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L.T. Meade, “The Queen of Girls’-Book Makers”: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Bestseller

“How is Mrs. Meade possible?” wondered the *Saturday Review* in 1906.¹ It was a reasonable question to ask: by 1906, L.T. (Elizabeth “Lillie” Thomasina) Meade (1844-1914) had published a number of books a year for over thirty years, sometimes up to a dozen, and her rate of production showed no signs of slowing down. In total, Meade published around 300 books, with several volumes appearing posthumously.² Though most famous as a writer of girls’ books, which played a key role in the formation of teenaged girls as a discrete readership in the late nineteenth century, Meade’s work also included crime fiction (sometimes written collaboratively), children’s stories, sensation fiction, and romances, among other genres. Her books appeared so frequently that reviewers often discussed several at a time, and advertisements featured long lists of them, often available at a range of prices to suit as many readers as possible. These bestselling books, together with her journalism and editorship of the girls’ magazine *Atalanta*, granted Meade significant celebrity status in the 1880s and 90s. She appeared in the *Strand*’s “Portraits of Celebrities at Different Times of their Lives” in December 1898, for example, thanks no doubt in part to the success of her popular detective stories also published in the magazine.³ She regularly featured prominently in surveys of girls’ reading habits, both in Britain and abroad, and in 1898 readers of *Girl’s Realm*, a magazine aimed at a readership of middle-class girls, voted her their favourite writer.⁴ Such wide-ranging activities made for an extremely lucrative career: as Charles Ferrall and Anna Jackson note, “[a]t a time when only about one in five authors was making over £400 a year ... Meade’s annual earnings were between £600 and £1000”.⁵

Yet, despite such striking statistics, Meade is today far from a household name. Perhaps more than any other successful Victorian woman writer, Meade offers a cautionary tale in the history of the bestseller. She is the consummate example of the once extraordinarily popular and prolific Victorian writer who is now largely unknown – a scenario made all the more remarkable by the scale of her former success. The very concept of bestsellers meant specifically for girl readers met with disapproval in some corners of the press, and Meade was forthright in her defence of her writing practices and the tastes of her readers. By examining Meade’s contributions to discussions about literary professionalism in the press, as well as her fictional portrayal of the production of bestselling work in her 1896 novel, *Merry Girls of England*, this essay argues that Meade self-consciously attempted to make a series of interventions in the reception of her work, as well as in the creation of her readership, that made a significant contribution to the concept of the bestseller in the late nineteenth century.

“The Queen of Girls’-Book Makers”: L.T. Meade versus the *Saturday Review*

It is tempting to speculate that many contemporaries may have been rather surprised by Meade’s dramatic fall from fame after her death. Although several obituaries referred to a decline in the quality of her work in the final years of her life, her books continued to be recommended. As late as 1909 the *Review of Reviews* asserted that “Mrs L.T. Meade’s name is sufficient guarantee for pleasant reading”.⁶ Bella Sidney Woolf named her a “children’s classics” in a 1906 article for the illustrated family magazine, *Quiver*, alongside Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and Frances Hodgson Burnett.⁷ Meade now sits uneasily alongside these writers in

hindsight but her inclusion is understandable: in the year prior to the article, a survey of the bestselling books for girls in thirty-two towns in England placed Meade first in seventeen of them and second in ten.⁸ Sidney Woolf comments that Meade's popular 1886 novel, *A World of Girls*, often credited as the first recognisable school story,⁹ is reason enough for inclusion on her list. *A World of Girls* sold thirty-seven thousand copies which, although less than the sales enjoyed by G.A. Henty, as Ferrall and Jackson point out, is still extremely impressive.¹⁰

But not all critics looked so favourably upon Meade's extraordinary literary output. In the same year she was heralded a children's classic in one magazine, she was the subject of a heated debate in another – the *Saturday Review*. What begins as a review of four of her recent books (*The Colonel and the Boy* (Hodder and Stoughton), *The Hill Top Girl*, *Turquoise and Ruby* and *Sue: a Little Heroine and her Friends* (all W& R Chambers)) turns into an exchange across multiple issues between the anonymous reviewer, editor Harold Hodge,¹¹ Meade herself and a number of readers. This debate of December 1906 is a useful place to begin my discussion of Meade because it retrospectively frames her outspoken advocacy of professionalism, allowing us to glimpse how the status of a Victorian bestseller begins to diminish. The terms of the debate reveal a great deal about the nature of the anxieties about bestselling writers, their books and their readers – such pertinent issues as the impressionability of vulnerable readers, the mass production of books, the relationship between price and the social class of the reader, the perils of working across genres, and the emphasis on profit as opposed to artistic quality.

