

The 'Wire-Puller': L. T. Meade as Advocate and Innovator of the Periodical Short Story

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The *Strand* magazine has been credited with creating, 'all by itself, a culture of the short story in Britain where none had theretofore existed'.¹ Launched in 1891, the *Strand* was indeed noteworthy for focusing its literary content on complete short works of fiction, including Arthur Conan Doyle's tales of Sherlock Holmes, and this editorial decision was unambiguously instrumental in changing the nature of popular literature and how it was consumed. Yet if the *Strand* was the first magazine to feature the short story as *the* quintessential form of periodical fiction, there were others that had already recognised and promoted this new genre's potential and malleability. Among the most prominent of those who did so were the editor and author L. T. Meade (Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Toulmin Smith), who four years prior to the advent of the *Strand* had launched *Atalanta*, a periodical aimed at a young adult female readership. From its first issue, *Atalanta* regularly featured short fiction in its pages, and during Meade's tenure as its editor (1887 to 1893) published on average ten stories per volume by existing and emerging (predominantly female) literary talent. Those whose short stories were printed in Meade's magazine included the professional fiction writers E. [Edith] Nesbit, Jean Ingelow, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Lanoe Falconer and Clemence Housman; winners of its scholarship competitions who went on to achieve greater fame included future authors Angela Brazil and Evelyn Sharp.

At the same time, Meade was at the forefront of a movement to create a more cohesive society of female authors in London, and was centrally involved in London's 'Literary Ladies' dining club from the point of its inception in 1889. As Linda Hughes asserts, the club was founded as a counterpart and rival to men's clubs such as the Savile which 'were homosocial spaces that confirmed members' status as an elect by excluding undesirables, including women.'² The power inherent in such homosocial activities and the professional networks that developed through them would have been self-evident to the careerist women who were debarred from them, and the group of 'Literary Ladies' that emerged in the wake of this recognition featured some of the most celebrated journalists, biographers, poets and authors of fiction at the time. Not only Meade, who was by then a well-established novelist with more than thirty titles to her name, but also Amy Levy, Alice Meynell, Katharine Tynan and Mona Caird were members from the point of the group's foundation.

The first large-scale event to be staged by the Literary Ladies was a dinner held at the Criterion Restaurant in London's Piccadilly Circus on the 31st of May, 1889. Their choice of an opulent venue sited in the heart of London firmly indicates that the group were intent on announcing their presence

in as public a manner as possible and, unsurprisingly, the Literary Ladies immediately drew the ire of male commentators. One of the most prominent of their critics was J. M. Barrie, who, writing anonymously about the event for the *Scots Observer* on 8 June 1889, referred derisively to the group that gathered at the Criterion as 'ladies who would be literary if it was not so expensive while the guests were literary ladies who did not attend'. In addition to denigrating the socio-economic standings and questioning the professional qualifications and artistic integrity of the group's members, Barrie also queried their status as women: 'those present were talking and laughing so like men', he wrote, 'that the gentlemen behind the curtains had only to attend with their ears to fancy themselves in the vicinity of their own sex.'³ It is clear that Barrie's intentions were to suggest that the emergence of women into the public sphere - in which they were newly visible and acted both independently of and as rivals to men - was not only shameful, but also served to re-sex them. Yet, while his commentary is clearly meant to disgrace the women it targets, it also reveals the extent of the threat they posed to the literary establishment into which they were then just beginning to make significant inroads. Barrie's criticisms thus also reveal his fears that the (male) literary status quo might be in the process of being overturned. Nonetheless, it was a tactic which in some degree worked. Such was the controversy that surrounded this first gathering that some of the key attendees (including Meynell and Tynan), fearing personal and professional censure, declined their invitations for several years afterwards. Meanwhile, the danger to reputation and livelihood for those women who dared remain in the club meant that organisers had difficulty in finding a woman both willing to helm the second event the following year and with an appropriately high profile to stave off further controversy and criticism. It is thus a testament of her professional confidence and prowess that, when approached, Meade eagerly agreed to act as chair of the 1890 dinner.⁴ She was undoubtedly a shrewd choice. As Hughes argues, 'more important than her prolific publication record' was her status as an editor: not only did this confer on her an authority that many other members at that point in time lacked, but it also meant that Meade could 'offer significant publishing opportunities to her colleagues', and thus was one of those best placed to fulfil the homosocial aims of the group.⁵

