AESTHETES AND QUEENS: MICHAEL FIELD, JOHN RUSKIN, AND *BELLEROPHÔN*

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Buried in the first play written by the collaborative playwrights known as Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper)¹ is a statement by their hero that could be taken as a pledge to the principles of the aesthetic movement:

Oh, to cleanse
The air, men's thoughts, the slime-besmear'd fields,
From the eruptive Filth....
it is born in me
To worship what is lovely, and efface
... whate'er
Soils and corrupts the fair earth or man. (13)

One can hear echoes in these lines of the more well-known male nineteenth-century aesthetes – their call for purity and their desire to move out of the nineteenth-century world of commerce, politics, and scientific enquiry.

Until recently, the British aesthetic movement has been seen as primarily a masculine enterprise that reflects its male creators – Rossetti, Swinburne, Morris, Pater, Wilde, Beardsley. However, newer work has revealed the central and sometimes subversive role women have played in the movement (Schaffer, Psomiades). Bradley, Cooper, and their play, *Bellerophôn* (1881), belong in this discussion. The playwrights were very much embedded in *fin de siècle* society. They visited and conversed extensively with Robert Browning, his son, and family. They went to "at-homes" with the Rossettis. They attended lectures and readings by Walter Pater and Paul Verlaine. They went to parties with Havelock Ellis and Oscar Wilde, and attended performances by Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry.

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