced across the grass--would no one stop her? – and then on the terrace, as if popping out to breathe the air, to glance at the garden, came a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress – could it be the famous scholar, could it be J—H— herself? (2000, 20)

Woolf's strategy of naming, and un-naming, women intellectuals reaches a powerful moment when she refers to "J—H—" as a spectral figure haunting the college of Fernham. This nod to Jane Harrison is more than a private tribute; it forms part of Woolf's broader meditation on women's exclusion from, and imaginative recovery of, the classical tradition. It is important to mention that the Hogarth Press published Harrison's *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (1925), and Woolf's personal library included several of Harrison's works: *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921), *Aspects, Aorists and the Classical Tripos* (1919), and *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913), the latter of which was given to Woolf as a Christmas gift from Harrison in 1923 (Marcus 1987, 148).

Famous as Jane Harrison was in her field, despite decades of experience and successful lectures at the British Museum,⁷⁹ she never held a professorship at Cambridge (she was hired only as a Lecturer in Classical Archaeology at Newnham in 1898, aged 48); Harrison's anthropological approach to the study of early Greek art and religion was disputed and later fell into disrepute, and she died in poverty in 1928. Prins celebrates Harrison as one of the initiators of the female line of Victorian Hellenism (Prins 1999a, 46), and scholars agree on considering her as an important influence on Woolf's appropriation of the classics as both the symbol and the instrument of rebellion against the elite of college-educated men (Fowler 1999, 219).

Regarding Virginia Woolf's decision to refer to Jane Harrison only by her initials in the published version of *A Room of One's Own*, Jean Mills (2017) offers two possible interpretations. The scholar suggests that by omitting Harrison's full

⁷⁹ For further reference on Jane Harrison scholarship and her "heretical" Hellenism see Arcara 2020, 32.

name in a text dedicated to foregrounding women's work and biographies, Woolf paradoxically contributes to Harrison's obscurity. This gesture reveals an ambivalence, or even suspicion, that Woolf occasionally expresses toward assertions of authority, which Harrison undoubtedly embodied at the time. While Woolf respects Harrison and is committed to women's education, she also appears to distance herself from her, reflecting a sense of alienation from her academic audience (Mills 2017, 45). Indeed, in a letter to Ethel Smyth of 1933 Woolf wrote about her fears when she gave her talks upon which *A Room of One's Own* was based and "If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact—Well they'd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously" (Woolf 1979, 195). As several scholars have noted over the years, including Jane Marcus, Susan Gubar, and Mark Hussey, Virginia Woolf, a mostly self-taught public intellectual invited to speak at Newnham and Girton, felt both inadequate and somewhat envious of the women who had formally studied there. In her essay "Virginia Woolf, Cambridge, and *A Room of One's Own*: 'The Proper Upkeep of Names'" (1996), Jane Marcus identifies Woolf's "grudge" against the university and its neglect of Jane Harrison's scholarly achievements as a form of "ressentiment", which Marcus defines as a response that "many brilliant and successful people of colour and women spend a great deal of energy smothering ... in exactly the same way that Woolf's narrator had to fling inkpots at the Angel in the House" (Marcus 1996, 9). Derived from the French, *ressentiment* implies a kind of indirect or repressed resentment, often expressed by devaluing the ideals or values of the individual being resented.

According to Mills (2017), the omissions found in early drafts of *A Room of One's Own*, particularly in the passage referring to "J—H—," reflect Woolf's sense of isolation from her academic audience. Yet, these same omissions also reveal a deeply felt urgency in her broader project: to exhort implore women to preserve and honour the legacies of their female intellectual role models. That urgency, however, becomes less visible in the final published version. In earlier drafts, Woolf used Harrison's full name and even crossed out a powerful statement: "the sort of mocking derision which women, when they have ceased to be young, & yet have won a great name; as Jane Harrison had...and [colleges] never spend a penny on

the proper upkeep of their name” (qtd. in Marcus 1996, 12). This moment suggests that Woolf was acutely aware of the significance of reputation and intellectual heritage for women scholars, writers, and thinkers. However, as Mills notes, by reducing Harrison’s name to initials in the final version, the famous ghostly scene in the gardens of Fernham becomes not a moment of recognition, “And There She Was,” but rather one of absence: “And There She Wasn’t” (Mills 2017).

The other interpretation proposed by Mills offers a more reverential reading. Linking Woolf’s gesture to Harrison’s mythography and feminist reinterpretations of ancient Greek religion, Mills argues that Woolf may not be distancing herself from Harrison at all. Rather, she could be elevating Harrison to divine status. By omitting the vowels and writing “J—H—,” Woolf evokes the structure of a Jewish inscription, such as the *tetragrammaton*, seen in forms like “G-D” or “YHWH,” (Jaweh) used to avoid the improper invocation of the divine name. So, according to Mills in this reading, referring to Harrison as “the great J—H—” signals an effort to found a new religious narrative: a women’s bible, centred on female intellectual lineage, to be studied and passed on through generations. Yet, as Mills notes, this gesture carries ambivalence. Just as the true pronunciation of the divine name has been lost due to its abbreviation, Woolf’s use of “J—H—” as a goddess honorific may, paradoxically, obscure the memory of a real, accomplished woman scholar. In seeking to sanctify Harrison, Woolf might simultaneously preserve and erase her, as though the religion she is beginning to establish is already dissolving at its inception (Mills 2017, 45).

Mills’s interpretation is particularly compelling when considered in the context of typographic signs as carriers of meaning, as discussed in Chapter II with reference to Michael Field and Monique Wittig. In each of these cases, the visual representation of names or identities through graphemes functions not merely as a stylistic choice, but as a means of interrogating the relationship between the individual and structures of authority, particularly in relation to gendered norms and the social inscription of women’s identities. These strategies also open up space for imagining alternative forms of subjectivity, authorship, and social organization against a patriarchal society.