By christening her “The Queen of Girls'-Book *Makers*” (my emphasis), the reviewer gestures towards the perceived lack of literary value of girls' books generally, and Meade's in particular. Such books are deemed to be products, not

works of artistic merit. Meade is likened to “an army contractor supplying shoddy shoes to the Government, or a cheap-furniture maker supplying rickety chairs or drawers that won’t pull out”.¹² She is a “publicist” rather than an author; her work “outputs” from her “factory”.¹³ Although acknowledging her undoubted success, the reviewer provides a rather cynical explanation as to the reasons for it:

Parents do not care what books they buy; girls do not care what they read; so Mrs. Meade is able to slip in between, and need not care what she writes. Very evidently she does not care. If she has any idea at all of a mission beyond the mission to make money, it would seem to be provision of an antidote to good education, or the preparation of the girl-mind to receive in later years the seed scattered by Marie Corelli.¹⁴

This reference to Corelli, an author also familiar with what Annette Federico calls “the vicissitudes of the Victorian literary market” and whose books were frequently characterised as “bosh” in the periodical press,¹⁵ indicates concerns over the moral and intellectual effect of certain kinds of books and reading practices on impressionable girls. The article deems these particular Meade books inappropriate due to “a mixture of mawkish sentiment and unpleasant suggestion”.¹⁶ Of additional alarm is the accessibility of this inappropriate reading to readers across the class spectrum. The “various prices” of the books ensure that “the poison may be said to be done up to suit all pockets”.¹⁷ Federico suggests that Corelli’s “cross-class appeal” was a key reason for her antagonistic relationship with the press because it made her “impossible to locate”, such was the assumption that “an author’s audience determined her cultural and artistic value”.¹⁸ Meade shares this “cross-class appeal”, but the reviewer also suggests that Meade exploits this in order to target her writing in specific and rather cynical ways. It is noted that the “poison” works on “a sort of scale

of unpleasantness”: “at the cheapest rate we have drunkenness, at the medium price the mendacity and petty larceny of their elders as entertainment for the girls, while at the full novel price we have the problem novel’s share of unpleasant suggestiveness”.¹⁹

Yet, the association between Meade and this kind of reading is rather surprising, given that Meade was formerly promoted as an example of quite the opposite. In his 1886 article, “What Girls Read”, published in the *Nineteenth Century*, Edward Salmon highlighted Meade as an example of “healthy” reading material for girls. “Girls’ literature,” he observed, “performs one very useful function. It enables girls to read something above mere baby tales, and yet keeps them from the influence of novels of a sort which should be read only by persons capable of forming a discreet judgment”.²⁰ For Salmon, writing in 1886, Meade’s work provided this necessary function; yet, twenty years later she is perceived, by this publication at least, to have become this inappropriate reading. The *Saturday Review* is arguably not alone in this deduction. In “The Reading of the Modern Girl”, a survey of two hundred school girls, published in the *Nineteenth Century* in the same year as the *Saturday Review* piece, Florence B. Low also mentions Meade and Corelli in the same breath, noting that both “scored a good number of votes” as to girls’ favourite authors.²¹ Low does not comment on these authors explicitly, but her overall conclusion is that “many of our girls are reading to-day books of an inferior nature”,²² their tastes tending “towards a lower level of literary art, the standard novels being neglected in favour of stories by tenth-rate writers”.²³

Meade is presented by the *Saturday Review*, in short, as an author whose myopic focus on sales and profit leads not only to poorly put-together books, but also to moral negligence as regards her impressionable readers. The article culminates in a

warning and a promise to parents to “be on their guard, and Mrs Meade’s books will be bought no more”.²⁴ Notably, the phrase used here is “bought no more” as opposed to “read no more”, suggesting that it is not only the content of the books that is of issue, but also their rate of production and Meade’s bestselling status.

Meade took personal offence to the provocative review. In a letter to the editor printed the following week, she writes: “I should not, however, have troubled to notice the criticism of myself or of my work which appeared in your columns last week were it not that you have chosen to impugn my character and traduce my motive in writing”.²⁵ She claims to have been wilfully misread: *The Colonel and the Boy*, she notes, “is meant for adult readers” and she strongly disputes the article’s characterisation of her as a malign influence on young girls on the basis of a book never intended for their eyes. It is interesting that Meade pinpoints this obfuscation of genre and audience as one of the key causes of the misinterpretation of her work, particularly given that this arguably continues to play a role in her rather side-lined place in literary history. Helen Bittel notes that the girls’ books produced by Meade and her contemporaries are “[m]arginalized [in scholarship] by their triple identification with children’s literature, mass culture, and ‘the feminine’”.²⁶ One wonders to what extent these associations have also had an impact upon the attention given to her other writing as well.²⁷ Where does one place a writer as industrious and versatile as Meade? Responses to the *Saturday Review* article and to Meade’s subsequent letter indicate that her involvement with multiple genres and audiences was as problematic then as it has been in later discussions of her work. One correspondent, for example, suggests:

People who buy her books do not regard her as a novelist but as a writer for the young. Yet she admits that she does write novels which are intended only for adults. Obviously her double role is in itself a danger.²⁸

This reference to her dangerous “double role” implies that a bestselling woman writer is particularly problematic if that bestselling status crosses genres and readerships, as well as classes and price ranges. Such versatility means that, counter to the *Review of Reviews*’ endorsement, Meade’s name may be far from a “guarantee” of anything, not least appropriate reading for “the young”.

