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Chapter 7
Bittersweet: Michael Field’s Sapphic Palate
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**Introduction**
This chapter explores the ‘flavours’ of female homoeroticism in the poetic works of Michael Field. ‘Michael Field’ was the collaborative pseudonym of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, an aunt and niece who enjoyed an intimate romantic and creative partnership spanning a thirty year period, beginning in 1884 with the verse-drama *Callirrhoë* and culminating in two volumes of Catholic poetry published in 1912 and 1913, the year of Cooper’s death (Bradley died a year later in 1914). Bradley and Cooper were prolific; they published poetry, verse dramas and also documented their lives in an extensive joint diary *Works and Days* (1888-1914).

Despite being neglected for the majority of the twentieth century, in the last ten years, critical work on Michael Field has increased dramatically, prompting a renewed recognition of Bradley and Cooper’s varied literary productions.

Bradley and Cooper moved in a circle comprised mainly of male aesthetes and decadents, including Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, Charles Ricketts, Charles Shannon, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. They shared their fellow aesthetes’ interests in the refinement and appreciation of the senses. This manifests in their diaries in detailed descriptions of the colours of flowers, the scents of perfumes, the texture of fabrics, the rhythms of classical music (they were fans of Wagner), among other sensory experiences. In this chapter, I intend to focus specifically on taste in Michael Field’s lyric poetry, examining the juxtaposition of ‘bitter’ and ‘sweet’ flavours across Bradley and Cooper’s oeuvre, with a particular emphasis on *Long Ago* (1889), their debut volume as ‘Michael Field’. I will consider these flavours as reflecting their engagement with the Ancient Greek poetess Sappho, their direct poetic precursors and their own homoerotic desires. Before commencing with this discussion, however, some clarification of the connection between homoeroticism and the senses is required.

**Synaesthesia and Homosexuality**
Synaesthesia has long been associated with sexual inversion – the late-nineteenth century term for homosexuality.¹ Sexologists such as Richard Freiherr von Krafft-
Ebing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs believed that the invert was a hypersensitive, often creative individual, and linked both hypersensitivity and sexual ‘perversity’ to the theories of congenital degeneration popularised by Max Nordau. In *Degeneration*, Nordau examines literary texts such as Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours* (1884) as case studies, linking synaesthesia (epitomised by Des Esseintes’ ‘sniffing of the colour of perfumes’) to sexual perversity (his prurient interest in ‘sexual aberrations’ and corruption of a young boy). However, whilst Nordau argues that synaesthesia can be linked to degeneracy and criminality, the British sexologist Havelock Ellis does not view either synaesthesia or sexual inversion as a dangerous disease, just as an abnormality:

we may compare inversion to such phenomenon as colour-hearing, in which there is not so much defect, as an abnormality of nervous tracks producing new and involuntary combinations. Just as the colour-hearer instinctively associates colours with sounds […] so the invert has his sexual sensations brought into relationship with objects that are normally without sexual appeal.

A typically ‘degenerate’ writer to whom Nordau refers in his study is the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne. Synaesthesia manifests in his work in the form of ‘intricate rhyme schemes and other sound patterns’ combined with ‘fusions and overlaps of visual imagery’ which make ‘excess demands on the reader’s consciousness’. Swinburne’s use of synaesthetic imagery can be linked to his blurring of other boundaries, such as those of gender and sexuality. As Alison Pease argues, the ‘repetitive sexuality’ of Swinburne’s poems results in ‘a bestial, sensual chaos that tends to collapse constructed taxonomies’. We find this tendency expressed through the figure of the androgyne – featured in Swinburne’s poem ‘Hermaphroditus’ (1863) – who combines male and female genitalia, resulting in a ‘double blossom of two fruitless flowers’. We also find this blurring of the genders in Swinburne’s desire to ‘become one’ with Sappho, who was for him, ‘beyond all question the greatest poet that ever lived’. In poems such as ‘Anactoria’ (inspired by Sappho’s Fragment 16) and elsewhere (‘Faustina’, ‘A Match’), Swinburne flaunts his fascination with the powerful *femme fatale*, until this fascination blurs into a kind of female identification: the effeminate man becomes one with the dominant woman.
Swinburne’s poetry therefore seems to bear out Ellis’s suggestion that
synaesthesia and inverted sexuality can be connected – both conditions dissolve the
boundaries between categories, whether sensory, or in terms of the body, gender roles,
and sexual desire. However, in this chapter, I want to address two neglected aspects of
this discussion. Firstly, whilst connections have been drawn between theories of
synaesthesia and *male* homoeroticism in *fin-de-siècle* literature, links between female
homoeroticism and the senses have been less frequently forged by critics.8 Secondly,
whilst scent, visual stimuli and sound have featured in this dialogue, taste and flavour
have figured less prominently. I propose that for Bradley and Cooper, writing together
as Michael Field, the contrasting flavours of bitterness and sweetness came to embody
their experience of female homoerotic desire *and* their identification with Sappho as
an important poetic precursor. These flavours are detected on the tongue – which is,
significantly, the organ of taste, the shaper of lyric speech, and a potential instrument
of sexual pleasure.

‘Heart-trainèd to the tongue’: Singing Sapphic Desire
In 1885, Bradley and Cooper obtained a copy of new English translations from
Sappho, Henry Thornton Wharton’s *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and
A Literal Translation* (1885). They were instantly inspired by these translations,
which were the first to reproduce Sappho’s love lyrics with the female pronouns intact
(previous translations had changed the addressee to male, or suggested that the love
poems were spoken by male personae). In the Preface to *Long Ago*, Michael Field
states their ‘audacious’ intention to extend ‘Sappho’s fragments into lyrics’ – an idea
that was eagerly welcomed by their mentor Robert Browning.9 The result was a
volume of sixty-eight lyric poems, each taking lines from Sappho (in Ancient Greek)
as an epigraph and expanding them into an original poem.