While it is unknown whether Woolf read the works of Michael Field, *Sight and Song* in particular, we do know from a diary entry that in November 1933 Woolf declined an invitation to attend an evening featuring Ethel Smyth's *March of Women* and a talk by Rebecca West on married women's right to earn, choosing instead to stay home and read "T. S. Eliot's criticism & Michael Field diaries, alone thank God" (1983, 189). As discussed in Chapter II, *Works and Days: From the Journal of Michael Field* was published that same year, offering not only a dual-voiced women's diary but also one written by "female 'outsiders' who sought anonymity and privacy" (Lounsberry 2018, 86). Patricia Cramer outlined how, in her works, Woolf explored the special point of view of outsiders to heterosexuality (Cramer 1992, 178). In 1933 Woolf was herself experimenting with blending poetry, drama, narrative, essay, and more in her work-in-progress *The Years*. As Barbara Lounsberry (2018) notes, the Fields' *Journal*, with its intimate portrayal of the trials and triumphs of English women writers, drafted poems, references to London's literary scene and its main protagonists, may have presented Woolf with a lived version of "the years" (Lounsberry 2018, 77). Lounsberry also claims that *Works and Days* offered Woolf testimony on women as "despised," therefore a primary source for her *Three Guineas* (Lounsberry 2018, 80). Lounsberry's argument on the significance of Michael Field's diaries, as well as those of other writers, as sources of inspiration for Woolf's work may seem somewhat reductive of Woolf's creative autonomy. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the lives of Michael Field could have appeared to Woolf as emblematic of educated, independent women, and classicists, akin to Jane Harrison.

In the manuscript draft of what would later become Woolf's 1937 novel *The Years*, the writer reflects extensively on the effects of unequal educational opportunities between male and female siblings. She highlights the financial imbalance, noting that while £300 per year is allocated for the sons' schooling and university education, only £50 is spent on violin and drawing lessons for the Pargiter daughters, Eleanor, Milly, Delia, and Rose (31). Woolf suggests that the issue lies not in the absence of educational institutions for women, since colleges such as Girton (founded in 1873), Newnham, and Somerville were available, but in the prevailing societal bias against women's higher education: "there was a certain

prejudice against women's colleges" (33–34). Woolf explores how educational inequality creates enduring divisions within families and between siblings (Snaith 2021, 346). In the Victorian home, learning spaces are distinctly gendered as male domains. When Rose attempts to enter her brother's "school room," she is excluded and made to feel intellectually inadequate. The published version of *The Years* traces the lasting psychological impact of this moment, showing how such experiences resonate even decades later (Snaith 2021, 346).

Woolf was interested in how educational institutions detrimentally affected both those included within them and those excluded from them. Her body of work frequently depicts "the procession of the sons of educated men who have been educated at public schools and universities," as they enter various professions. In *Jacob's Room*, the protagonist's straightforward trajectory from Rugby to Trinity College Cambridge and into professional life is interrupted and subverted by World War I. As highlighted by Snaith, the notion of a linear and unified development of 'character' dissolves as the female narrator attempts, and fails, to fully 'know' Jacob. Similarly, the function and outcome of his formal education remain ambiguous, aside from its role in granting him a sense of entitlement and "magisterial authority" (Snaith 2021, 354). Like the young male scholars in *The Years*, Jacob effortlessly inhabits both an intellectual lineage and the physical environments that represent it. His study houses texts by Spinoza, Spenser, "all the Elizabethans," and Dickens, while his academic writing, such as the essay "Does History consist of the biographies of Great Men?", reinforces and legitimizes the white, male intellectual tradition. Woolf further critiques an education system that instils values of competition, nationalism, imperial ambition, and aggression, effectively preparing young men for war. This militaristic indoctrination is vividly illustrated in a scene where undergraduates march into King's College Chapel:

Look as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. What sculptured faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance (Woolf 2008, 38).

The use of military imagery implies that these young men have already been symbolically conscripted into a system where church, state, and university operate as interconnected institutions. This structure explicitly excludes women. Moreover, upon noticing a woman in the chapel, Jacob reflects: “No one would think of bringing a dog into church . . . a dog destroys the service completely. So do these women” (Woolf 2008, 40). Drawing on Samuel Johnson’s misogynistic analogy,⁸⁰ Woolf exposes how Jacob internalizes and reproduces patriarchal notions of women’s incongruity within academic and sacred spaces. The critique thus extends beyond institutional inequality to the deeper, more insidious ideological forces at play. This is the pervasive “odour” or “atmosphere” that Woolf identifies in *Three Guineas*, the “impalpable” yet potent adversary that infiltrates even tangible realities “like salaries, which might have been thought impervious to atmosphere” (Woolf 2015, 134-135).

Both *Jacob’s Room* and *The Years* show male scholarship, privilege, and homosocial bonds as closely tied to classical Greek studies. Jacob is depicted reading and translating Greek, and his subsequent journey to Greece further cements his friendship with Durrant through their shared cultural capital: “It seemed to both that they had read every book in the world. Civilisations stood round them like flowers ready for picking... we’re the only people in the world who know what the Greeks meant” (Woolf 2008, 101-102). Yet, as the narrative unfolds, Woolf gradually exposes the limitations of this education. Jacob is portrayed as disconnected from the historical past, he “knew no more Greek than served him to stumble through a play. Of ancient history he knew nothing” (102), and intellectually ill-equipped to form or articulate his own political views. Education here is portrayed not as critical inquiry but as passive reception and rote learning. Woolf critiques this model of learning, revealing the superficiality underlying the cultivated image of the classically educated gentleman, and suggesting a profound hollowness at the core of this traditional ideal.