Meade uses her letter to challenge in particular the preoccupation with her rate of production, arguing:

A reviewer has, of course, a right to his opinions, but no reviewer has a right to give false and misleading interpretations of books he reviews in the Press, and so poison the minds of the reading public against the writer. It is easy to indulge in vague generalisations and to denounce a writer’s work when it is turned out rapidly. The same remark is occasionally made (and with reason) about journalism and journalistic methods. If I choose to draw upon a gift of rapid imagination which I apparently possess, that is a matter for myself and for my publishers.²⁹

Employing a number of rhetorical strategies here, Meade turns the notion of reading as “poison” back on the *Review* and its journalists, as she also does with their criticisms of her speed of writing. By associating this speed with words such as “gift” and “imagination”, as opposed to “factory” and “production”, she reformulates their characterisation of her writing practice in a way that is in keeping with how she presents her productivity elsewhere in the press, as I discuss in more detail below. She

also strongly refutes accusations of impropriety, stating: “I hold in my possession letters from my girl readers written from all parts of the world, in which they thank me for moral help and encouragement to do right”.³⁰ She had made such declarations before, in the articles and interviews that can be seen to play an important role in the creation of adolescent girls as a discrete readership.³¹ By using this established rhetoric about the importance of community among her girl readers, the letter serves as a call to arms to these readers for support: “To these girls, who number tens of thousands, I appeal for the final verdict on my juvenile books, and am content to leave the matter in their young hands. When they cease to buy, I assure you, Sir, I shall cease to write, but not before”.³²

Meade’s tone of defiance is clear, but by also figuring her parting shot around the issue of *buying*, as opposed to reading, she left herself open to further attack from the *Review*. Far from retreating from the position of the original article, given its evidently disgruntled subject, Hodge is, if anything, further aggravated by Meade’s response. In his reply, which he does not provide for any other letters in this issue, he argues that Meade’s letter has proven their point:

We are not aware that we ever suggested that Meade would cease to write while she could find a market for her writings. She endorses the view we expressed, that her standard of writing is merely, Will it sell? ... We adhere to everything we said of her books.³³

Such strong words ensured that the argument rumbled on.³⁴ In a letter of January 1907, “P.H.” criticises the “ungracious sneer” of Hodge’s editorial note, pointing out that “We all of us, no matter what our profession, must consider the audience to which we appeal”.³⁵ A group of nine pupils from Dulwich High School for Girls also

write “to defend Mrs. L.T. Meade from the attack she has lately had in your Review, as girls who have read many of her books, and find great delight in them....We her girl-friends will not stop reading her books, the writer of the most thrilling stories, the stories which we all love”.³⁶ Once again, Hodge’s reply serves to inflame the debate by criticising the girls’ grammar and suggesting that the school “should try to set at least a tolerably high standard of reading. It has however to contend with the difficulty that in Dulwich Mrs. Meade is a local celebrity, a thing loved of the suburban mind”.³⁷

It would perhaps grant Hodge too much credit to suggest these exchanges are ultimately responsible for Meade’s eventual obscurity, despite his confidence that “school-girls...will soon know better than to read Mrs. Meade. Our review is producing its results”.³⁸ After all, this was not her first or only poor review. Yet the article and the subsequent correspondence certainly seems to represent a change in the general response to Meade’s work and her advocacy of the professionalization of authorship. With few letters and no known extant full-length memoirs, we primarily know Meade through her work and through interviews she gave in the press, what Janis Dawson calls “autobiographical ‘tit-bits’”.³⁹ Meade’s impassioned letter to the *Review* is quite the “tit-bit”, granting a fascinating level of insight into her work and professional ethos. It also demonstrates that Meade divided opinion, precisely because of the nature of her commercial success.

“I live by the pen”: Meade and Debates about the Professional Woman Writer

In interviews, profiles and articles throughout the 1880s and 90s, Meade is an ebullient advocate of the professionalization of authorship. Dawson describes Meade as a “savvy professional” who “carefully constructed and controlled her public image as a professional woman writer”.⁴⁰ She knew what appealed to her various sets of readers – romanticised references to her Irish background for the readers of her “Wild Irish Girl” books, for example.⁴¹ Her lively discussions of the details of the work involved in being a professional woman writer – her daily routine, her daily word count, her methods of naming characters and deciding plot details, her relationships with publishers and readers – suggest she was aware that this was a topic that would fascinate readers, but her comments also represent a significant contribution to debates about literary professionalism at the time. *Young Woman*, for example, published a profile of Meade entitled “How I Write My Books” in 1892 in which she revealed that she “write[s] to order”.⁴² *Hearth and Home*, which frequently reported on Meade’s presence in the press as well as her various social engagements, particularly involving the annual Women Writers’ Dinner, dubbed this revelation “the most singular of all the confidences recently given to the public”.⁴³ Her daily working practices and the challenge of balancing the domestic and the literary formed a key aspect of Helen C. Black’s profile of Meade in *Pen, Pencil, Baton and Mask: Biographical Sketches* (1896). But not all of her comments on literary work were so positively received: her prescient call for the teaching of creative writing (a “School of Fiction”, as she termed it) in the *New Century Review* in 1897, for example, was met with abject ridicule by some commentators. Nevertheless, in such moments Meade self-consciously positioned herself as an expert voice on literary professionalism. In “From the Editor’s Standpoint”, her final editorial column for *Atalanta*, she offered practical advice to readers wishing to become writers

themselves, encouraging them in their dealings with editors always to be “as *terse* and *business-like* as possible”.⁴⁴ The essay was reprinted in the 1894 volume *On the Art of Writing Fiction*, suggesting this expert advice was deemed to be of value to others as well.