Bradley and Cooper appeal to Sappho in order to signal their inheritance as
women poets. As the most famous and celebrated woman poet, Sappho offered an
unparalleled model for female creativity that inspired many women poets during the
nineteenth century (and male poets too, as we have seen in relation to Swinburne).
Yet, as Margaret Reynolds observes, Sappho offered a far from unproblematic model
of female poetic identity:
At a time when women were becoming increasingly radical in their demands for political and social freedoms at the expense of domestic claims, this fated nineteenth-century Sappho sang a song where art and love were mutually exclusive […] the results for women poets were ambivalent. To be identified as a ‘modern Sappho’ was both an inspiring blessing and an inhibiting curse.¹⁰

Sappho’s story seems to epitomise the suffering of the woman poet who must choose between art and love. The impossibility of this choice, and her rejection by Phaon (the boatman she loved, according to Ovid and later classical writers) results in her suicidal leap from the Leucadian cliffs. This narrative continues in Madame de Staël’s influential novel Corinne (1807), which imagines the woman poet as a captivating performer who enjoys public adulation before her tragic death. The nineteenth-century poetesses L. E. L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon) and Felicia Hemans continued this theme in ‘The Improvisatrice’ (1824) and ‘Corinne at the Capitol’ (1830).

But for Bradley and Cooper, writing later in the nineteenth century, Sappho represents an empowering example of a woman who made desire the very subject of her song. Rather than being the passive object of love poetry – the silent muse with which women had long been associated – Sappho’s lyrics instead address men and women as her muses, placing her firmly in the position of poet. This was a model of creativity that Bradley and Cooper wished to emulate. This aspiration is expressed in an early poem by Bradley (published under her first pseudonym ‘Arran Leigh’) entitled ‘The New Minnesinger’ which articulates her belief that women must add their own voices to the tradition of love poetry, hitherto dominated by men:

O Woman, all too long by thee
   Love’s praises have been heard;
But thou to swell the minstrelsy
   Hath brought no wealth’ning word.
Thou, who its sweetest sweet canst tell
   Heart-trainèd to the tongue,
Hast listened to its music well
   But never led the song!¹¹
The image of the ‘tongue’ is significant here, recalling the Ovid’s myth of Philomela, another important origin story for female creativity. As in the case of Sappho’s unrequited love, the myth of the nightingale associates poetic creativity with both femininity and pain. Drawing on this myth, Bradley asserts that rather than being silenced, woman must learn to use her tongue – trained to detect ‘sweetest sweet’ music – in order to ‘lead the song’. Elsewhere, she and Cooper declare that it is: ‘Sweeter to sigh than be sighed over, / Sweeter to deal the blow than bear the grieving, / That girl will learn who dares become a lover’. Sappho’s poetry, full of love lyrics expressed to various named addressees, offer an inspiring example of a woman who ‘dared become a lover’ and a poet.

Sappho was also a particularly inspiring model for Bradley and Cooper due to her ambiguous sexuality. Whilst increasingly associated with lesbian desire by the end of the nineteenth-century (due to the work of poets with strong classical abilities, such as Swinburne, who envisioned Sappho as a homoerotic figure), ‘Victorian Sappho’ continued to represent heterosexual desire. Thus, for the late-Victorian ‘educated reader, up-to-date with the developments in Greek scholarship, Sappho represented a sexual ambivalence: still the lover of Phaon, but now also clearly linked with a homoerotic female community’. Sappho appealed to Bradley and Cooper as a model for their poetics precisely because ‘she represents a category-defying mixture of sexual imagery which usefully tropes the identity configured within the space that is “Michael Field”’.15

Finally, in addition to her enabling sexual ambiguity, Sappho’s lyric fragments offered Bradley and Cooper a treasure-trove of sensual imagery to incorporate into their own verse. Her poetry is replete with descriptions of luxurious objects, intoxicating scents, scintillating colours and delicious flavours. The modernist poet H.D. alludes to this in her essay ‘The Wise Sappho’ (1918), associating Sappho with tints ‘of rich colour […] violets, purple woof of cloth, scarlet garments, dyed fastening of a sandal, the lurid, crushed and perished hyacinth’. Jane McIntosh Snyder notes that: ‘Such details of appearance, clothing, and adornment are essential aspects of the Sapphic texture of desire’, connecting this to a female tradition of writing about clothes, fabrics and dyes. In their diaries, Bradley and Cooper also participate in this tradition, focusing intently on details of clothing which they often incorporate into poems. However, they also draw upon a language of taste and flavour derived from Sappho’s lyrics, to which I now turn.
‘Of love, the bitter-sweet, I sang’: Flavour in Michael Field’s *Long Ago* (1889)

Our modern understanding of flavour is itself a late-nineteenth century phenomenon. Research during the *fin-de-siècle* period focused on the idea that different areas of the tongue detected different tastes. In 1880, the Austrian physiologist Maximilian von Vintschgau concluded that there were four basic tastes: sweet, sour, bitter and salty.\(^{19}\) It is interesting to note that Bradley and Cooper’s lyric poetry is written at precisely the moment that science is defining the location of tastes on the tongue, and these flavours – particularly bitterness, saltiness and sweetness – pervade Michael Field’s *Long Ago*.\(^{20}\) For example, the word ‘sweet’ occurs thirty-one times in the volume. In ‘Poem III’, addressed to Phaon, Michael Field’s Sappho hungers for sweet honey; a metaphor for her unrequited desire:

> Oh, not the honey nor the bee!
> Yet who can drain the flowers
> As I? Less mad, Persephone
> Spoiled the Sicilian bowers
> Than I for scent and splendour rove
> The rosy oleander grove,
> Or lost in myrtle nook unveil
> Thoughts that make Aphrodite pale. […]

> Honey! clear, soothing, nectarous, sweet,
> On which my heart would feed,
> Give me, O Love, the golden meat
> And stay my life’s long greed –
> The food in which the gods delight
> That glistens tempting in my sight!
> Phaon, thy lips withhold from me
> The bliss of honey and of bee.\(^{21}\)

This poem is based on Sappho’s fragment ‘Neither honey nor bee for me’, which, according to Wharton, was composed as an epithalamion poem. The phrase is spoken by a bride who wishes for ‘good unmixed with evil’.\(^{22}\) Field’s poem, however, seems
to express a different wish – their Sappho is hungry to experience pleasure (the sweetness of honey) even if it comes with a potential sting in its tail. The language of temptation and danger implies that consuming this honey will result in bitterness – like Persephone, this desirous woman will pay an awful price for revelling in the sensual delights of nature. This grim fate is hinted at by the presence of ‘rosy oleander’ which, despite its pleasing appearance, is a highly poisonous plant.

