

CAST

HONORIA KATE NESBIT
EUGENIUS BRENT KRAMMES
SATYRUS KYLE BARTON
PLACIDIA MIRIAM JANECEK
VALENTINIAN III/THEODOSIUS II JACOB BENDER
MARSA ANNA WILLIAMS
ANTHEMIUS KATIE WETZEL
PULCHERIA HEIDI RENÉE AIJALA
ATHENAIS LAUREN ROSALES
SERVANT I LYDIA MAUNZ-BREESE
SERVANT II ANNEMARIE PEARSON DE ANDRÉS
PROLOGUE ANNMARIE STEFFES

SETTING — ACTS I, II, AND IV AT RAVENNA
ACT III AT BYZANTIUM

ATTILA, MY ATTILA!

A WORLD PREMIERE

The actors, director, stagehands, and scholars
involved in this production
present this drama in honor of

DR. FLORENCE BOOS.

Written by Michael Field

Adapted and Directed by Annmarie Steffes

Performed by the
Iowa English Department Graduate Players

Saturday, May 2, 2015

Midwest Victorian Studies Association Conference
University of Iowa

AUTHOR BIO

Michael Field is the shared pseudonym of Katharine Harris Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Emma Cooper (1862-1913) – an aunt/niece writing duo who co-published twenty-seven dramas and eight volumes of poetry between 1881 and 1913.

Born to a wealthy family in Birmingham, Katharine Bradley moved into her elder sister Emma's household upon their father's death in 1861 or 1862. Soon Emma became invalid after giving birth to another daughter, and Bradley took responsibility for raising and educating young Cooper. In 1875, Bradley published her first volume of poetry under the name Arran Leigh, and six years later began the collaboration with Edith Cooper (pseudonym "Isla Leigh") with the publication of *Bellerophon*.

In 1884, the pair adopted the name Michael Field and published two verse dramas, *Callirrhoe* and *Fair Rosamund*. Praised by critics, Michael Field were* able to maintain their cover and status until 1889, when, as Bradley predicted, their reputation declined upon the public's learning that "Michael Field" was not a man but rather two spinsters.

By the late 1880's, the pair had developed a deep romantic connection that lasted until their deaths – though in later life the formerly atheist Cooper converted to Catholicism and felt much emotional conflict about the relationship. Nonetheless, their works remained focused on themes of female power, lesbianism, and classical paganism. These themes are all highlighted in *Attila, My Attila*, which the pair published in 1896. Though they received little critical attention for much of the 20th century, Michael Field have enjoyed a recent resurgence as their contribution to women's and queer literature has come to be more widely recognized.

* Like the editors of *Michael Field and Their World* (2007), we have opted to treat Bradley and Cooper's pseudonym as a plural noun.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE:

The Varied Legends of Attila

The majority of accounts of Attila represent him as a violent barbarian, the charismatic leader of the wild Hun hordes, and a man of rapacious greed and unbounded ambition. In life, he was a skilled military commander and shrewd diplomat. At the height of his power, Attila's empire stretched "from the Baltic to the Balkans, from the Rhine to the Black Sea" (Man 1). Like the legends surrounding his life, the events surrounding the death of Attila in 453 CE continue to elicit speculation and exude an aura of mystery. Priscus, the Greek historian and diplomat, wrote the most widely accepted account of Attila's conquests and death. Although it does not still survive, it was copied in the sixth century by the Roman historian Jordanes. According to Priscus, after his marriage to Ildico, Attila suffered a nasal hemorrhage from excessive celebration and drowned in his own blood. While subsequent legends portray Ildico as his murderess, Priscus reports that Attila's attendants found her weeping helplessly beside her husband's body the morning after their wedding.

Likewise, the Germanic and Scandinavian legends and sagas often conflict in their accounts of Attila's death. In one of the stories within the German *Walthersaga*, the hero Walter rescues his childhood sweetheart, Hildegund (also known as Ildico from Priscus's history), from the camps of the Huns. In this story, Attila does not die; he wakes up with a "royal hangover," in comic fashion (Babcock 125). In contrast to this Germanic account, the Scandinavian *Volsungasaga* portrays Attila's death as "spectacular" (Babcock 125). Often these differences occurred due to political reasons: the stories of Attila's death on his wedding night seem to have been conflated with tales of his pillaging for the Scandinavians, whereas the Germanic legends have it that Attila was defeated in battle later by the Burgundians. Thus, Attila's wedding feast allows for the escape of the hero in the *Walthersaga*, only for the death to come later, at a more historically opportune moment for the Germanic stories.

Recently, historian and philologist Michael Babcock has defended Ildico from any culpability, but he argues that Attila's death was indeed murder – the result of an assassination plot at the behest of Marcian, the successor to Theodosius, Emperor of the East. The assassination plot, while only a theory, would have directly resulted from the historical events central to *Attila, My Attila!*. After Honoria sent her ring to Attila with her plea that he save her from an arranged marriage, Attila interpreted Honoria's message as a marriage proposal and a means of accessing the Roman Empire. According to Babcock, "Attila would pursue this dead-end, long-distance relationship for the rest of his life" fueling "his obsession with Rome" (125). In fact, Attila invaded northern Italy in 452 CE after his unsuccessful bid to conquer Gaul and his defeat in the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains.

Field's representations of both Honoria as the "New Woman" and of this moment of historical change rely heavily on the language and sympathies of Edward Gibbon in his canonical work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He highlights the drama within this passage of history and the significance of women in the aptly titled section on Honoria and Attila, "The adventures of the princess Honoria." He also romanticizes their eventual betrothal when he claims that Attila, "almost in the spirit of romantic chivalry, the savage monarch professed himself the lover and the champion of the princess Honoria" (Gibbon 403). By titling this piece as an adventure and an exhibition of "romantic chivalry," Gibbon creates the drama that Field threads throughout their play. Gibbon then suggests that since her marriage might have brought about "some danger to the state, she was raised, by the title of Augusta," which Field uses to open their drama and identify Honoria as a "new woman" of an earlier age (403). Gibbon articulates a degree of sympathy for Augusta's conflict between duty and love:

"But the fair Honoria had no sooner attained the sixteenth year of her age than she detested the importunate greatness which must ever exclude her from the comforts of honorable love: in the midst of vain and unsatisfactory pomp Honoria sighed, yielded to the impulse of nature, and threw herself into the arms of her chamberlain Eugenius." (403-4)

We see this scene repeated in Field's play, but what makes this passage of particular interest are Gibbon's suggestions that firstly, Honoria "sighed," identifying the emotive drama of this history, and secondly that "the impulse of nature" is undoubtedly part of female desire. Gibbon also struggles with the conventions of marriage and morality. He refers to Honoria's pregnancy as her "her guilt and shame," but suggest that these terms are "the absurd language of imperious man" (404).

In Gibbon's history, Honoria is exiled to Constantinople, to live a life of celibacy with the sisters of Theodosius, which drives her to a "desperate resolution." Gibbon claims that,

In the pursuit of love, or rather of revenge, the daughter of Placidia sacrificed every duty and every prejudice, and offered to deliver her person into the arms of a barbarian of whose language she was ignorant, whose figure was scarcely human, and whose religion and manners she abhorred. (404)

Gibbon sympathizes with Honoria, but questions her motives for pursuing Attila, whose every quality she should despise. However, he offers no answers or explanations beyond his own speculation. He suggests that Honoria's fate is ultimately due to her birth as "the daughter of an emperor" (405).

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