One of the most revealing interviews with Meade on the topic of the working life of a writer appeared in the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* in 1901 as part of their “Sidelights on Modern Writers” series. The author, Laura Stubbs, frames the article at the outset with reference to the professional literary world, reporting that the interview has come about as a result of an encounter between Stubbs and Meade at “a crowded literary meeting of the Grosvenor Crescent Club” (“a development of the Pioneer Club”,⁴⁵ of which Meade was also a member) in which “lady novelists” came under attack by the speaker. After attempting “however feebly” to defend women writers, Stubbs reports that she felt a hand on her arm and heard a voice in her ear whisper, “Well done, dear, I, as a novelist, feel grateful to you”.⁴⁶ This “soft and caressing voice” belonged, of course, to Meade, who is described as “a plainly-dressed middle-aged woman” with “kindly eyes”, a “marked contrast to the majority of the ladies present, who were in full toilette”.⁴⁷ This combination of details – Meade’s presence at the lecture, her formation of an alliance with a woman who vocally defends lady novelists, and her comparative plainness of attire – reveals a great deal about Meade’s position in the literary marketplace and the seriousness with which she took her own advice regarding the importance of maintaining a business-like demeanour at all times.

Dawson suggests that part of Meade’s careful construction of her literary persona is her emphasis on being “firmly embedded in the domestic sphere”, noting that “[a] woman who made a good income as an author of girls’ books might be

progressive, but she could not afford to be perceived as radical”.⁴⁸ In keeping with this, the setting of Stubbs’ encounter with Meade shifts from the Grosvenor Crescent Club to Meade’s “sunny drawing-room” in West Dulwich.⁴⁹ Yet, the potential tension between the domestic and the professional, and perhaps also the progressive and the more radical, is potent throughout the interview. It is notable, for example, that Stubbs pointedly leads from the observation that her arrival interrupted Meade’s reading of “Thomas Hardy’s latest novel” (which must be the controversial *Jude the Obscure*) into the key point of discussion she wishes to raise with Meade, a woman she evidently admires but also finds to be a frustrating role model.⁵⁰ Such is the sensitivity of the question Stubbs feels it necessary to secure Meade’s promise that she will not lose her temper. Although asked sympathetically, Stubbs’ enquiry reinforces the perceived mutual exclusivity of quantity and quality in the production of bestselling work: to write (and sell) in bulk is necessarily to write badly or, at least, not as well as one might:

“I want to know why, with all your splendid gifts and abilities, you do not give yourself up to writing one good book instead of (forgive me for saying it) frittering away your energy in sensational stories for magazines, interesting, of course, well written, else they had never secured so large a hearing, but I feel you might give the world a book that would remain like George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, a literary monument of your genius.”

She looked at me and laughed, but there were tears in her eyes.

“My dear,” she said, “I live by my pen – I support my invalid husband and my children by it, and I have to write what brings in the quickest and readiest return. The time is past for me to write my so-called monumental work, and

were it not so, I have my family to maintain. In short, I have to keep the pot boiling at whatever cost. For all that, I take trouble over my work, infinite trouble, infinite pains. There is no royal road to success; we have to carve out our own way, believe me that, dear”.⁵¹

One wonders as to the accuracy of Stubbs’ depiction of Meade’s complex emotional reaction, given the actual content of Meade’s response, which privileges practicality and hard work over more romanticised constructions of the writing life. Meade’s statement that she will not write a work to rival that of George Eliot (an author she admired and referenced in her girls’ books) demonstrates a substantial degree of awareness of her place in the literary marketplace, but by referring to this imaginary book as her “so-called monumental work”, Meade resists the importance and significance Stubbs attaches to such a book. Although she did sometimes refer to writing in more romanticised terms – as her “fairy gift”, for example, in her “How I Began” article for *Girl’s Realm*⁵² – in response to the woman she met at a gathering of professional women writers, Meade stresses the role played by financial necessity in driving her immense productivity and professional ambition; however, she rejects the implied suggestion that she this should mean she does not take “great trouble” over her work. In “A School of Fiction”, she stated that the “plea” was not intended for “the Jane Austens and Thackerays of our time”, but for the “novelist who supplies the bookstall and the periodical”.⁵³ In both this article and her response to Stubbs, Meade acknowledges a difference between types of authors but, importantly, she does not accept the implication that what she does lacks value in and of itself, that it is not also a gift of a kind. “Gift” after all, is the word she uses in her rebuttal to the *Saturday Review*.

Perhaps it is this indefatigable commitment to hard work, practicality and the business-like that is Meade's central contribution to the construction of the bestseller in the late Victorian period. In her commentary on literary professionalism throughout her career, these skills and characteristics are emphatically not secondary or inferior, but are valuable in and of themselves. It is perhaps for this reason she feels her very character has been debased by the *Saturday Review*'s censorious review of her work. Her vow to keep writing "at whatever cost" is a point of honour for her, representative of the hard work, honesty, integrity and business-like attitude she considers to be required of a person in her position. For her critics, however, that "cost" is the good name of literature and, worse still, the moral character of her impressionable readers.