1.3 The Intellectual Status of Women

⁸⁰ See Lacey 2002.

The publication of the volume *Our Women: Chapters on the Sex Discord* by Arnold Bennett in 1920, and its subsequent favourable reviews in newspapers such as the *New Statesman*, sparked such indignation and unease in Virginia Woolf that, as she noted in her diary, she was considering “making up a paper upon Women, as a counterblast to Mr. Bennett’s adverse views reported in the papers” (1978, 69). As Susan Dick points out, the diary entry where Woolf contemplates her “counterblast” also contains a moving description of a distinct loss of self-confidence (Dick 1987, 52). At the time, Woolf was working tirelessly on her novel *Jacob’s Room* and, after receiving a visit from T.S. Eliot who praised Joyce’s *Ulysses*, she was left with the feeling that her writing was unworthy: “... I reflected how what I’m doing is probably being better done by Mr. Joyce” (Woolf 1978, 69). An incentive to overcome Woolf’s hesitation on her “counterblast” arrived from the reviews published by Desmond MacCarthy on the *New Statesman* on October the 2nd 1920: “Affable Hawk” (MacCarthy’s penname), in his column “Books in General”, agreed wholeheartedly with Bennett’s assertion that “women are inferior to men in intellectual power, especially in that kind of power which is described as creative.”⁸¹ In the first of two letters to the *New Statesman* Woolf expresses her displeasure with Bennett’s and “Affable Hawk”’s contentious views on women’s intellectual inferiority and, most of all, with their further conviction that neither education nor liberty will alter this fact. Woolf asks how “does Affable Hawk account for the fact ... that the seventeenth century produced more remarkable women than the sixteenth, the eighteenth than the seventeenth, and the nineteenth than all three put together?” (Woolf 1978, 339). Furthermore, as a counterpoint to “Affable Hawk”’s argument, Woolf firstly challenges the notion of male superiority by referring to a tradition of women writers in literary history, mentioning Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Aphra Behn and Jane Harrison to underline the immense “advance in intellectual power” (Woolf 1978, 339); then, she mentions Sappho, universally regarded as equal to Homer since ancient times, as evidence of

⁸¹ The letters will be republished in the form of an essay with the title of *The Intellectual Status of Women* as Appendix iii in the second volume of her diary in 1978. See Woolf, V. (1978), *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 2, 1920 – 1924, ed. A. Olivier Bell, New York/London, HBJ

women's intellectual prowess: "I have often been told that Sappho was a woman, and that Plato and Aristotle placed her with Homer and Archilochus among the greatest of their poets" (Woolf 1978, 340). Woolf also quotes Symonds's and his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873) to demonstrate that liberty and education permitted Sappho, and her school of poets, to express their talents: "The customs of the Aeolians permitted more social and domestic freedom than was common in Greece. Aeolian women were not confined ... they were highly educated ..." (Woolf 1978, 340). In his subsequent reply, not only did "Affable Hawk" remain staunch in his convictions, but he also questioned Sappho's reputation by confuting the value of her fragments and attributing her fame to the story of her leap from the Leucadian cliffs.

In the second letter to "Affable Hawk," Woolf argues for the recognition of a female intellectual tradition and for the need of education and freedom to continue to develop those traditions (Dick 1987, 54) – an argument that will be central to *A Room of One's Own* some years later. After contrasting the conditions which enabled Sappho to express her talents with those that inhibited, in Woolf's time, the expression of the talents of the musician and composer Ethel Smyth, the author states:

It seems to me indisputable that the conditions which make it possible for a Shakespeare to exist are that he shall have had predecessors in his art, shall make one of a group where art is freely discussed and practised, and shall himself have the utmost of freedom of action and experience. Perhaps in Lesbos, but never since, have these conditions been the lot of women (Woolf 1978, 341).

All "activity of the mind should be so encouraged", Woolf affirms near the end of her letter, "that there will always be in existence a nucleus of women to think, invent, imagine and create as freely as men do, and with as little fear of ridicule and condescension" (Woolf 1978, 341).

The intellectual *boutade* in the *New Statesman* inspired, in no small part, Woolf's short story *A Society*. Before turning to the analysis, it is worth briefly outlining the publication history and context of Woolf's short story. Written in 1920 and published in 1921 on *Monday or Tuesday*, Woolf's only collection of short stories, the piece was excluded by Leonard Woolf from *A Haunted House and Other*

Short Stories (1944), the posthumous collection he compiled after her death in 1941. Leonard explained that this exclusion followed Woolf's own decision not to include the story in the new collection of short fiction she had planned to publish in 1942. Dick (1987) suggests that there are likely several reasons behind Woolf's decision not to reprint *A Society*. First, unlike the other seven stories in *Monday or Tuesday*, *A Society* does not exhibit the narrative experimentation Woolf was beginning to explore at the time. In terms of style and structure, it more closely resembles her earlier novel *Night and Day* (1919), which she later described as her "exercise in the conventional style" (Woolf 1978, 231), than the more formally innovative pieces included in the same collection. Second, by 1940, when the idea of a new collection was under discussion, Woolf may have felt that the feminist themes presented in *A Society* had already been more fully and effectively developed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). A third possible reason, which, from a contemporary perspective, only heightens the story's interest, is the degree to which *A Society* reflects, with striking immediacy, the historical and cultural context of its composition (Dick 1987, 51). While some of Woolf's early critics seemed to share her apparent dismissal of the story, several scholars in the 1980s began to recognize its significance, both within Woolf's body of work and in the broader context of feminist literature. For instance, Jean Guiget refers to *A Society* as a "failed venture into militant literature" but "it contains the germs of *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* (quoted in Meyerowitz 238-239). Jane Marcus reads it in terms of "mockery of the institutions of the men of [Woolf's] class" (Marcus 1987, 91).