In ‘Poem XVII’ of Long Ago, presumably having consorted with Phaon, Sappho reaps the consequences of her rash actions, crying to Artemis for her lost ‘maidenhood’:

And Sappho touched the lyre alone,  
Until she made the bright strings moan.  
She called to Artemis aloud –  
Alas, the moon was wrapped in cloud! –  
“Oh, whither art thou gone from me?  
Come back again virginity!”

When Artemis rejects her, Sappho’s suffering is figured as bitterness: ‘O Sappho, bitter was thy pain!’ The golden honey in ‘Poem III’ is contrasted with the cold silver moon in ‘Poem XVII’, just as the sweetness of pleasure is juxtaposed with the bitterness of rejection. Long Ago ends with an unnumbered poem which imagines Sappho’s leap off the cliffs – a stark coastal setting that contrasts with the floral fecundity of earlier lyrics in the volume:

O free me, for I take the leap,  
Apollo, from thy snowy steep!  
[…] let me be  
A dumb seabird with a breast love free,  
And feel the waves fall over me.

Reading across Long Ago as a whole, I suggest therefore that two opposing flavours can be identified – honey, nectar, sweetness, and bee imagery, on the one hand, which is addictive and (eventually) cloying, and bitter, salt, sweat, tears and sea-spray flavours, which represent the bitterness of unrequited or impossible love.
These two flavours are drawn from a distinctly Sapphic palate derived from Sappho’s fragments. As the poet Anne Carson observes: ‘It was Sappho who first called eros “bittersweet”’. In Fragment 130, Sappho describes love as: ‘Sweetbitter, impossible to fight off, creature stealing up’. Two poems from Long Ago make direct reference to this famous fragment: in ‘Poem XXVIII’, Michael Field’s Sappho describes love as a ‘fatal creature, bitter-sweet’. In ‘Poem LXII’, she states: ‘Of love, the bitter-sweet, I sang / Because I owned a glory in its curse’.

The Greek word ‘glukupikron’ translates literally as ‘sweetbitter’, implying, as Diana Collecott notes ‘that Eros brings sweetness and then bitterness, in that order: the usual English translation inverts these elements’. Catherine Maxwell argues that Sappho’s ‘characterisation of the oxymoronic bittersweetness of love has pervaded lyric poetry ever since’ and during the Renaissance was ‘used extensively without realisation of its original source’. Edgar Wind confirms that Sappho was the originator of the term ‘bittersweet’, which was later incorrectly attributed to Orpheus by the Italian Renaissance philosopher Ficino: ‘there can be no doubt that the cult of ambivalent love as defined by Sappho, and now proclaimed by Ficino as an Orphic tradition, had an influence on the “bitter-sweet” style of the Petrarchists who regarded themselves as Platonic poets’.

As avid readers of Ancient Greek literature, it is likely that Bradley and Cooper used the term ‘bittersweet’ with an awareness of the Sapphic origins of the term. Bradley attended summer courses in classical languages at Newnham College, Cambridge in 1874. She and Cooper also studied Latin and Ancient Greek at University College, Bristol on moving to the city in 1879. Hence, the two women were well-versed in Ancient Greek before encountering Wharton’s volume in 1885. As a result of this classical education, we can observe Sappho’s influence on their poetry before Long Ago. In an early poem, entitled ‘Bitter-Sweet’ (in The New Minnesinger, 1875) Bradley uses the term in connection with memory, loss and homoerotic love, suggesting her consciousness of the Sapphic roots of this word. ‘Bitter-Sweet’ laments the loss of a female beloved, contrasting this with a natural setting of late summer in full bloom:

O roses that for her are sweet!
O scent of new-mown hay!
O grand old chestnuts, at whose feet
The happy children play!

What bitter memories ye may be,
What memories bitter-sweet;
Again beneath the chestnut tree
The little ones may meet;

The roses bloom in pinken spray
'Mid briary thickets fair;
But she who made the summer-day
May be no longer there.

O what, an’ if the roses red,
The hay about our feet,
Should mind us of the darling dead
For whom they once were sweet!33

This poem demonstrates Bradley’s early awareness of Sappho, whose fragments use the imagery of bitterness and sweetness to lament the absence of past lovers or bemoan their unattainability – as in ‘Fragment 31’ when Sappho listens to her lover’s ‘sweet speaking’ to another man:

He seems fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly it sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue is snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying.34

It is possible to detect faint echoes of Sappho’s fragment in Bradley’s ‘Bitter-Sweet: the ‘new-mown hay’ and ‘briary thickets’ evoke ‘greener than grass’, the blooming of the roses parallels the blush of Sappho’s cheeks, and, of course, the preoccupation of both poems is imminent death and loss (in Bradley’s case, this is perhaps a reference
to the death of her mother in 1868; *The New Minnesinger* is dedicated to ‘My Mother’s Memory’). Matthew Mitton detects an echo of Sappho’s fragments in another of Bradley’s early poems, ‘From the Ballads of Göthe’: ‘Alas that gentle feet should tread / Upon a violet’s lowly head! / And must I die? O still ’tis sweet / To perish at the lov’d one’s feet!’ Mitton notes that these ‘four lines recall Sappho’s fragment –“As on the hills the shepherds trample the hyacinth under foot and the purple flower [is pressed] to earth” – which Bradley and Cooper [...] turn into ‘V’ from *Long Ago*.’