We may ask what role this openness about her strategic approach to literary production has played in her descent into obscurity in the twentieth century. In her interview with *Young Woman*, Meade proudly declared "I don't know any other writer who has done so much work as I have done in the time".⁵⁴ Yet, her belief that this is a significant achievement is not shared by her detractors. According to the *Saturday Review*, "To a responsible writer with capacity for anything higher than the mere turn-out of so many words, four volumes of this length would be two years' good work; but to Mrs. Meade's factory they are an item in the output. So long as the stuff is turned out in sufficient bulk, why should she stop to consider quality?"⁵⁵ The difference between these perspectives suggests it is perhaps the case that Meade's own sense of what is to be valued in her work never changed; rather, these once highly marketable and "singular" revelatory insights into the professional process of a bestselling writer did not continue to hold the same value for others as the twentieth century progressed.

“If only... I could write something that somebody would buy and publish and pay for!”: Writing as Profession in Meade’s *Merry Girls of England* (1896)

Meade’s disclosures about her work also help to contextualise her fictional portrayals of the professional writing life, which can often be surprisingly ambivalent. Such ambivalence is in keeping with other aspects of Meade’s work. Yet, despite allowing that “some aspects of Meade’s gender politics, like her qualified definitions of New Womanhood and especially her glorification of female self-sacrifice can never fit easily into a feminist re-valuation of [New Girl fiction]”, Bittel argues that we must “[attend] seriously to the inconsistencies of these understudied novels [in order to] do justice to their cultural importance as well as to their ideological complexity”.⁵⁶ Such an approach can offer an alternative perspective on her ambivalent fictional portrayal of literary professionalism, as well. In her 1896 novel, *Merry Girls of England*, Meade offers what appears to be a rather negative depiction of a girl’s ambition to write a book that “will sell, and sell, and sell”.⁵⁷ Yet this can be read differently when examined alongside Meade’s comments on professionalism in the press.

Described by one reviewer as “[Meade] at her best”, *Merry Girls of England* tells the story of the orphaned Underhill sisters who must “fight their way in the world”.⁵⁸ The narrative focus is split between the four sisters and their friend, Hero, all of whom represent different degrees of adherence or resistance to ideals of both female independence and self-sacrifice. Sally Mitchell has suggested that Meade often “deliberately echoed literature her readers knew”,⁵⁹ and thus the sisters in this novel recall the sibling roles of Louise M. Alcott’s *Little Women*. Rosamund, the eldest sister, is self-sacrificing, always aware of decorum and much-beloved by the devoted

youngest girls. Barbara, however, the sixteen-year-old second sister, shares Jo March's (and Meade's) desire to live by the pen. Yet, despite the fact that Barbara's wishes appear, superficially at least, to match those of her creator (as well as many of her readers, given the number of queries about the literary life in correspondence columns in girls' magazines at the time), Barbara's calamitous attempt to fulfil her literary ambition not only disastrously separates her from her sisters but also almost results in her death. Barbara is marked out as different from her sisters from the outset: in contrast to Rosamund's natural grace, Barbara has "somewhat big feet, long arms with rather ungainly hands, square shoulders, and a face full of determination and power".⁶⁰ This focus on the physical awkwardness and lack of genteel femininity of the character who will later be possessed by "the author mania"⁶¹ is reminiscent of the masculinised representations of women writers propagated by the critics of the New Woman.

Yet, Barbara's awkwardness and her literary ambitions are not necessarily related concepts: read in the context of Meade's other girls' books, which frequently feature boisterous but endearing central protagonists, Barbara's ungainly limbs are perhaps more to do with marking her out as the central girl protagonist, as opposed to a nascent example of the pathological New Woman. In constructing Barbara in ways that would have been familiar to her readers, Meade makes the most likeable character in the book the mouthpiece for her defence of the literary New Woman. In response to the family solicitor's fear that her desire for "the intellectual life" will turn her into "one of those monsters of the present day – a New Woman", Barbara retorts: "If to be a New Woman means being well educated, and taking an interest in life, and seeing plenty of my fellow men and women, then I *am* going to become one".⁶²

Ferrall and Jackson read this incident as proof that the novel represents Meade's "need to define the New Woman in her own terms".⁶³

Reading Barbara in the context of Meade's construction of girl protagonists may offer insight into her representation of the New Woman, but there is no disputing the vehemence with which she portrays Barbara's experience of "living by the pen". After ignoring the advice of her elders, Barbara runs away to make her way in literary London, only to find the process more difficult than she had imagined. Exhausted both mentally and physically from the pressures of supporting herself and Hero, Barbara succumbs to temptation and plagiarises from the manuscript belonging to one of the professional woman writers who daily work in the reading room of the British Museum. Barbara's guilt over this act of theft leads to an attack of brain fever that very nearly kills her. Bittel states that the "narrative logic" of this incident "suggests that New Girl desires for independence are naïve, if not dangerous. For this reason, girls should heed the advice of protective adults and remain with the safety of the domestic sphere".⁶⁴ I agree that Barbara's experience implies her naivety and makes the case for the importance of listening to the advice of more knowledgeable adults; however, I suggest that Meade has a particular kind of advice in mind – the absolute necessity of being sufficiently prepared, pragmatic and business-like when one enters the public sphere of the professional writer.