The story is set between 1909 and 1919, a troubled decade in which the Great War is commemorated by a silent five-year hiatus in the narrative, and portrays a group of independent women, those "daughters of educated men" as Woolf would call them in *Three Guineas*, who gather to form a society with the aim of "asking questions." The group resembles the intellectual women described by Woolf in her letters to the *New Statesman*; as has been noted (Dick 1987, 53), the sort of questions these women are determined to ask invert Bennett's and "Affable Hawk"'s assumptions, for they want to rigorously interrogate the notion that men have produced anything of value:

So we made ourselves into a society for asking questions. ... While all were to read books, look at pictures, go to concerts, keep our eyes open in the streets, and ask questions perpetually. ... Before parting that night we agreed that the objects of life were to produce good people and good books. Our questions were to be directed to finding out how far these objects were now attained by men. We vowed solemnly that we would not bear a single child until we were satisfied (Woolf 2014, 2216).

The story is narrated from the point of view of a character called Cassandra, the name of the well-known mythological figure, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy, who was blessed with the gift of prophecy by Apollo but cursed so that no one would believe her. She famously predicted the fall of Troy but was unable to prevent it. I agree with Dick's assumptions when she says that Woolf's vehement and explicit disagreement with Bennett and "Affable Hawk" made her also aware of the kind of reception her short story, expressing the same ideas of the *New Statesman* letters, would be given by male reviewers (Dick 1987, 55). Therefore, Woolf's choice of naming her narrator Cassandra might be related to her desire of concealing herself behind the voice of that mythologic cursed figure. In Woolf's story, indeed, Cassandra tends to let her readers draw their own conclusions about the discoveries the society makes, rather than expressing evaluations or judgements. However, right at the beginning, Cassandra's voice strikes the sarcastic note that the reader will hear throughout the story: "we drew round the fire and began *as usual* to praise men" (Woolf 2014, 2212; my emphasis).

Undisguised references to "Affable Hawk" can be seen in *A Society* when Cassandra sarcastically advises Castalia, another member of the women's group, to "teach her [daughter] to believe that a man's intellect is, and always will be, fundamentally superior to a woman's" (Woolf 2014, 2224). Furthermore, Castalia's conclusion that men should be kept occupied bearing children so they wouldn't engage in war, and perhaps improve their nature, recalls Woolf's second letter to "Affable Hawk", in which she points out that the occupation that has engaged women "from the earliest times" of bringing "forth the entire population of the universe" has not only taken time and strength but "bred in them some of the most lovable and admirable qualities of the race" (Woolf 1978, 341-2).

After establishing their “society for asking questions” and resolving not to bear children until they have found satisfactory answers, the women spend the next five years investigating various domains of male achievement, including the military, law, scholarship, painting, and literature. Woolf draws on her own involvement in the “Dreadnought” hoax by having the character Rose recount how she disguised herself as an Ethiopian prince and boarded one of His Majesty’s ships.⁸² As in the historical event, the masquerade is only partially successful. The scene in which the ship’s captain is deceived by Rose, now disguised as a gentleman, blends and elaborates elements from Woolf’s own humorous account of the “Dreadnought” hoax, written in 1940. The somnolent judges in the law courts, the vast and sentimental paintings exhibited at the Academy, and Oxbridge’s sterile research into “the question of Sappho’s chastity”⁸³ (all emblematic of male inventions and institutions) lead the women to conclude that men’s so-called superiority produces little of real value. When they turn to the subject of literature, they revisit the assumptions Poll had initially challenged and Bennett articulated in *Our Women*. One member asks: “No woman has ever been an artist, has she Poll?” (Woolf 2014, 2226). Poll’s response recalls Woolf’s first letter to Affable Hawk: “Jane-Austen-Charlotte-Brontë-George-Eliot,” cried Poll, “like a man crying muffins in a back street.” The list fails to persuade Eleanor, as it failed to persuade “Affable Hawk.” Indeed, toward the end of the story, when the women reunite to compare their findings, Eleanor, quoting “from a weekly newspaper,” reads a statement which is almost that of “Affable Hawk”: “Since Sappho there has been no female of first rate.” As Marcus notes, Woolf’s short story is “even more fundamentally subversive than a modern version of *Lysistrata*, when read as a mockery of the institutions of the men of her class, Cambridge University, and the secret society of her friends, her husband, her brother, her uncles, and their cousins, the Cambridge Apostles” (Marcus 1987, 91).

⁸² The “Dreadnought” hoax was a prank orchestrated in 1910 by members of the Bloomsbury Group, including Virginia Woolf, who disguised themselves as Abyssinian royals and tricked the Royal Navy into giving them an official tour of the HMS *Dreadnought*. The hoax mocked the pomp of imperial protocol and highlighted the performative nature of authority and identity. See <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Dreadnought-Hoax/>.

⁸³ Jane Marcus (1987, 81) underlines that the references to Sappho in *A Society* must be read in the context of the “modern cult of Sappho” and, as anticipated in Chapter I, the “search for the real Sappho which reached its peak in Paris before the First World War.”