‘Bittersweet’, along with other poems from *The New Minnesinger*, therefore supports the suggestion that Bradley was aware of Sappho’s work *before* reading Wharton’s edition of the fragments. Bradley and Cooper would also have been aware of Sappho through their reading of Swinburne. According to Elizabeth Prettejohn, Swinburne’s ‘Sapphic poems of the 1860s were an avowed inspiration’ for Wharton in making his translations.37 Swinburne links ‘bittersweetness’ to explicitly erotic scenarios in poems such as ‘Frigoletta’ and ‘Anactoria’. For example, in ‘Frigoletta’ – again inspired by a hermaphroditic figure – the speaker is overcome with the ‘bitterness of things too sweet!’ Another poem, ‘Anactoria’, spoken by Sappho, opens with the statement: ‘My life is bitter with thy love’. Later in the poem, Sappho sadistically fantasises about consuming Anactoria’s body:

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Ah that my mouth for Muses’ milk were fed
On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!
That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste
The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!
That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat
Thy breasts like honey! that from face to feet
Thy body were abolished and consumed,
And in my flesh thy very flesh entombed!
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The lover’s body, described here through the language of tastes found in such sensual Biblical passages as the ‘Song of Songs’ (in which the Bride’s lips drip ‘honey and milk’ and her navel is ‘a round goblet’) and from the symbolism of the Eucharist itself, is almost cloying in its sweetness.40 Sappho’s unrequited love may be ‘bitter’,
but her lover’s body is sickly sweet (the words ‘sweet’ or ‘sweeter’ occur twenty-four times in the poem).

The entire poem plays on parallels between bodily eroticism and lyric composition; for example, Swinburne uses the word ‘feet’ to refer to the metrical units of the poem: ‘seven times sweet, / The paces and the pauses of thy feet’. In the same way, Sappho’s wishes to taste Anactoria’s blood with her tongue, in order to compose her orally into a poem: ‘thy body is the song, / Thy mouth the music’. In a similar way, in her own Fragment 31, Sappho’s ‘broken tongue’ signifies her bittersweet suffering – and uncannily anticipates her shattered poetic corpus (and her violent death): ‘What is spoken […] is the violence of Sappho’s fragmentation’. Thus, Swinburne’s poem employs Sappho’s own imagery of the tongue to simultaneously signal acts of lesbian oral eroticism and lyric (de)composition.

Walter Pater also references Sappho’s fragment in his Greek Studies (1895), describing Bacchus as: ‘the god of the bitterness of wine, “of things too sweet”; the sea-water of the Lesbian grape become somewhat brackish in the cup’ (brackish means ‘slightly salty’). This description refers to the painting of Bacchus (1867) by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Simeon Solomon which depicts the god as a dark-haired youth with strikingly feminine features. While the quotation is taken from Swinburne’s ‘Fragoletta’, Pater also indirectly references his ‘Anactoria’, in which Sappho refers to ‘all the broken kisses salt as brine / That shuddering lips make moist with waterish wine’ and ‘stinging lips wherein the hot sweet brine / That Love was born of burns and foams like wine’. Pater thus implicitly connects male and female homoeroticism by subtly layering references to Sappho’s original fragment and to Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria’, couched within his suggestive description of this homoerotic painting, thus uniting both homoerotic traditions within the same sensual Hellenistic world. This description may also signify Pater’s awareness that Solomon himself was in fact as fond of portraying Sapphic subjects as he was male homoerotic figures – he completed a Study of Sappho in 1862, a watercolour Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene (1864) and Erinna Taken from Sappho (1865), a sketch which dramatises Fragment 31.

‘A little cave that cleaves’: Landscape, Sensuality and the Female Body
Michael Field therefore inherit their Sapphic palate from their admired decadent contemporaries, Swinburne and Pater, and use it in a similar way to represent the
pleasures and pains of homoerotic love. However, theirs is also a specifically female homoerotic aesthetic. Bradley and Cooper use natural imagery of sweet flowers, honey, dew and salty moisture to implicitly draw parallels to the flavours of the female body. This approach is derived from Sappho herself: as Snyder observes, Sappho’s fragments blur descriptions of nature with a specifically female geography. For example, in Fragment 96, Sappho writes of a woman who surpasses all others just as:

the rosy-fingered moon

surpasses all the stars; the light
spreads over the salty sea
equally as over the many-flowered fields.

And the dew grows beautifully liquid
and roses and tender chervil
flourish, and flowery honey-lotus.46

Snyder notes that in Sappho’s fragments (and in Homer’s writings) ‘the dew is described as “female” […] because women were associated with fluids and moisture (blood, amniotic fluid, vaginal secretions)’. In Fragment 96, Sappho therefore ‘seems to be capitalizing on an already established pattern of symbolism whereby dew-covered flowers represent the female body’.47

In several poems from Long Ago, Bradley and Cooper forge a similar connection; for example, in ‘Poem I’, where amorous maidens twine dewy garlands and recline on mossy beds together, or other lyrics where moist flowers offer veiled imagery of female genitalia. For example, in ‘Poem LII’, Michael Field’s masterful rewriting of the Tiresias myth, female sexual pleasure is described using the metaphor of a budding tree and a blooming rose:

the thrill of
springtide when the saplings fill.
Though fragrant breath the sun receives
From the young rose’s softening leaves,
Her plaited petals once undone
The rose herself receives the sun.48

This gives the tastes described elsewhere a remarkably erotic charge – the licking of honey or the sweetness of the dew-soaked flower petal become symbols of female homoerotic desire. This sensuality is vividly evoked in ‘Fragment XLIII’ which describes the home of the nymths:

Cool water gurgles through
The apple-boughs, and sleep
Falls from the flickering leaves,
Where hoary shadows keep
Secluded from man’s view
A little cave that cleaves
The rock with fissure deep.