Indeed, Barbara's attempt to become the next bestselling woman writer is virtually a fictionalised version of Meade's "From the Editor's Standpoint" essay that originally appeared in *Atalanta*. Dawson calls this article Meade's "most complete expression of her sense of herself as a professional writer and editor".⁶⁵ Meade's tone is firm throughout and her advice candid, with an emphasis on the importance of a "proper business spirit".⁶⁶ Although she acknowledges that an author "must have the

necessary talent, or, at least, the knack of gauging popular taste”,⁶⁷ she stresses the importance of hard work and perseverance. She is exacting in her dismissal of “blushing rosy-faced girls”, “hackneyed topics” and “false humility”,⁶⁸ and it is clear that her advice is derived from direct experience of being the busy editor of a well-regarded girls’ magazine. It is in this context that Barbara’s failure as a writer must be placed. Early in the novel, her regret that she is not “a little older” and therefore able to “write something that somebody would buy and publish and pay for!” is followed by the realisation that “at any rate, [she] can go in for all the prizes that the girls’ magazines offer, and that money might help”.⁶⁹ *Atalanta* did indeed offer opportunities for readers to be published in its pages, “paid at the usual rate”,⁷⁰ so the suggestion is not without precedent, but Barbara’s rather flippant assumption that this kind of publication can be easily achieved is rather ironic given Meade’s description in her article of the legion of girls who expect to be able to earn money with little or no experience of actual writing. It is not Barbara’s wish to write, then, that is at fault, but her lack of awareness of the hard work that will be involved.

Meade is undoubtedly rather uncompromising in the essay, using words such as “puny”, “poor”, and “feeble”⁷¹ to describe the attempts by some young amateur essayists, but this plain speaking is in the service of equipping girls with the information and realistic attitude necessary to be a successful professional. It is possible to draw a connection between Meade and the contemporary journalist Frances Low, who also published advice for fellow women writers in the 1890s, culminating in her 1904 book *Press Work for Women*. Low’s handbook shares the uncompromising tone of Meade’s essay and also, arguably, its strong moral imperative. Although acknowledging that Low’s book is “undeniably pessimistic”, Alexis Easley suggests “it is also a decidedly progressive text that aims to demystify

the profession for single women. ‘It is essential’, Low emphasises, ‘that the journalistic novice should embark on her career clear-eyed, with a knowledge of the conditions prevailing in the market’.⁷² One wonders if Low and Meade were acquainted, or if Low had previously read and even professionally benefitted from Meade’s advice in *Atalanta*, so similar is their shared commitment to “de-romanticizing the profession, forcing women to understand their roles as workers in a fiercely competitive industry”.⁷³

Barbara’s progress from wide-eyed novice author to brain-fevered plagiarist is certainly a de-romanticization of the literary profession. But it is clear, by contextualising it in terms of Meade’s editorial advice, that the issue at stake is not writing itself, nor independence, but a girl’s preparedness for the writing life and her naïve belief that she can quickly and easily produce a book for which “money will pour in”.⁷⁴ In a revealing scene, Barbara looks longingly at a bookshop window: “Oh, and I see George Eliot in the corner. Once I read half of the ‘Mill on the Floss’; how did I long, long beyond words, to learn more about Maggie! If I get my fortune, I can buy that book”.⁷⁵ Such is Meade’s admiration of Eliot that Barbara’s effusive love serves as proof of her intellect and innate moral sense, despite her current misguided wilfulness. But the half-read, abandoned novel also represents Barbara’s own unfinished state and naivety: having only read half of the book, she is not aware of the ways in which Maggie Tulliver becomes weighed down by religion and society. Nor will she find out any time soon, unable to finish her own book manuscript just as she was unable to finish Eliot’s novel.

This unfinished, ill-prepared aspect of Barbara’s literary endeavour is in stark contrast to the novel’s other representation of an author, Miss Clarkson, the “little woman, with grey hair, a high forehead, and large, dreamy eyes” who sits next to

Barbara in the reading room.⁷⁶ It is tempting to read this figure as Meade herself, or a conflation of herself and her literary acquaintances, so important was the famous reading room to Meade's own literary apprenticeship.⁷⁷ As Dawson points out, the famous reading room served as an important place for "literary celebrities and aspirants...to meet and be met" and thus a stint in its hallowed space is "a trope in the professional literary woman's autobiography".⁷⁸ But, as Meade stresses, Barbara is not yet ready for this world. Although she soon realises the importance of daily graft, she eschews the fellowship represented by the collective of professional women writers by resisting their attempts to befriend her. Worse still, her act of plagiarism represents the complete reverse of the honesty and integrity that Meade considers to be key characteristics of the hard-working professional author, of which Miss Clarkson is an exemplary model:

The little woman had come day after day, and employed her time looking up books of reference, taking down copious notes, and finally writing something in a neat hand on many sheets of paper. She must have been over fifty years of age; her face was strong and somewhat nervous, she had large hands, she worked very hard".⁷⁹

If not a version of Meade herself, Miss Clarkson is certainly representative of Meade's ideals and serves to highlight all the more the ways in which Barbara falls short of them. In addition to her hard work, Miss Clarkson is also revealed to be kind, gracious and judicious. She forgives Barbara for her theft of the infamous page forty-eight (the only reason Barbara's book secured a publisher) and, in addition, offers her frank and kind-hearted encouragement:

[Your book] certainly better not be published yet. Some day, Barbara, you will write, and write well – some day, when you are older. I have read a good deal of your book in proof; and I can see that, quite apart from the idea that you have taken from me, you have talent of your own – talent which may become of value by-and-by...⁸⁰