1.4 Woolf and Greek classicism

Regarding Woolf's "Greekness," Gwyn Jenkins argues that Clara Pater "ignited a passion for the literary study of Greek" (Jenkins 2021, 23). However, Woolf began studying Greek in 1897 under the guidance of George Warr, a leading Greek scholar of the time and a key figure in establishing the Ladies' Department at King's College. By that year, she had gained access to Warr's Advanced Grammar and Reading Class, engaging with texts such as Sophocles' *Oedipus* at a level equivalent to university study. In 1898 Woolf, along with her sister Vanessa, began studying Latin with Clara Pater. Their curriculum included works like Virgil's *Aeneid*, and in the following academic year, Woolf studied both Greek and Latin with Pater, reading, among others, Plato's *Ion* and later Sophocles' *Antigone* (Kenyon Jones and Snaith 2010). *Antigone* deeply captured Woolf's imagination and remained a lifelong influence, particularly for its portrayal of a woman challenging state authority and patriarchal power. The play features in both *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, where in the latter it serves as an "instructive analysis of tyranny" within the political climate of the 1930s (Woolf 2015, 162). Reflecting on this influence in 1934, Woolf wrote: "Reading Antigone. How powerful that spell is still – Greek. Thank heaven I learnt it young" (1983, 257). She described Pater as "perfectly delightful" (Woolf 1975, 26), indicating a deep admiration for both her teacher and the subject. Clara Pater herself was an advocate for women's education, active in the Association for Promoting the Higher Education of Women in Oxford and later became Vice President of Somerville College (Snaith 2021, 350). Woolf's depiction of a queer student–tutor relationship in her short story "Slater's Pins Have No Points,"⁸⁴ through the character Julia Craye, reflects the lasting impact of her time studying with Pater and suggests the broader legacy of her education at King's College. "Slater's Pins Have No Points" follows Fanny as she struggles to make sense of her own pleasure while watching Julia Craye, her piano instructor, with quiet yet intense desire. Woolf employs floral imagery to subtly evoke queer longing as Fanny observes and reflects on Miss Craye.

⁸⁴ The story was first published in the January 1928 issue of *Forum*, as "Slater's Pin Have No Points." Leonard Woolf republished it in 1944 in *A Haunted House and Other Stories* with the title of "Moments of Being: Slater's Pins Have No Points." I chose to retain Woolf's original title.

Notably, Woolf chose not to pursue English literature at King's, despite the presence of influential women on staff, such as Principal Lilian Faithfull and Edith Morley, the latter of whom became the first woman to hold a professorial chair in English at a British university, the University College, Reading. According to Jane Marcus: "Clara Pater, her Latin teacher; Janet Case, her Greek teacher; Violet Dickinson, who read her first essays and got them published; Caroline Emelia Stephen, 'Nun', her Quaker aunt who helped her into the discipline of work and left her a legacy of economic freedom to do it... these were the formative influences on Virginia Woolf's mind" (Marcus 1987, 104).

In her essay "On Not Knowing Greek," published in 1925 in the *Common Reader*, Woolf begins by asking why people should desire to know Greek and whether it can be used as a means of locating the present, of measuring our difference and reflecting on people's own condition (Spiropoulou 2002, 2). By the time she was writing her essay on Greek literature, Woolf had already translated the *Agamemnon* and read all of Sophocles. As Worman points out (2019, 35), "On not Knowing Greek" has always been considered, along with other references to ancient Greek, as evidence of Woolf's longing for a proper formal education on classical languages, largely a privilege for boys of the upper classes. In this respect, Woolf's use of Greece as a trope highlights her awareness of the marginalization of women, especially in her use of it as an exotic world of culture denied to her sex (Fowler 1983; 1999).

Fascinated by the ancient Greek literary tradition, Woolf drew inspiration from its themes, forms, and ideals. For instance, the tragic plays of Sophocles and Euripides particularly resonated with Woolf, as they explored human emotions and the complexities of existence (Fowler 1999, 222). British Hellenism contributed to shaping Woolf's sense of herself as a particularly English writer – and potential inheritor of the classical Greek legacy.⁸⁵ Fowler offers an overview of intertextual references in Woolf's "adaptation" of Greek stylistic conventions such as the chorus, the platonic dialogue, and methods of reporting action in her fiction (Fowler 1999, 217). Moreover, as has been noted, Woolf uses Greece, the Greek language

⁸⁵ On the Victorian ideological assumption of being the descendants as well as the continuators of the ancient classical civilisations see Arcara 2001 and McVicker 2017.

and specifically the female tragic figure as a means of shaping a post-war re-evaluation of British imperialist discourse, even as she also appropriates tragic features for her novels (Worman 2019, 35). Furthermore, since in the Victorian patriarchal society Greek was the key to power, as Marcus points out: “Woolf felt that not knowing Greek – not knowing Greek in groups of schoolboys ... only knowing Greek alone or with a tutor – meant no female intellectual aristocracy” (Marcus 1987, 92). Woolf always claimed an ineptitude at Greek grammar, a subject she found to be “hopelessly dull” (Woolf 1975, 231). She wrote in her diary that her private tutor Janet Case judged her Greek exercise “detestable”: “she saw that my foundations were rotten... & bade me start with the very first exercise – upon the proper use of the article – which I had hitherto used with the greatest impropriety” (Woolf 1978, 183). “On Not Knowing Greek” comes as the culmination of over twenty years of Greek study: an essay in which, despite the self-deprecating title, the author deploys all her skills and explores her fascination for this “enigmatic” dead language – and culture.⁸⁶

