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Dever, Carolyn. *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022. 261 pp.

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<1>In her impressive *Chains of Love and Beauty: The Diary of Michael Field*, Carolyn Dever undertakes the daunting task of addressing *Works and Days*, Michael Field's massive diary. Held in manuscript by the British Library and digitized at *The Diaries of Michael Field* <<http://michaelfielddiary.dartmouth.edu/>>, it comprises twenty-nine volumes and some 9500 handwritten pages. The diary has been an essential resource for scholars of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the aunt and niece who published poetry under the name Michael Field. Until now, however, the diary has not been the subject of a scholarly monograph.

<2>Dever's tour de force introduction brings together multiple lines of argument. It is also beautifully, touchingly written, creating a picture of Michael Field as "two women who had a great deal to say, in a world that was not yet ready to hear them" and of the diary as "a story about entangled family ties" (1). Dever demonstrates that *Works and Days* is many things: a moving record of a relationship; a rich repository of biographical information; an important intervention in the turn of the century art world; a record of psychosexual development and family drama; and a novelistic form, including a marriage plot that is synonymous with authorship and collaboration. All of these threads are brilliantly woven together in Dever's overarching argument that the diary's "double narrative" relies on the plot device of female marriage, while subverting the marriage plot's "conventions of time, space, and futurity, including reproductive futurity" (29).

<3>Dever proposes that scholars approach the diary as they would a Victorian multi-plot novel because doing so can enable "new ways of thinking about how literary forms such as novels afford their readers templates for organizing their perceptions of the world" (22). Bradley and Cooper's famous claim that they "are closer married" than Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning is the basis for their own endogamous marriage plot that "cannot betray a girlhood family by choosing

something or someone else” (11). The marriage plot’s competing ideas of fidelity—either to a passionate partner who takes one away from the childhood home, or to one’s family of origin—is the narrative engine of Michael Field’s diary.

<4>Subsequent chapters of *Chains of Love and Beauty* address ten of the diary’s volumes to show Bradley and Cooper “shaping the narrative through distinctively novelistic strategies” (4), especially by appropriating the Victorian marriage plot. Chapters that represent loss are vital to Dever’s argument because they show how Bradley and Cooper revised their sense of their own marriage and their collaboration in light of that loss. Dever views this triangulation—this need of a third term that will “bring Cooper and Bradley together to establish perspective on their twoness” (15)—through a psychoanalytic lens. Ultimately, these losses inspire new ways of being. Their final loss, however, could not be triangulated or narratively recuperated. Cooper dies of cancer in 1913, leaving Bradley alone to write the diary until her own death of cancer, just nine months later.

<5>Chapter one, “A Rebellious Hand,” addresses the diary’s origins. The first volume Bradley and Cooper wrote together is volume two in the British Library, and it precedes by twenty years volume one, the 1868-69 journal that Bradley wrote alone. This complex origin story is further complicated by Dever’s convincing claims that the *true* first volume, held at the Bodleian Library, is Bradley’s 1867-68 diary. This work, writes Dever, “inaugurates many of the formative tropes we will see much later” in *Works and Days* (42): “the temporal and spatial abundance that makes absence presence; the sealing of bonds with material objects, and especially rings; and the conjuring power of Edith Cooper” (43).

<6>Dever explores these narrative touchstones in the 1888-89 volume they wrote together, which begins with the death of Matthew Arnold, narrates the death of Emma Cooper (Bradley’s elder sister and Cooper’s mother), and ends with the death of Robert Browning. Both Browning and Emma, argues Dever, “die to become tropes, figures that Bradley and Cooper use to stabilize their perspectives and identities, both personally and artistically” (55). Dever contends that authorship is, for Bradley and Cooper, another word for marriage, and “by commingling marriage and authorship as literally as they do, Michael Field redeploy the codes of temporality—and specifically, of futurity—that heterosexual marriage narratives so often secure” (24).

<7>This first chapter, because it delves into the interaction and development of the two voices, is essential for establishing the terms of Dever’s investigation. Always sensitive to the “serious complexities of gender and voice” (8), Dever’s analysis of

how Bradley and Cooper narrate death attests to their formal experiments that reconceive time, space, and selfhood.