Miss Clarkson's words are echoed by Barbara's own sober observation at the end of novel, when she muses that one day she will indeed write a book, "When I am worthy, which I am not at present".⁸¹

The insistence that Barbara is too young and ill-prepared for the demands of the profession is perhaps rather unfair, given Meade's rather romanticised depiction of her own literary girlhood at home in Ireland. But that is only one aspect of Meade's literary persona, and Barbara Underhill's time in the British Museum is perhaps more informed by Meade the editor than Meade the fellow reading-room apprentice. One can imagine Meade's closing words of "From the Editor's Standpoint" as an addendum to Miss Clarkson's above speech: "If to ability is added courage, and to courage perseverance, you will succeed; and I hope to shake hands with you in spirit over the good work you have accomplished".⁸² Positioning herself as the firm but fair expert professional, Meade's words offer guidance to a generation of Barbara Underhills, and reinforce her belief in the importance of perseverance and hard work for those who live by their pen.

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In his study of “under-read” Victorian novels, John Sutherland suggests that “[t]here are Victorian novelists so bad that it’s one’s intellectual duty not to read them. Life is too short and eternity scarcely long enough to read the 197-strong output of Annie S. Swan or all the 251 works of L.T. Meade deposited in the British Library”.⁸³ The editor of the *Saturday Review* would surely agree. But to what extent is this kind of wholesale dismissal of Meade’s work fair? During a radio book club as part of the Edinburgh Festival in August 2013, the former children’s laureate Julia Donaldson nominated Meade’s 1893 novel *Beyond the Blue Mountains* as a “hidden gem”.⁸⁴ Describing it as a cross between C.S. Lewis’s Narnia books and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Donaldson stated that her copy had belonged to her grandmother and continues to be enjoyed by her family. Donaldson’s championing of Meade represents an intriguing connection between two successful, bestselling writers, particularly given Donaldson’s former role as laureate. It is tempting to imagine that Meade would have been an ideal choice for such a role had it been available in her own day, such was her public profile and advocacy of young readers.

Yet, Meade’s status as a well-known vocal participant in debates about girls’ books, commercialism and the professionalization of authorship, means that she plays a prominent but perhaps ultimately ambivalent role in the construction of the bestseller. Once lauded by some as “singular confidences”, her revelations about the writing life and her campaigns for better provision for the “novelist who supplies the bookstall and the periodical” were taken to be confirmations of the worst aspects of bestselling books, profit-driven authors, and indifferent, indiscriminate readers. Meade had always had her detractors and the *Saturday Review* by no means completely introduces this interpretation in 1906, but the confrontational article is certainly symptomatic of the more widespread critical dismissal that would come to

be the dominant discourse on Meade and many writers like her after the Victorian period. The unabashed pronouncements about word count and working to order that had been so important to her construction of a successful literary persona at the time did not retain favour as reading tastes and aesthetic values changed in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in the pages of the periodical press, as well as in her novels, Meade can be understood to be engaging with debates that continue to be relevant to discussions of marginalized genres and bestselling writers to this day.

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¹ “The Queen of Girls’-Book Makers,” *Saturday Review* 15 Dec. 1906: 741-2 (741).

² For the fullest bibliography to date, see Ralph Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650-1900* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005) 1202-38.

³ “Portraits of Celebrities at Different Times of their Lives,” *The Strand* 16 (Dec. 1898): 674.

⁴ Sally Mitchell, *The New Girl: Girls’ Culture in England, 1880-1915* (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) 14.

⁵ Charles Ferrall and Anna Jackson, *Juvenile Literature and British Society, 1850-1950: The Age of Adolescence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010) 5.

⁶ “Girls’ Books,” *Review of Reviews* 40 (Dec 1909): 598.

⁷ Bella Sidney Woolf, “Children’s Classics,” *Quiver* 220 (Jan 1906): 672-9 (679).

⁸ Jean Garriock, *Late Victorian and Edwardian Images of Women and their Education in the Popular Periodical Press with Particular Reference to L.T. Meade* (Diss. U of Liverpool, 1997) 175.

⁹ For example, Mavis Reimer, “L.T. Meade,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography 141: British Children’s Writers 1880-1914*, ed. Laura Zaidman (Cengage Gale, 1994) 186-98 (193).

¹⁰ Ferrall and Jackson 5.

¹¹ One wonders if Hodge was in fact the author of the original review article, given the degree to which his editorial responses to correspondents align with the opinion of the original review.

¹² “Queen” 741.

¹³ Ibid. 742.

¹⁴ Ibid. 741.

¹⁵ Annette R. Federico, *Idols of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 2000) 8, 1.

¹⁶ “Queen” 741.

¹⁷ Ibid. 742.

¹⁸ Federico 52.

¹⁹ “Queen” 742.

²⁰ Edward Salmon, “What Girls Read,” *Nineteenth Century* 20 (1886): 515-29 (522).

²¹ Florence B. Low, “The Reading of the Modern Girl,” *Nineteenth Century* 59 (1906): 278-87 (279).

²² Ibid 278.

²³ Ibid 283.

²⁴ “Queen” 742.

²⁵ L.T. Meade, “To the Editor of the Saturday Review,” *Saturday Review* 22 Dec. 1906: 774.