Woolf spent several months rereading Greek tragedies and Plato in preparation for writing the essay (Dalgarno 2011, 18), aiming to open up a domain traditionally dominated by university dons, particularly Matthew Arnold and Francis Newman, whom she pointedly leaves unnamed, and by the poet Shelley, whom she explicitly cites. Far from being a lamentation, Woolf’s essay turns out to be a meditation on a language as charming and as dramatic as it can be. The opening sentence of the essay only apparently follows from its title: “For it is vain and foolish to talk of Knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded” (Woolf 1984, 24). In this respect, Hurst underlines that “the ‘ignorance’ Woolf claims is far from straightforward: what she does not know about the Greeks cannot really be known, whether by schoolboys, scholars, or female autodidacts” (Hurst 2006, 221). As Rebecca Nagel (2002) argues, the difficulty of knowing another language extends well beyond grammar and vocabulary; it encompasses psychological

⁸⁶ Emily Dalgarno (2011) notes that Woolf’s title “mimics” Matthew Arnold’s repetition of “knowing Greek” in *Literature and Science*, where he plays on the phrase “some thirty times.” See also Hurst 2019, 20.

dimensions, as well as the effects of climate, physical distance, and historical time. According to Nagel, there are two key psychological aspects at play, only one of which Woolf explicitly addresses, while the other remains implicit in her reflections on the tension between the elitism of Greek and the aspirations of the common reader. On one hand, the inherent difficulty of Greek appeals to those who are drawn to intellectual challenges and to the exclusivity of mastering something beyond the reach of most people. On the other hand, that difficulty demands humility, particularly because the learner can never rely on the validating presence of a native speaker, making true comprehension perpetually uncertain (Nagel 2002, 70). The second psychological aspect identified by Nagel concerns the representation of emotions in Greek literature. Woolf greatly admires the emotional honesty she finds in Greek texts. Yet, just as perfection can carry a certain coldness, the bluntness with which emotions are expressed in Greek literature can make them difficult to read. Woolf observes that such directness lacks the psychological nuance and analytic depth characteristic of modern English or French literature. She illustrates this contrast by setting the concise, unembellished Greek epigrams for the dead against the “sidelong, satiric” war poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (Woolf 1925, 48). Interestingly, Woolf suggests that she herself grew “more Greek” in this regard as she aged. In *A Sketch of the Past*, she critiques the obliqueness of her earlier writing, attributing it not to the influence of modern literary subtlety, but to what she calls the “contemptible training of the Victorian tea table” (Woolf 1985, 164). Drawing on the *topos* of the dichotomy North/South in English literature, Woolf claims that the nature of Attic tragedy was determined by its performance outdoor due to the favourable climate that changes people’s manners:

If we try to think of Sophocles here, we must annihilate the smoke and the damp and the thick wet mists ... With warmth and sunshine and months of brilliant, fine weather, life of course is instantly changed; ... make people voluble; inspire in them that sneering, laughing, nimbleness of wit and tongue peculiar to the Southern races, which has nothing in common with the slow reserve, the low half-tones, the brooding introspective melancholy of people accustomed to live more than half the year indoors (1984, 35).

Rowena Fowler and Yopie Prins, among others, have traced, through the study of Woolf’s notebooks and diaries, what the writer was reading while working

on, and in preparation of, “On Not Knowing Greek.” In those years, in fact, Woolf “returned” to Aeschylus⁸⁷ choosing *Agamemnon*: “though how to read Aeschylus, I don’t quite know: quickly is my desire, but that, I see, is an illusion” – she wrote in her diary (Woolf 1978, 205). Woolf remarked in several entries in the diary her attempts at mastering the text of the *Agamemnon* until she proclaimed with satisfaction: “I now know how to read Greek quick ... and with pleasure” (1978, 73). As Prins notes, the purpose for desiring to read quickly was to “quicken the strange pleasure of reading a dead language” (Prins 2017, 37). In a remarkable passage of “On Not Knowing Greek” Woolf describes her experience of reading Aeschylus:

... tremendous by stretching every phrase to the utmost, by sending them floating forth in metaphors, by bidding them rise up and stalk eyeless and majestic through the scene. To understand him it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us. For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means (1984, 31-32).

The use of the phrase “to take the dangerous leap through the air” that indicates the metaphorical jump into a space between English and Greek (Prins 2017, 37), appears to me also as a reference to Sappho’s leap from the Leucadian cliff, a legend passed on from Ovid, and so central to the Victorian literary tradition⁸⁸. In addition, it is significant that in *A Room of One’s Own*, after the poetic visionary passage dedicated to Jane Harrison, the narrator mentions “the flash of some terrible *reality leaping*, as its way is, out of the heart of the spring” (Woolf

⁸⁷ Reading Aeschylean tragedies was part of Woolf’s training with Janet Case. As Woolf noted in a letter in 1903: “a great flea jumped on to my Aeschylus as I read with Case the other day – and now bites large holes in me”. Woolf kept reading Aeschylus despite the “large holes” in her comprehension or, perhaps, because of them since, in her reading notebook on the *Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus (January 1907), she noted that “in the obscurity of the language lies its dramatic merit.” On Woolf’s reading notebooks see Silver 1983, 146.

⁸⁸ On the reception of Sappho in the Victorian tradition see Prins 1999b.

2014, 2926, my emphasis). In my opinion, the recurring choice of the words “leap/leaping” creates an evocative bridge between Woolf’s works, remarking the influence of the lost glorious Greek past embodied by the poet of Lesbo.

Woolf’s admiration for the alienation of words from meaning, in Aeschylean tragedy, is also expressed in another passage of “On Not Knowing Greek”:

Every sentence had to explode on striking the ear, however slowly and beautifully the words might then descend, and however enigmatic might their final purport be. No splendour or richness of metaphor could have saved the Agamemnon if either images or allusions of the subtlest or most decorative had got between us and the naked cry

ὅτοτοτοῖ πόποι δᾶ • ὥπολλον, ὥπολλον⁸⁹ (1984, 31).