Here, the imagery of the hidden grotto recalls the secreted spaces of the female body. This poem drips with moisture and fecundity, from the gurgling stream to the cave where the nymths dwell, secluded ‘from man’s view’:

Worshipped with milk and oil,
There dwell the nymths, and there
They listen to the breeze,
About their dewy hair
The clustered garlands coil,
Or, moving round the trees,
Cherish the roots with care.49

Like their fertile surroundings, the nymths are fed ‘milk and oil’, their hair ‘dewy’ with fresh garlands. This is an idyllic world of mutual nourishment. This poem is based on Sappho’s Fragment 2, which ends with an entreaty to Cypris (an alternative name for Aphrodite) to ‘pour gracefully into golden cups nectar that is mingled with our festivities’.50 Prins observes that the synaesthetic ‘commingling of sensations in the first three stanzas […] anticipates the commingling of the nectar in the fourth’.
Once again, it is flavour – in this case, nectar – that provides a metaphor for erotic commingling, since the Ancient Greek word ‘ommemeichmenon [mingle] also has sexual connotations, as in the intermingling of bodies’. 51

The poem epitomises Bradley’s and Cooper’s ‘homoerotic topography’ in which the ‘language of place shades into the language of the body’. 52 The cleft – concealed by coils of dewy foliage, leading to hidden, fertile roots – evokes a suggestively vulvic landscape. This landscape draws its inspiration from Wharton’s Preface, in which he cites a passage from John Addington Symonds’s Studies of the Greek Poets (1873) where Symonds describes the sensual delights of Lesbos:

All the luxuries and elegance of life which that climate and the rich valleys of Lesbos could afford, were at their disposal: exquisite gardens, in which the rose and hyacinth spread perfume; river-beds ablaze with the oleander and wild pomegranate; olive groves and fountains [...] fruits such as only the southern sea and sea-wind can mature [...] In scenes such as these the Lesbian poets lived, and thought of Love. When we read their poems, we seem to have the perfumes, colours, sounds and lights of that luxurious land distilled in verse. 53

As Prins observes, in this passage: ‘the landscape of Lesbos, with its valleys and rivers, spreading perfumes and feathery maidenhair, assumes the contours of a female body’. 54 Bradley and Cooper, in turn, build on this approach in order to create the decadent, sensual world of Long Ago.

Flavour is key here, as the sea-ripened fruits, olives and fresh herbs that Symonds mentions populate Bradley and Cooper’s verse, signifying the flavours of the female body. This sensuality is evoked through the act of garland weaving. In the act of garland-weaving, dewy flowers are joined together; an apt metaphor for lesbian love-making, echoing Swinburne’s Sappho’s demand in ‘Anactoria’: ‘Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower / Breast kindle breast’. 55 Skilful garland-weaving also requires dexterous finger work – reminding us of Virginia Blain’s entreaty ‘not to overlook the importance of hands as signifiers of erotic power’ in Michael Field’s poetry. 56 In ‘Poem XIII’, Dica is praised for her garland-wreathing: ‘Dica, the Graces oft incline / To watch thy fingers’ skill / As with light foliage they entwine / The aromatic dill’. 57 This weaving can be read as an erotic, possibly
masturbatory act, as Dica’s deft fingers ‘seek the fount where feathery, / Young shoots and tendrils creep’. If this seems far-fetched, consider that Bradley and Cooper wrote openly of Giorgione’s painting ‘The Sleeping Venus’: ‘Her hand the thigh’s tense surface leaves, / Falling inward. Not even sleep / Dare invalidate the deep, / Universal pleasure sex / Must unto itself annex’.

Bradley and Cooper’s garlands are tactile, scented and flavoured. They are composed of herbs that are aromatic, succulent and visually-appealing: of ‘piercing, languorous, spicy scent, / And thousand hues in lustre blent’. This lends them to a distinctive oral eroticism – the flavour and scent of the garland is suggestive of the salt, spice and sweet aromas of female genitalia. This sensuous connection between landscape and the female body can be discerned in a later poem ‘Circe at Circaeum’, written by Cooper around 1900 and published in the posthumous 1914 collection Dedicated. The poem re-imagines the myth of Circe, Glaucus and Scylla from Circe’s point of view. In the original tale, Circe’s jealous love for the sea-god Glaucus led her to transform Scylla into a monster, by poisoning the water where she bathed. Cooper’s poem envisages Circe brewing her potion at her island home: ‘the shaggy rims / Of the shore’s last rock-pool’. Circe’s potion ‘bleeds’ a ‘drooping poppy leaf’ into ‘the vast glitter of the brine’, but it is her sweet breath itself that gives the spell its potency:

She breathes as if the rustling ferns set free
The evening dew; she looses from her bosom
A trail of jasmine-flower; her breathing stirs
All that bees ravish from auriculas
Of drugged, delicious, smothering meal; she closes
With tremor to the shadowy breeze her lids,
And lets her sweetness overlap the salt.

Here, Circe’s body and nature merge deliciously – it is her sweetness that infuses the salt of the sea. In this sense, Circe’s body becomes one with that of her coastal surroundings – the salty rock pool – just as Scylla becomes yoked to dogs and other monstrous parts in Ovid’s original myth: ‘In vain she offers from herself to run / And drags about her what she strives to shun’. As Marianne Govers Hopman observes, we can read Scylla’s corrupted nether regions as embodying horror at female genitalia
Cooper’s poem offers a counter-point to that myth; the imagery in ‘Circe at Circulaem’ describes a cave dripping with brine, but transforms disgust at female genitalia and fluids into a celebration of women’s power and autonomy. The poem manages to revise a story of female rivalry and body-horror into a portrait of Circe’s self-sufficient sensuality. The flavours of saltiness and sweetness are key to this – far from experiencing the ‘bittersweetness’ of love, Circe instead blends the sweetness from her bosom and her breath with the brackish ‘ocean-ooze’ that swirls around her lower half, resulting in orgasmic ‘spasm-waves in coiling current spread’.