²⁶ Helen Bittel, ““Required Reading for ‘Revoluting Daughters’?: The New Girl Fiction of L.T. Meade,” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 2: 2 (2006)

<<http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue22/bittel.htm>> <para 1>.

²⁷ Janis Dawson notes that critics have generally not “explored the other genres that Meade explored so successfully”. ““Write a little bit every day’: L.T. Meade, Self-Representation, and the Professional Woman Writer,” *Victorian Review* 35.1 (2009): 132-52 (132).

²⁸ “E.S.,” “To the Editor of the Saturday Review,” *Saturday Review* 29 Dec. 1906: 806.

²⁹ Meade, “To the Editor” 774.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See, for example, “Story Writing for Girls,” *Academy and Literature* 1644 (1903): 499.

³² Meade, “To the Editor” 774.

³³ Editor’s note in response to Meade, “To the Editor” 774.

³⁴ It is rather notable that this entire incident coincided with Christmas. Dedications found in Meade books suggest they were indeed frequently given as Christmas presents, and thus this attempt to “poison the minds of the reading public” could have significant economic consequences for Meade.

³⁵ “P.H.,” “To the Editor of the Saturday Review,” *Saturday Review* 5 Jan: 17.

³⁶ Jessie Hawkes-Smith, et al., “To the Editor of the Saturday Review,” *Saturday Review* 19 Jan 1907: 81.

³⁷ Editor’s note in response to Hawkes-Smith 81.

³⁸ Editor’s note in response to “P.H.” 17.

³⁹ Dawson, ““Write a little”” 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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- ⁴¹ See Beth Rodgers, "Irishness, Professional Authorship and the 'Wild Irish Girls' of L.T. Meade," *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 56.2 (2013): 131-51.
- ⁴² "How I Write My Books: An Interview with L.T. Meade," *Young Woman* 1 (1892): 122-3.
- ⁴³ "People, Places and Things," *Hearth and Home* (1893): 202.
- ⁴⁴ L.T. Meade, "From the Editor's Standpoint," *On the Art of Writing Fiction* (London: Wells, Gardner, Darnton, 1894) 124-38 (131) (emphasis in original).
- ⁴⁵ David Doughan and Peter Gordon, *Women, Clubs and Associations in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2006) 50.
- ⁴⁶ Laura Stubbs, "Sidelights on Modern Writers: Mrs. L.T. Meade," *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* 5.3 (December 1901): 247-50 (247).
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Dawson, "'Write a little'" 134.
- ⁴⁹ Stubbs 247.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Ibid. 247-8.
- ⁵² L.T. Meade, "How I Began," *Girl's Realm* 3 (1900-1): 57-64 (59).
- ⁵³ L.T. Meade, "A School of Fiction," *New Century Review* 1.3 (1897): 220-31 (220).
- ⁵⁴ Meade, "How I Write" 122. John Sutherland estimates that only approximately two per cent of Victorian authors published more than one hundred books, so Meade was right to consider herself unusually productive. "Foreword: The Underread," *The New Nineteenth Century: Feminist Readings of Underread Victorian Fiction*, eds. Barbara Leah Harman and Susan Meyer (New York: Garland, 1996) xi – xxv (xx).
- ⁵⁵ "Queen" 742.
- ⁵⁶ Bittel <para 32>.
- ⁵⁷ L.T. Meade, *Merry Girls of England* (London: Cassell, 1896) 95.
- ⁵⁸ "Concerning Children's Books," *The Academy* 19 Dec. 1896: 559.
- ⁵⁹ Mitchell 15.
- ⁶⁰ Meade, *Merry Girls* 9.
- ⁶¹ Ibid 59.
- ⁶² Ibid 129.
- ⁶³ Ferrall and Jackson 122.
- ⁶⁴ Bittel <para 19>.
- ⁶⁵ Dawson, "'Write a little'" 148.
- ⁶⁶ Meade, "From the Editor's Standpoint" 124.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid 126.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid 127, 129, 131.
- ⁶⁹ Meade, *Merry Girls* 49.

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- ⁷⁰ Janis Dawson, “‘Not for girls alone, but for anyone who can relish really good literature’: L.T. Meade, *Atalanta*, and the Family Literary Magazine,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 46.4 (2013): 475-98 (487).
- ⁷¹ Meade, “From the Editor’s Standpoint” 129.
- ⁷² Alexis Easley, “Anti/Feminism: Frances Low and the Issue of Women’s Work at the Fin de Siècle,” *Women in Journalism at the Fin de Siècle: Making a Name for Herself*, ed. F. Elizabeth Gray (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012) 218-35 (226).
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*
- ⁷⁴ Meade, *Merry Girls* 95.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid* 54.
- ⁷⁶ Meade, *Merry Girls* 177.
- ⁷⁷ Meade, “How I Began” 62.
- ⁷⁸ Dawson, “‘Write a little’” 137.
- ⁷⁹ Meade, *Merry Girls* 177.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid* 273-4.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid* 288.
- ⁸² Meade, “From the Editor’s Standpoint” 138.
- ⁸³ Sutherland xii.
- ⁸⁴ Radio 2 Book Club Special from the Edinburgh Festival, *Simon Mayo Drivetime*. Monday 19 Aug 2013. My thanks to Dr Whitney Standlee for alerting me to this programme.