It is true that, well before the *Strand* launched, Meade had already become not only well known among the London literary crowd, but also well respected. Such was her reputation that W. B. Yeats actively sought out her acquaintance in 1887, at the beginning of his career as a poet, and soon afterwards turned to her for publishing advice.⁶ Yeats was savvy to do so, for Meade was highly attuned to publishing trends, and from the earliest days of her own career had paid attention to the ebb and flow of literary culture. Her first highly successful work of fiction, the novel *Scamp and I* (1877), a tragic tale of a street urchin and her dog, for instance, owed at least some of its success to the fact that, in it, Meade drew upon prevailing societal concerns about the London poor that had

been fueled by the journalism of James Greenwood and the novels of Charles Dickens, playing into themes of middle and upper class guilt that she recognized through them in the process.⁷

Eventually the author of well over two hundred novels for a variety of reading audiences, Meade was also a contributor to numerous periodicals, eventually including the *Strand*, for which she published five separate and highly popular series of short fiction. Yet despite the evidence of her many and varied professional accomplishments as a writer, in an interview with Helen C. Black in 1896 it was to her editorship of *Atalanta* that Meade referred as 'the greatest idea and achievement of her life', and it is not difficult to surmise the reasons she so valued her endeavours at the magazine.⁸ If Meade offered an example to Yeats through her professional success, even more so did she afford her female readers of *Atalanta* a pattern to follow and a status to aspire to. Always a consummate professional, Meade's work ethic during the period in which she helmed the magazine is exhausting to contemplate even by modern standards: as she noted to Black, during that time she spent each of her early mornings at her home in the London suburb of West Dulwich composing fictional work before taking care of household duties in the later hours of the morning. She then travelled to *Atalanta's* editorial offices in central London, where she worked from early afternoon until 7 PM. Returning home, she had dinner with her family before resuming work in her home office, correcting proofs until late at night. At that point in time, she noted, 'An eight-hours' day would have seemed very little work to me'.⁹ In this interview, Meade details her careerist practices unapologetically, and evidences her commitment to the dual responsibilities of work and home (she was married and the mother of three young children at the time). But what is perhaps most significant about her conversation with Black is that, in it, Meade does not downplay her devotion to her profession nor its central importance to her: it is not, after all, motherhood that is her greatest achievement, but *Atalanta*, and it is through *Atalanta* that her professional legacy and literary influence can most readily be established. It is in the pages of this publication that she both nurtured writers of merit and helped to shape the future of literature by influencing the direction it would take, nudging and cajoling it, through her choices of works to publish and advice to dispense, towards the type of literary short story that would later become emblematic of high modernism. It is also through *Atalanta* that Meade was eventually able to forge the types of powerful alliances between women that she and the group of 'Literary Ladies' in London had been seeking: via the magazine, she was able to publish and promote female authors and foster associations between them that led to greater professional influence for women in publishing more generally. The seeds of this type of power and impact develop recognisably in *Atalanta* over the course of Meade's editorship, and ultimately, two strands of thought pervade the magazine: those that encourage female agency and inter-female cooperation (or admonish the lack of it); and those that nurture, stimulate and even attempt to provoke creativity and experimentation.

Meade had spotted early on the popular potential of the short story, and through *Atalanta's* regular 'Reading Union' and 'School of Fiction' columns, which consistently dispensed professional writing advice to readers, promoted the writing of short fiction as a viable career option for women. By 1893 Meade was presciently directing those among her readers who aspired to be authors to 'turn their attention to the short complete story'.¹⁰ Doing so, she argued, made good business sense: not only were magazines 'the best opening for the young writer', but through their publication in periodicals, short stories would be 'immediately presented to an assured public'.¹¹ In that same year, the innovative short story writer Lanoe Falconer also advised *Atalanta's* readers that their short stories should eschew excess detail, explanatory notes and didacticism:

There are many things lawful, if not expedient, in the three-volume novel that in the short story are forbidden – moralizing, for instance, or comments of any kind, personal confidences or confessions...on that tiny stage where there is hardly room for the puppets and their manoeuvres, there is plainly no space for the wire-puller. Even more cheerfully renounced those dreary addenda called explanations.¹²