‘Lay upon our tongues Thy holy Bread’: Later Poetry
Bradley and Cooper continue to develop their symbolic language of taste in their later poems. The title of their 1908 volume *Wild Honey from Various Thyme*, written during the period in which Bradley and Cooper converted to Catholicism, refers to John the Baptist’s sustenance in the desert:

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Wild was the honey thou did’st eat;
The rocks and the free bees,
Entombed thy honeycomb.
[…]
Or taste of desert food
We have beheld thy Vision on the road.
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Here, Bradley and Cooper compare the experience of conversion to the ingestion of honey. This trope is derived from the Bible in which ‘the gift of prophecy is figured […] as an eating of the book which taste like honey in the mouth’. But elsewhere in the volume, Bradley and Cooper continue to utilise the Pagan imagery we find in their earlier lyrics (including *Long Ago*); for instance, in the pair poems ‘The Feeding of Apollo’ and ‘The Feeding of Bacchus’. Bradley and Cooper’s creative conversion is aided by their use of bee imagery that has both Pagan and Christian connotations. Thain points out that the bee was revered in Ancient Greece, where poets were often named after bees ‘because of their noise and their ability to produce sweetness’. Bradley and Cooper were clearly aware of this when writing *Long Ago*; in ‘Poem XXVI’, Sappho describes a young woman she is training to become a poet ‘whose
soft lips are dumb; / The golden bees about them hum’. The use of bee symbolism therefore connects the sweet honey Sappho yearns for with John the Baptist’s wild honey in the desert.

Another poem from *Wild Honey* entitled ‘Festa’ celebrates Bradley and Cooper’s life together as delicious banquet of the senses. The speaker of the poem sits with her beloved in a ‘white river room’ (which may represent the poets’ Richmond home by the Thames, The Paragon, where they moved in 1899). Here, the ‘festa’ (an Italian word for a religious festival) marks the celebration of their relationship:

A feast that has no wine! O joy intense,
Clear ecstasy in one white river-room!
To-night my Love is with me in the bloom
Of roses – laughing at their redolence:
““A cedar-coffer, a miasma dense
With suck of honey”... Dote on their perfume,
Find tropes! I, shuddering at thy rescued doom,
Sigh for some wider token to my sense
Of the wonder that I have of thee, my bride,
My feast...The candles burn: they are too few.
But, hist! the river-night hath heard my sigh:
The candles reappear and multiply.
Procession-wise in filmy lights outside;
And the oar plashes as from singing dew.

Fragrance plays a central role in this poem, as the beloved challenges the speaker to ‘find tropes’ for the evocative perfume of the roses. But flavour is also present via the speaker’s synaesthetic response: the feast needs ‘no wine’, for the banquet is ‘the suck of honey’ exuded by the roses. The companion is also hailed as ‘my bride, my feast’, recalling verses from the ‘Song of Songs’: ‘I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat [...] drink abundantly, O beloved’ (5: 1). These lines are also reminiscent of Swinburne’s Anactoria, who desires to consume the beloved, describing her fingers as ‘good to bruise or bite / As honeycomb of the inmost honey-cells, / With almond-shaped and roseleaf-coloured
The image of ‘singing dew’ at the close of the poem evokes the dew-wet foliage of *Long Ago* with all its connotations of feminine sexuality. The beloved reawakens the speaker’s senses (giving ‘wider token of my sense’) culminating in ‘clear ecstasy’ – and in poetic creation: the dew is ‘singing’ like the poet.

Another poem from *Wild Honey* that employs flavour symbolism is ‘Cherry Song’. The speaker dreams of ‘Where I ate cherries with thee in a valley, / And the fruit was red’ and ‘the juice was sweet’. The location of this poem in a dream-like space, combined with its regular nursery rhyme-like quatrains, works to play down the erotic connotations of the juicy cherries. The poem calls to mind Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ (1862). In Rossetti’s much-analysed poem, sisterly love shades into erotic desire as Lizzie begs her sister:

Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez’d from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me

Critics such as Mary Wilson Carpenter describe the poem as ‘undeniably homoerotic’: ‘The result of Laura’s totally unrestrained, orgiastic consumption of the “juices” on her sister’s body is her restoration to life and health and […] to desire’. Rossetti was the only contemporary woman poet openly revered by Bradley and Cooper – in their poem ‘Why are Women Silent?’ they place her alongside Sappho as an example of female poetic mastery resulting from unrequited passion:

O Christina, by thy cry of pain,
Sappho by thy deadly sweat, I answer women can attain
The great measures of the masters only if they love in vain.

This ‘deadly sweat’ recalls Fragment 31, in which Sappho’s body shaken by a cold sweat. We can also detect ‘bittersweetness’ in this image: the word ‘sweat’ bears a visual resemblance to sweet, yet it is salty to taste. Given their admiration of Rossetti
and the incestual nature of their own relationship, it is likely that Bradley and Cooper found inspiration in Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’, a poem that combines religious symbolism, mouth-watering fruits and female homoeroticism.