As Prins notes (2005: 180), the Greek quotation, left “naked” in the middle of the page, untranslated and untransliterated, creates a space for reading between English and Greek, producing a striking performative effect on the eye. This is yet another visual strategy that adds layers of meaning, particularly for readers who cannot read Greek. Since one of the main points of “On Not Knowing Greek” is to define what the beauty of Greek is, quoting Greek literature untranslated reinforces the Woolfian idea that the primary reason for studying Greek is its beauty. Woolf concludes that the beauty of Greek literature consists in its serenity, maturity, restraint, and wholeness and “all of these words carry echoes of Ruskin, Arnold, and Pater” (Nagel 2002, 67), the Fathers of British Aestheticism.

For these reasons, quoting words and phrases in Greek all over the essay, Woolf demonstrates how “it is useless to read Greek in translation” (Woolf 1984, 37). A sentence that has even been quoted by Richard Jenkins in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980), along with other quotations from “On Not Knowing Greek.” The problematic nature of translation in this context complicates questions of reading and representation. Translating an ancient text versus translating a living

⁸⁹ “*ototototoi popoi da O’Pollon O’Pollon*”, the invocation to Apollo by Cassandra is preceded by un-intelligible stuttered words. Woolf translated the phrase in her *Agamemnon* notebook as “Ah!. O God! ... Apollo, O Apollo!” using the dots between the exclamation “Ah!” and the vocative “O” to point out “the untranslatability of this cry, the deployment of ellipses (as so often in Woolf’s own prose) to signals something that remain inaudible and can only be visualized graphically on the page” (Prins 2017, 54).

culture involves fundamentally different assumptions: the former is grounded in the documented referentiality of language preserved over centuries, while the latter, typical of ethnographic translation, must account for performance, where meaning is shaped in large part by cultural context (Dalgarno 2011, 28). In “On Not Knowing Greek,” Woolf gestures toward a broader cultural discourse that extends beyond the binary of reading in translation or in the original language. Her observations about how tragedies were performed outdoors, since, according to Woolf, good weather alters people’s manners, highlight the importance of climate, physical distance, and historical circumstance in shaping cultural meaning. Woolf thus moves beyond philological concerns to reflect on the embodied, environmental, and temporal dimensions that inform how texts are produced and received.

Virginia Woolf’s letters to the editor of the *New Statesman* with her critique of Arnold Bennett’s misogynistic assertions on men’s intellectual superiority provide a compelling feminist viewpoint: the author vehemently rejected the notion of an inherent male intellectual superiority and instead argued for women’s intellectual potential, emphasizing the need for equal opportunities and freedom from societal constraints. The feminist ideas expressed in her letters to the *New Statesman*, would be developed years later in *A Room of One’s Own*, which emphasises the importance of economic and intellectual freedom for artistic creation. In this essay, Woolf contended that women require financial independence and a physical space of their own to develop their intellect and to unleash their creative potential. Woolf argued that throughout history, women’s contributions to art, literature, and intellectual pursuits had been stifled by the patriarchal structure of society that denied them agency and opportunity. *A Room of One’s Own* also underlines the undisputable concept that universities are hostile to women because patriarchy is hostile to any ideas which challenge unthinking male supremacy. A concept that Woolf experienced herself precisely in the exchange of letters with the editor of the *New Statesman*.

As previously outlined, I argue that a feminist *fil rouge* allows to connect Woolf’s rejection of “Affable Hawk”’s assumptions of women’s intellectual inferiority with her satirical short story *A Society* and with her landmark essay *A Room of One’s Own*. While *Three Guineas*, arguably Woolf’s most overtly political

work, sits outside the classical framework explored in this thesis, it nevertheless reinforces the same feminist commitment to challenging patriarchal authority and women's institutional exclusion.

Woolf's deep knowledge of the themes and formal techniques of Greek tragedy is disseminated in her fiction. For instance, as Hurst notes (Hurst 2006, 222), Woolf "is interested in the formal features of the tragedy and the novel, commenting on the development of the stage chorus into the fictional narrator." Woolf's interest in classical education and women's relation to it is an aspect of Woolf's criticism of the Victorian educational system, which allowed men to access positions of power from which women were excluded. However, Woolf's feminist approach shows that if, on one side, Greek was the key to positions of power, on the other, Woolf herself expressed her critical views to British imperialism. I would add that by acknowledging her predecessors, from Jane Austen to the classicist Jane Harrison, in her letters to the *New Statesman* as well as in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf highlights women's intellectual achievements despite the lack of formal tuition and freedom.

In response to Woolf's claim that women should be able "to create as freely as men do, and with as little fear of ridicule and condescension," "Affable Hawk"'s last words on the matter were sarcastic and condescending: "If the freedom and education of women is [sic] impeded by the expression of my views, I shall argue no more" (Woolf 1978, 341). One would hope that today – a century later – no male intellectual should genuinely want to argue any more.

Conclusion

In *The Lesbian Body* (1973), Monique Wittig dismantles the conventional structures of language and narrative to stage a radical vision of lesbian embodiment, one that is as much about fragmentation and rupture as it is about poetic reinvention. Though this text is mentioned only in a single chapter in the present study, it offers a flashpoint through which broader patterns in women's literary engagement with the classical past can be illuminated. The resonances between Wittig's linguistic experimentation and the fragmentary, sapphic poetics of Michael Field in *Sight and Song* reveal not so much a direct line of influence, as a shared aesthetic and political sensibility.

