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PHILIP LARKIN, L.T. MEADE, AND THE SWEET GIRL-GRADUATE

Philip Larkin published 'Lines on a Young lady's Photograph Album' as the first poem in his second collection of poetry, *The Less Deceived*, in 1955. The poem had been written in Belfast two years earlier, and was addressed to Winifred Arnott, a young trainee librarian with whom Larkin had a brief, unconsummated relationship at this time. The poem describes several of the photographs in her album, and unfolds into a meditation on photography, desire, and the passing of time. One of the photographs depicts its subject as 'a sweet girl-graduate' (8).¹ This has been identified as an allusion to Tennyson's *The Princess*, where the prologue mentions 'sweet girl-graduates in their golden hair' (142).² While Tennyson's words were likely to have been familiar to Larkin, I will argue that his memory of them was reinforced by a less canonical source. Larkin's 'sweet girl-graduate' is, I suggest, a previously unnoticed allusion to the novel *A Sweet Girl-Graduate* by L.T. Meade (1891).³ This allusion illuminates not only the poem in which it appears, but Larkin's developing sense of himself as a writer.

There is no mention of Meade's novel in Larkin's published letters.⁴ However, it is likely that he read *A Sweet Girl Graduate* sometime before 1943. The novel sold over twenty-thousand copies and was widely reprinted until at least 1902; Larkin could have encountered a copy second-hand or in a library. He would have come across Meade's novel in the course of his surprisingly extensive reading of girls' school stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He read these for pleasure, as well as for the eroticised depictions of passionate female friendships that they often contained, and he drew on them extensively when writing his own stories under the pseudonym 'Brunette Colman' as an undergraduate at St John's College, Oxford.⁵ Although Meade is not one of

the authors mentioned in Brunette's essay 'What Are We Writing For?', there are several reasons why Larkin might have been particularly interested in *A Sweet Girl Graduate*.

Meade blends the genres of the girls' school story and the Oxford novel in her tale of female undergraduates at the fictional St Benet's College for Women. Her story might therefore have offered Larkin hints for how to manage his second (unfinished) Willow Gables story, *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's* (1943), which sees the characters of *Trouble at Willow Gables* (also 1943) transposed to a fictional women's college in Oxford. Meade's novel focusses on Priscilla Peel, a naïve young woman from a provincial, lower-class background who feels out of place in her new surroundings and struggles to fit in with her more privileged fellow undergraduates. Priscilla might therefore have offered a gender-swapped model for John Kemp, the central character of Larkin's first published novel, *Jill* (1946).⁶ While Larkin obviously drew on his own undergraduate experience, and had first-hand knowledge of Oxford undergraduate life which Meade lacked, he might nonetheless have recalled Meade's novel when writing his own.

He seems to have recalled it again seven years later, when writing 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'. He quoted the title of Meade's novel to describe one photograph of the addressee as 'a sweet girl-graduate' (8). This seems likely to be a vague, half-remembered allusion rather than a specific reference designed to create inter-textual connections. But at least one passage of Meade's novel shares the concerns of Larkin's poem. In this passage, Rosalind Merton is telling Annie Day, a fellow undergraduate at St Benet's, about how her passionate devotion to a senior undergraduate, Maggie Oliphant, has been replaced by a strong dislike for her. Annie comments: 'I think it's a very unhealthy sign of any place to have all the girls sighing and groaning about one or two— dying to possess their autographs, and kissing their photographs, and framing them, and putting them up in their rooms. I hate that mawkish kind of nonsense'. Rosalind blushes at this, recalling how 'she had passionately kissed Maggie's beautiful face as it looked at her out of a photograph, and, until the moment when all her feelings had undergone such a change, was secretly saving up her pence to

buy a frame for it'. Here, then, Meade wrote about the capacity of photographs to arouse and mediate desire in a way that Larkin might have recalled when writing 'Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album'.

Whether Winnifred Arnott detected any allusion when she read the words 'a sweet girl-graduate' is debatable. She was conventional in her upbringing and views, and it seems unlikely that Larkin shared his interest in girls' school stories with her, or that he showed her his Willow Gables fictions. But she might well have read girls' school stories as a young woman, and she seems as likely to have recognised the words from Meade's novel as she is to have associated them with Tennyson's poem.

The publication of *The Less Deceived* in October 1955 marked a turning point in Larkin's writing life. Around this time, he had given up trying to produce a third novel to follow *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). He had abandoned any plans he might have had to finish *Michaelmas Term at St Bride's* or to publish either of his Willow Gables fictions. He had left Belfast to take up the job of Librarian at the University of Hull that March, a position he would hold for the rest of his working life. Creatively, his future seemed to lie with poetry. And yet, in the opening poem of his new collection, an allusion to a girls' school story cast a backwards glance in the direction of his juvenile prose. Just as he was recommitting himself to poetry, then, Larkin opened a secret passage between his mature work as a poet and his pseudonymous juvenile writings.

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¹ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Archie Burnett (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), pp. 27-28.

² *Ibid.*, 357.

³ L.T. Meade, *A Sweet Girl-Graduate* (London: Cassell & Co., 1891).

⁴ *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940-1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1992); Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2011).

⁵ The 'Brunette Colman' works are collected in Philip Larkin, *Trouble at Willow Gables and Other Fictions*, ed. by James Booth (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

⁶ Philip Larkin, *Jill* (London: The Fortune Press, 1946, repr. London: Faber & Faber, 1964).