In other words, as early as 1893 Lanoe Falconer was already conceiving of a style of short story that was much different in scope and technique from those written by the generation of authors who came before. As Adrian Hunter notes, the short stories of Charles Dickens had varied little in tone, style and content from his novels, and 'left little to the co-productive imagination of the reader: he *told* rather than *showed*, *stated* rather than *implied*, with the effect that his short stories, like those of his contemporaries Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell, seemed like "unused chapters of longer works".¹³ Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont meanwhile assert in their detailed exploration of women writers and the modern short story that 'in writing manuals and creative writing courses modernist short stories are staged as primary models and maxims such as "show, don't tell" or "every word counts" have become well-known mantras for aspiring writers'.¹⁴ Falconer's conception of the short story can thus be seen not only to dispense with the realist conventions of the form, but to approach a modernist aesthetic. Meade's decision to include this type of advice, in an article that runs to three pages and is centrally located in the volume, situates her as an editor who was not only encouraging young women into the professions, but encouraging them into a specific profession, that of the short story writer, with a view to placing them at the forefront of the form's innovation and artistry.

About the short story form in the 1890s, Hunter further notes that women's struggles at the time, during which the controversial figure of the independent, athletic, politically-engaged New Woman gained in stature and influence, were 'not just for apolitical enfranchisement and social equality, but

for cultural expression and a literature of their own', and explains that for contemporary commentators such as George Saintsbury, Andrew Lang and H. D. Traill, the 'literary avant-garde's fondness for introspective realism [was] evidence of this spreading, and deleterious, influence of the feminine'.¹⁵ The figure of the artistic woman was, to these men as she was to Barrie, a threat to the pre-eminence of masculinity and the male, but what such arguments also assert is that the psychological interiority that marked out the avant-garde short story was both a woman's invention and a woman's proclivity. Just as woman was largely confined to enclosed spaces such as the home, so too were the narratives she created limited to the interiors of her own mind. Men's tales, in contrast, were marked by exteriority: action and speech rather than thought; plotted rather than plotless. In this formulation, the modernist short story – exemplified in academic commentaries and in popular conception as the urtext of the genre – is thus not just a feminine but a distinctly female form.

Further to this, the magazine itself acts as a microcosm of the type of hybridity and eclecticism that D'hoker and Eggermont have aligned with the development of the short story form in the 1890s. Appearing in its pages are stories by authors of both sexes that experiment with and push the boundaries of form and content with mixed degrees of success. Meade, as the mediator of these stories, is key: it is she who decided which stories appeared and which themes and characterisations should be highlighted. In its focus on content for young female readers, *Atalanta* needed to appeal to those readers; to divine and assimilate their viewpoints. At the same time, Meade's choice of content suggests that there was a diverse and complex range of identities that *Atalanta* needed to cater for. Acknowledging this is the only means of reconciling the inclusion in the magazine of short stories which took such disparate forms as the dismal and self-consciously political allegory and the sexually-charged and morally ambiguous gothic tale. Yet it is significant, and true to Meade's editorial innovativeness, that neither type of tale fits comfortably within stereotypes of Victorian childhood and femininity. The evidence of the magazine indicates that Meade recognised the diversity and burgeoning modernity of her readers, and sought to appeal to and direct it. If Victorian realism was, as D'hoker and Eggermont argue, the genre of 'reticence, truth and moral purpose' (298), then the short stories published in Meade's *Atalanta* were, at their best, if not its antitheses, then at the very least its antagonists.¹⁶

The stories Meade chose to include in *Atalanta* by and large adhere to Falconer's advice by avoiding extraneous detail and sermonizing. Eminently readable and generally written to a high literary standard, many feature proto-feminist content, highlight the notion of duty to others (evident in portrayals of characters of both sexes) and promote ideas of female strength, resilience and self-sufficiency. This is particularly true of the earliest issues, which are more remarkable for their