Moving backward from Wittig over the course of this thesis, I have examined how classical influence, Mediterranean culture and identity converge in the work of three key authors: Michael Field, Amy Levy, and Virginia Woolf. While writing within the broader constraints of late Victorian and early modernist culture, each of these writers approached antiquity from a distinct historical and personal position. What unites them and has emerged as a key point of this study, is their shared queer positionality and their complex, often subversive, engagement with classical traditions. Through an interdisciplinary lens that draws from Women's Studies, Classical Reception Studies, Gender Studies, and Mediterranean Studies, this research has shown how these writers not only claimed intellectual space through their classical engagements but also transformed ancient material into a means of challenging dominant narratives of gender, sexuality, and cultural identity.

My work began by examining the cultural and ideological framework of Victorian Hellenism, focusing on the ways in which classical antiquity was embedded within English elite education, diplomacy, and masculinity. The knowledge of ancient Latin and Greek languages and culture functioned as both symbols of national identity and tools of exclusion, granting authority only to those who had access to formal education were those were mandatory. The classics functioned not merely as a body of knowledge but as a mechanism of social distinction, deeply embedded in the educational and institutional structures of nineteenth-century Britain. Women, systematically denied this institutional

education, were relegated to the margins of classical discourse. Yet, as I explored through a feminist lens – one that resists aligning with essentialist readings of *écriture féminine*, such as the one proposed by Hélène Cixous – this exclusion did not translate into absence. Instead, women developed alternative modes of engaging with the ancient world, through translation, poetic re-imagining, and the curation of private or informal intellectual spaces. These strategies allowed them not only to claim interpretive agency over classical texts, but to reshape antiquity into a resource for imagining new forms of knowledge, selfhood, and desire.

A key component of this negotiation was the reception of Sappho into English culture, which played a pivotal role in shaping women's imaginative access to the classical past. Sappho became a symbol and a beacon for women writers seeking intellectual legitimacy and emotional resonance within a tradition that had largely marginalised them. By engaging with and reinterpreting Sappho's fragmentary legacy, women such as Michael Field began to carve out a parallel lineage, one that made space for female creativity, homoerotic expression, and a consciously protofeminist reconfiguration of male-dominated spaces.

The second Chapter of this work analysed how Michael Field found in the figure of Sappho both a model and a method. The recurring motif of textual fragmentation that permeates their work resonates with Sappho's surviving corpus and becomes a formal and thematic strategy for articulating female subjectivity and desire in their collection *Long Ago*. Michael Field's legacy culminates in the analogies I attempted to trace between their poetic experimentation in *Sight and Song* and Monique Wittig's radical textuality in *Le Corps lesbien*, reinforcing their shared connections as a continuous thread of lesbian-feminist resistance extending into the twentieth century.

Further evidence can be found in the typographical strategies employed by Michael Field to navigate authorship, identity, and erasure. In *Sight and Song*, the broken signature "Mi-/chael Field" on the title page serves not only as a pseudonym but also as a visually fractured marker of dual authorship and gender ambiguity; it visually registers the dual authorship of Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley while simultaneously troubling the gendered expectations of literary authority.

Similarly, in *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's use of the fragmented initials "J—H—" to refer to Jane Harrison invites speculation and interpretive openness. As explored in Chapters II and IV of this thesis, these typographical choices are not incidental; they function as layered, semiotic gestures that both conceal and reveal, destabilising fixed identities while marking presence through absence. In both cases, fragmentation becomes a site of creative resistance, one that complicates the authority of authorship and mirrors the fragmentary legacy of Sappho herself. These visual and textual strategies connect these women across time, and testify their participation in a queer, feminist poetics that privileges multiplicity, ambiguity, and refusal of normativity. In both cases, typographic fragmentation becomes a site of interpretive richness, a form of resistance against linear, patriarchal narratives of authorship and intellectual history. These gestures further bind Harrison, Field, and Woolf in a shared feminist and sapphic legacy, one that reclaims the classical past in order to articulate new, radical possibilities for female subjectivity and creative expression.

Chapter III explored the work of Amy Levy, a pioneering figure who, as the first Jewish woman to attend Cambridge University, gained access to formal classical education. Levy's reimagining of classical figures such as Medea and Xanthippe reveals her sustained engagement with themes of exile, betrayal, and patriarchal constraint. Through her dramatic monologue *Xanthippe: A Fragment* (1881), Levy reclaims Socrates' wife as a figure of thwarted intellectual ambition, using the classical tradition to critique the systemic exclusion of women from cultural authority. Her work demonstrates a sharp awareness of the continuities between the disenfranchisement of women in antiquity and in the nineteenth century. By reconstructing classical female voices, Levy participates in a feminist project of reinterpretation and resistance. Additionally, the recurring presence of female addressees in her poetry has led scholars to consider how her writing may encode queer desire, suggesting that Levy's engagement with the classics was also a means of negotiating identity, affiliation, and longing outside the bounds of normative heterosexual frameworks.

This constellation of Sapphic figures is united not only by thematic concerns, fragmentation, queerness, reimagined classicism, but also by subtle gestures of

resistance encoded in the very form of their texts. It was through such a gesture that I first sensed the unexpected affinity between Michael Field and Monique Wittig. I recall reading *The Lesbian Body* just before attending a presentation of its Italian translation, curated by Deborah Ardilli. The visual fracture of “Mi-/chael Field” on *Sight and Song*’s book cover had already drawn my attention as an evident disruption of authorship but, listening to Ardilli on Wittig’s work resonated deeply with Field’s poetics of ambiguity and dislocation. Ardilli’s words, drawn from both the preface to the Italian edition and her talk at the Some Prefer Cake Festival in Bologna (Italy), illuminated how queer textuality operates through rupture, ellipsis, and multiplicity. This moment reinforced the critical method that underpins this thesis: reading across fragments, between margins, and along the queer lines of influence that traditional literary histories often overlook.

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