Thus, these poems from *Wild Honey* demonstrate that despite their conversion to Catholicism, Bradley and Cooper continued to employ the language of flavour to represent desire. In keeping with this, their later religious poetry, published in *Poems of Adoration* (1912) and *Mystic Trees* (1913), features erotic imagery of Eucharistic consumption and of Christ’s wounds. Consider, for example, the poem ‘A Crucifix’ that describes Jesus as ‘a welcoming open fruit’ and the poem ‘Imple Superna Gratia’ (meaning ‘Fill up with divine grace’) which expresses a vampiric desire to feed on the wounds:

We may enter far into a rose,  
Parting it, but the bee deeper still:  
With our eyes we may even penetrate  
To a ruby and our vision fill; […]  
Give me finer potency of gift!  
For Thy Holy Wounds I would attain,  
As a bee the feeding loveliness  
Of the sanguine roses. I would lift  
Flashes of such faith that I may drain  
From each Gem the wells of Blood that press!76

In this poem, the speaker desires to penetrate and feed on Christ’s wounds just as a bee pollinates a rose. This is strikingly reminiscent of *Long Ago*’s ‘Poem III’, in which Sappho longs to drain the flowers of their honey and nectar. The disturbingly vampiric imagery of this poem transforms transubstantiation – the transformation of Christ’s body and blood into the bread and wine taken at communion – into ‘a sexualised feeding on Christ’.77 This feeding also encodes a specifically *female* homoeroticism, as the speaker imagines ‘parting’ the leaves of the rose to reach its deepest centre. As Paula Bennett notes, flowers, jewels and bees – all of which found in this poem – function as clitoral symbols in nineteenth-century women’s poetry.78 Oral eroticism permeates the poem; the speaker wishes to drink and ‘drain’ the flower of its ‘ruby’ nectar, evoking menstrual imagery.
Another poem, ‘That He Should Taste Death For Every Man’ also meditates on the process of transubstantiation, focusing on the wafer received on the tongue in the Sacrament. The speaker expresses gratitude that Christ himself ‘ate’ death, so that his followers could receive salvation:

No grinding of the cornfield had sufficed
To lay upon our tongues Thy holy Bread,
Unless Thou hadst Thyself so harshly fed
With grindings of the bone of death.

Finally, a poem entitled ‘After Anointing’ revels in the sensuality of Catholic ritual. As Ellis Hanson observes, the Church appealed to many decadent writers due to its sensory extravagance: ‘The sheer sensuality of its ritual, whether Anglo or Roman Catholic, exposed the Church to accusations of paganism, even hedonism, rendering it the ideal stage for the subversive gestures of the Catholic dandy’. Bradley and Cooper were not immune to this; ‘After Anointing’ revels in the ‘joy of the senses’ they discovered in the Catholic Church: ‘joy of all / And each of them, as fall / The Holy Oils!’ In the second stanza, the five points upon which the holy oils are applied (representing Christ’s five wounds) are compared to the ‘fivefold garland’ of the senses:

Joy ripples through each covered lid;
Nor are the ears forbid
Sounds as of honeycomb, so sweet is Heaven
Afar, such sweet, such haunting sound!
O nostrils, myrtle ye shall love!
The lips taste fully, as if God were found.
Swift, under peace, toward Heaven
The hands, the feet, so still, like still lakes move.
Delighted Powers of Sense, ye dance,
Woven in such a lovely chance!

This poem attests to the fact that Bradley and Cooper were still weaving garlands of sensory delight twenty-three years after the publication of Long Ago. Whether through
Sappho’s honey, sea-ripened fruits, or the touch of the communion wafer on the tongue, flavour played a key part in catalysing the significant poetic transformations which led their work from Ancient Greece to the Catholic Church. Despite their conversion from Paganism to Christianity, Michael Field’s use of flavour to represent desire remains constant across their oeuvre. Their Sapphic palate, trained on bittersweetness, remains sensitive to the end.

‘Like a mermaid’: Tasting Sappho in the Twentieth Century

Michael Field’s use of bittersweet flavours forms part of an ongoing tradition in women’s writing. We can, for example, trace links between Long Ago and the modernist poet H.D.’s debut collection Sea Garden (1916):

H.D.’s ‘Sea Garden’ is indeed a garden of flowers […] but it is always a garden whose sweetness and comfort is tempered by sea-salt and rock, by sand and wind. There is always the undertow of bitterness to counter the honeyed delight of the flowers – the glukupikron (“sweet-bitter”) element of eros with which Sappho is constantly preoccupied.83

Equally, in Long Ago, as we have seen, although some poems are brimming with lush woodland and sweet-smelling flowers, other poems are set in the ‘bitter’ world of the cliffs, waves, and salt-spray, where Sappho meets her death. H.D.’s life-long companion Bryher also published a volume Region of Lutany (1914) which draws on Sapphic landscapes and synaesthetic imagery, forging a ‘homoerotic topography’ that has parallels with Long Ago. For example in ‘Corfu’, the island is depicted as a lover with a sensual ‘wave-curved mouth’, ‘quivering’ and ‘breathing’ with a ‘cypress-breast’.84

In a posthumously published poem by Amy Lowell, entitled ‘To Two Unknown Ladies’ (1927), flavour provides a covert means for writing about lesbian relationships. The ‘ladies’ in question are Somerville and Ross (Edith Somerville and Violet Florence Martin) whose personal and creative partnership bears a striking resemblance to that of Michael Field. On reading their work, Lowell’s speaker is strangely ‘haunted’ by these two dead spinsters: ‘I go back to you again, / Evening and evening, in a kind of thirst, / Surprising my tongue upon an almond taste’.85 The
significance of the almond flavour is never explained, though it is reaffirmed later on: ‘Almonds, I said, / Smooth, white, and bitter, wonderfully almonds’. 86

The significance of the almond flavour is clarified, however, if we consider that Lowell describes her beloved as an almond in the ‘Two Speak Together’ section of *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919). These love poems have been read as addressed to Lowell’s long-term partner Ada Dwyer Russell. ‘Aubade’ compares undressing the beloved to unshelling an almond: ‘As I would free the white almond from the green husk / So would I strip your trappings off, / Beloved’. 87 ‘White and Green’ depicts the naked beloved as ‘an almond flower unsheathed / Leaping and flickering between the budded branches’. 88 In her last volume before her death, *What’s O’Clock* (1925), Lowell included a poem entitled ‘In Excelsis’. This poem employs Eucharistic imagery, as the beloved is consumed by the speaker, filling her as water (or milk) fills an empty vessel:

I drink your lips,
I eat the whiteness of your hands and feet.
My mouth is open,
As a new jar I am empty and open.
Like white water are you who fill the cup of my mouth 89