challenging of traditional gender roles than for their literary experimentation. This proclivity is evident from the first of the story's Meade published, Lady Lindsay's 'Lizzie's Pianoforte Class', from *Atalanta's* inaugural issue (October 1887), which features a young female protagonist who doubts her abilities and worries about the potential for public ridicule when she is asked to take on a part vacated by another girl in a piano recital.¹⁷ In the story, Lindsay skilfully contrasts the joy with which Lizzie jumps into a stormy sea as others around her look on in fear with the young girl's terror at the prospect of striking the wrong notes at her piano recital in front of 'those dreadful mammas who are going to sit and look on'.¹⁸ In thus drawing important distinctions between the freedom from censure Lizzie enjoys out of doors, and which allows her to thrive, and the antagonism and ill-will inherent in interior spaces, which have until this point only served to instil her with anxiety, Lindsay subsequently shows her protagonist making an important realisation about how a more cohesive form of female influence and agency might be achieved. A moment of epiphany the child experiences during the course of the recital leads her to acknowledge the power inherent in cooperation and kindness: when Lizzie fears she might falter, she tells herself '*You owe a duty, you owe a duty*'. This idea in turn reminds her of the common saying, 'England expects every man to do his duty', and causes her to wonder, 'Why not every woman, nay, even every child?'¹⁹ (p. 37) Subsequently seeing herself as implicit in this call to duty, she also envisions herself anew as a creature of both responsibility and capability, and is able to simultaneously fulfil her obligations and achieve her full creative potential as a result. From this initial short story, Meade's editorial choices can be seen to convey a message about female solidarity which is in keeping with the ethos of her schoolgirl novels, and by subtly but recognisably querying existing ideas of Empire by drawing attention to the errors inherent in its exclusions. [footnote for my chapter here]

By April of 1888, the stories Meade was choosing to publish expand on these themes of female potential and agency, while also branching out into the realms of mystery. Arnold Hamlyn's 'A Jewel of Price', for example, anticipates the style and subject matter that would become a hallmark of the *Strand* when it emerged three years later. 'A Jewel' begins as a story about the career failure and relative poverty of the male narrator, but soon turns into a mystery story concerning a stolen watch of great value. Increasingly unconventional in tone and content as it progresses towards its denouement at a criminal prosecution trial, the story remains fascinating for Hamlyn's narrative decision to make the narrator simultaneously both ignorant of the solution to the mystery and also the culprit of the theft (he himself has stolen the watch while sleepwalking). Meanwhile, its heroine is a twelve-year-old girl, Lettice, who takes the stand to testify on the narrator's behalf, exonerating him of the crime in the process. She later presides with authority over the dinner party that follows the trial, impressing her male fellow diners with her self-possession and maturity. Much attention is

paid in the story to the heroine's relative youth, but only her name and the use of pronouns indicate that she is female, making this a tale remarkable for the degree to which gender is largely inconsequential. In line with this, in the story's final paragraphs the narrator reveals the extent of the platonic friendship that has developed between himself and Lettice in the ensuing years, stating that he has 'at this moment no dearer friend in all the world' than her.²⁰

Similar themes of female agency are developed in a slightly later story, Frances A. Humphrey's 'Lost on the Prairie' (May 1888), which offers a much more formidable challenge to prevailing notions of femininity.²¹ In Humphrey's tale a young American girl, Winifred, moves with her family from urban Massachusetts to a remote Kansas homestead. Narrated in its first half by its young female protagonist, the story demonstrates Winifred to be eminently capable of holding her own in the rugged conditions to which she has been relocated: she rides her horse in races against her father, and often wins. On the day in which most of the action of the story occurs, she has been left to care for her young brother, Dot, while her parents journey to the nearest town, fifteen miles away. Determined to fulfil the domestic role she has been assigned as fully as possible, she leaves Dot alone outside while she goes indoors to do the baking and housekeeping. Fundamentally unsuited to these tasks, Winifred takes far more time than she has anticipated in completing them and, detrimentally, these domestic pursuits cause her to neglect her far more imperative role as protector of her brother. Emerging from the house to find Dot has disappeared, she rides out on her horse to save him, but is pursued by wolves and forced to seek refuge in an abandoned cabin, where the wolves literally bay at the door. In the second half of the story, told through the medium of a letter written by her father to relatives in Massachusetts, we learn that local settlers eventually found Dot and brought him safely home, and also of the rescue of Winifred, who has protected her frightened horse from the threat of the wolves, putting herself in mortal danger in the process. In this narrative, Humphrey creates an adventure tale in which Winifred can be seen to enact the role of the (traditionally male) western hero: riding horses, fighting wolves, saving helpless animals from almost certain death. There is little didacticism, but the fact that the adventure of the ride and rescue is portrayed vividly and heroically, while the domestic duties the girl enacts are likened to a childish game of pretending to be something she is not, clearly demonstrate that there is nothing but her gender and relative youth to separate the protagonist from the heroes portrayed in the work of Humphrey's contemporaries Rider Haggard and Bret Harte.