<8>Chapter two, “The Hot Hands of the Modern,” focuses on 1892-93 and the “existential threat” (72) to Michael Field posed by Cooper’s intense attraction to art critic Bernard Berenson. In the 1892 diary, Dever finds Bradley and Cooper recalibrating their notions of art, love, and collaboration in response to Berenson’s presence in—and ultimate absence from—their lives. This chapter of their life together reveals a pattern: “In the emotional logic of their relationship, Cooper consistently heeds a primal loyalty that keeps her as one with Bradley—but she persistently presses forward and outward to create new affective bonds. . . . Cooper is always seeking something new, something more, something else. But her efforts to embrace a forward trajectory are always thwarted” (99).

<9>Dever’s third chapter, “The Infamous Cliché,” addresses 1897, the year that James Cooper (Cooper’s father, Bradley’s brother-in-law) went missing while on vacation in the Alps. Having left for a walk one day, he never returned, and his body was not found for months. Suddenly, the diary is replete with the “tropes of Victorian melodrama” (105)—mystery, a missing body, foreign actors. Despite this, it was “a deeply happy year for the poets” (122). James dead is easier to narrate into their lives than James alive: “As we so often see with Michael Field, the projection of a disembodied ideal of beatific parental love plays to their advantage: it is clear from the very beginning that James, dead, is much easier to tolerate than the live version. He has been an obstacle, a barrier, to the poets” (108).

<10>The loss discussed in chapter four, “Lilies and Light and Liquor,” is also a gain. In a move that concretizes their status as both orphans and as independent women, Bradley and Cooper leave the family home and all of its associations to establish a home of their own in 1899. At this time, Bradley and Cooper become “the Poets” to “the Artists” Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts. A sustaining aesthetic friendship, the bond with Ricketts and Shannon inspires them create a palace of art in Paragon, the fitting name of their first home together. While their written output is slim in 1899, in decorating Paragon, “their aesthetic life is their aesthetic practice” (142).

<11>The refrain of Oscar Wilde’s “Ballad of Reading Gaol” provides the keynote to chapter five, “Venite Adoremus.” In 1906, Bradley and Cooper literally kill the thing they love: informed that their cherished dog Whym Chow will never recover from an illness, they euthanize him. The dog, writes Dever, occupies a unique psychic space for Bradley and Cooper, because unlike Emma or James, “Chow

enables Michael Fields's fusion as a married couple rather than as daughter figures ancillary to someone else's nuclear family" (174). Thus, this loss is constitutively different from previous losses; the intense and all-consuming grief at Chow's death is Bradley and Cooper's oblique expression of grief over the loss of their own intimacy. The Catholic Church provides a new trinity as both women convert in the year following Chow's death. But Dever finds that when "they translate their relationship from the material into the realm of ideas" (184) they forsake the core of intimacy that had existed between them.

<12>In the final chapter, "The Ends: 1913, 1914, and Beyond," Dever presents "Michael Fields's retreat in grief and desolation" which "marks a very sad ending" (38) in our real-world understanding of their life together. In the world of the diary, however, this reality is belied by the diary's recursive form, where ends are never truly ended and even death is narrated into a new form of living. After Cooper dies, Bradley uses invocation and apostrophe to keep her alive in the diary's daily forms. Cooper thus lives beyond "the constraints of lived experience to remain, however melancholically, among the narrative's woven strands" (205).

<13>In some ways, Dever's book is itself like the Michael Field diary: discursive, wide-ranging, continually fascinating, occasionally digressive. And like Bradley and Cooper in the diary, Dever in *The Chains of Love and Beauty* displays erudition, playfulness, keen powers of observation, and the ability to turn a memorable phrase. Dever's claims about Michael Field's formal innovations would be stronger, however, had she engaged the significant body of scholarship on the diary as a form. Philippe Lejeune, for one, theorizes the mode of temporality specific to the diary form. His work overlaps with Dever's analyses of Bradley and Cooper's temporal strategies in stimulating ways, as does Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's work on life writing and autobiographical subjectivity. Apart from this omission, *Chains of Love and Beauty* is an impressive, important book, sure to be foundational for all future work on Michael Field.