Drawing on these and other examples, Collecott identifies a language of fluidity in modernist women’s writing which she links directly to a Sapphic aesthetic. This emphasis on *licking, tasting, eating* confounds ‘the boundary between inside and out’, between self and other, in addition to situating these poems within an ongoing tradition of writing about female desire. 90 Contemporary poets writing during the era of second-wave feminism continue to experiment with such imagery, linking taste even more explicitly to lesbian eroticism. For example, Olga Broumas’s ‘Sleeping Beauty’ describes love-making as an exchange of bitter and salty fluids:

Blood. Tears. The vital
salt of our body. Each
other’s mouth.
Dreamlike
the taste of you
sharpen my tongue like a thousand shells,
bitter, metallic. I know

as I sleep
that my blood runs clear
as salt
in your mouth, my eyes.⁹¹

Adrienne Rich’s early poem ‘Holiday’ is set in a Sapphic idyll of ‘dripping leaves’ where ‘The senses flourished like a laden tree’. The speaker and her beloved dine together:

From wicker baskets by a green canal,
Staining our lips with peach and nectarine,
Slapping at golden wasps. And when we kissed,
Tasting that sunlit juice, the landscape folded
Into our clasp, and not a breath recalled
The long walk back to winter, leagues away.⁹²

With its ripe fruits and golden wasps, this poem is strikingly similar to Bradley and Cooper’s lyric productions; indeed, it would not be out of place in Wild Honey. Rich continues to develop this Sapphic imagery in her later work. ‘The Floating Poem, unnumbered’ from Twenty-One Love Poems (1976) describes lesbian lovemaking as ‘like the half-curled frond / of the fiddlehead fern in forests / just washed by sun’ and the lover’s fingers ‘reaching where I had been waiting years for you / in my rose-wet cave’.⁹³

Finally, we can identify a cluster of later twentieth-century novels and films that draw on a Sapphic palate – if obliquely. Consider, for example, Patricia Highsmith’s The Price of Salt (1952), May Sarton’s Mrs Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing (1975) – its solitary coastal setting reminiscent of Sappho’s island – and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s strange portrait of lesbian sadomasochism, The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (1972). Most recently, Sarah Waters’s neo-Victorian novel Tipping the Velvet (1998) opens with the line ‘Have you ever tasted a Whitstable
oyster?’ before the heroine, Nan, informs us that Whitstable oysters are ‘the juiciest, the savouriest yet the subtlest, oysters in the whole of England.94 Waters knowingly employs the oyster here as a symbol for female genitalia (just as the title of the novel plays on Victorian slang for cunnilingus). The young Nan’s appreciation and intimate knowledge of the oyster foreshadows her lesbian destiny. Later, Nan worries that she tastes ‘like a herring’ when Kitty kisses her hand, to which Kitty replies: “perhaps, maybe, like a mermaid…” And she kissed my fingers.’95 Kitty’s reaction suggests that she too revels in the salt flavours of the female body. Drawing on the same Sapphic palate as Bradley and Cooper, these texts, whether consciously or unconsciously, figure Sapphic desire as a flavour – one that can be, by turns, both bitter and sweet.

1 ‘Sexual inversion’ refers to the theory that the homosexual had a female soul in a male body (or vice versa). For more on Victorian sexology, see Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (eds.), Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
11 Arran Leigh (Katharine Bradley), The New Minnesinger and Other Poems (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1875), pp. 1-8. A ‘minnesinger’ is the name for a medieval German troubadour.
12 In Ancient Greek mythology, Philomela is raped her brother-in-law Tereus. He cuts out her tongue so that she cannot relate her experience. She is eventually transformed into a nightingale – a symbol of the poet’s song used by male poets such as Milton, Keats, Shelley and Tennyson (see Maxwell). For women poets’ use of this myth, see

13 Michael Field, ‘I would not be a fugitive’, *Underneath the Bough* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), pp. 131-32.


19 The ‘tongue map’ originated in a 1901 paper by German scientist David Hänig. This paper was translated by the Harvard psychologist Edwin G. Boring in 1942. However, the diagram was misinterpreted, leading to the enduring misconception that different parts of the tongue can only pick up certain tastes: bitter (back of the tongue), sour and salty (the middle) and sweet (on the tip).


21 *Field, Long Ago*, pp. 5-6.


23 *Field, Long Ago*, p. 27.


27 Quoted in Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p. 3.

28 *Field, Long Ago*, p. 46; p. 114.


30 Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne*, p. 32.


32 In 1891, Bradley writes that she originally came to Newnham with ‘the pulpy lyrics of the N. M. [New Minnesinger] in my brain’. This suggests that her early poems were written at the same time she was receiving her classical education (quoted in Thain and Vadillo, *Michael Field, The Poet*, p. 245).

33 Arran Leigh (Katharine Bradley), *The New Minnesinger*, pp. 29-30.


35 Leigh (Bradley), *New Minnesinger*, pp. 17-20.
37 Elizabeth Prettejohn, ‘Solomon, Swinburne, Sappho’, *Victorian Review*, 34 (2008), 103-128 (p. 120).
42 Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 27.
43 Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 28.
45 Swinburne, ‘Anactoria’, p. 27.
46 Quoted in Snyder, *Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho*, p. 46 (Snyder’s translation).
50 Campbell, ‘Fragment 2’, p.57.
51 Prins, *Victorian Sappho* p. 98.
54 Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, p. 100.
65 Field, ‘Circe at Circaeum’, p. 73.
68 Ibid. Sappho was named the ‘Pierian bee’ after the spring of the Muses: see Hilda M. Ransome, *The Sacred Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* [1937] (New York: Dover Publications, 2004).


72 Field, ‘Cherry Song’, *Wild Honey*, p. 28.


77 Thain, *Michael Field*, p. 177.


82 Ibid.


86 Ibid., p. 564.

87 Ibid., p. 73.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., p. 444.


95 Ibid., p. 33.