By July of 1888, Meade's editorial choices include Susan Coolidge's fairy story, 'Etelka's Choice', remarkable for its inventive conversational style and innovations on the fairy tale moral. Set in '*Boemer-wald*' (the Bohemian Forest), the story features a female main character, Etelka, who is of 'Slavonic and gypsy origin'.²² In this intriguing variation on the Cinderella tale, Etelka is abused by her

mother and mistreated, too, by her brothers. When she meets fairies in the woods who have witnessed her suffering, they offer to grant her a choice of wishes: they will cast a spell on her so that when she dances, either flowers or gold coins will appear beneath her feet. Longing to experience the beauty of the wildflowers but believing that the gold will be of most help to her family, she prioritises duty over personal fulfilment and chooses the second option. But Etelka's family are soon demonstrated to be both greedy and undeserving and, after moving to the city, demand more and more material possessions without finding satisfaction. As their needs increase, Etelka is forced to dance until she is near death. Finally deserting her family, she returns to the woods, where she seeks out the fairies and asks them to undo their spell. Unable to do so, they instead agree to alter the spell so that the wildflowers she had originally longed for will appear, but only when she dances for Lepperl, the man she truly loves. Etelka and Lepperl are soon married, and she transforms what was his once barren land into fields of colour and beauty. In Coolidge's allegory, it is notable that the themes of female self-sacrifice and materialist rewards which are emblematic of traditional fairy tales are condemned, while the pursuit of aesthetic beauty and personal fulfilment are rewarded.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' story 'The Toddlethwaite Prize' (January 1889) meanwhile offers a compelling complement to both Humphrey's and Coolidge's narratives by promoting the values of self-sacrifice but focusing instead on male characters.²³ In this tale, a young student, Bob Gresham, sits up to nurse a critically ill younger schoolmate, Teddie, who dotes on him. As a result, Bob is too tired to recall the speech he has chosen to memorise for the Toddlethwaite prize competition the next day, and which he was expected to win. When the sponsor of the prize learns of Bob's good deed, he awards Bob £100, twice the amount of the Toddlethwaite prize. The story is significant in this context for prioritising and rewarding values in males such as nurture and selflessness which are traditionally seen as feminine, and for devaluing stereotypically masculine achievements (oratorical skills, public glory, scholastic accomplishment).

In his more light-hearted 'The Talismans' (September 1890), which appears in the subsequent volume of *Atalanta* and also features a boys' school setting, Dr. [Richard] Garnett creates a story that is simultaneously whimsical and thought-provoking, drawing on philosophical ideas to explore the nature and meaning of time. Again incorporating a male central character, Garnett's story can be seen to mark a shift in the tone and purpose of the short fiction published in *Atalanta*, with Meade from this point onward revealing a tendency to publish stories that do not just defy the gendered status quo, but also experiment with the ways in which the short story can be innovated to convey ideas and meanings as succinctly and creatively as possible. In 'The Talismans', Garnett dispenses with almost all extraneous detail, leading the reader through a series of mythical vignettes that are only revealed to be dream sequences in the story's final sentences. Beginning in a classroom where the subject of

study is the philosophy of time, a student gradually loses interest. The story then jumps to a form of mythical realm, where the student attempts to barter with the anthropomorphised figure of Time for an ancient treasure that will endow him with authority. Choosing as his prize Time's single lock of hair – the source of all Time's power - the student subsequently finds that by enfeebling the physical embodiment of Time he has also stopped time, a prospect which turns out to be more problematic than he had anticipated. Featuring narrative ellipsis and playing with ideas of genre, Garnett's story is serious in tone but the effect is both humorous and educational. The enigmatic ending of the tale within the tale, in which time starts again because Time's hair has regrown, is clearly meant to provoke intellectual debate about the logic of time both in and outside the story, and thus to foster philosophical discussion among readers. It is an adroitly written piece of short fiction and, coming as it does towards the end of the volume, points to the more challenging and innovative work that is to come.

Clemence Housman, later a prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement in the United Kingdom, creates a different form of enigmatic tale in her own contribution to the magazine, 'The Were-Wolf', published in *Atalanta* in December of 1890, just three months after Garnett's story. Housman's story more clearly signals Meade's intention to publish unconventional and intellectually difficult works of short fiction: though it is written in heightened Victorian prose, its themes can be viewed as controversial and its central characterisations experimental. It focuses on the repeated winter visits of a female character, 'White Fell', to an isolated farmhouse shared by twin brothers Sweyn and Christian and their extended family. Housman's choice of name for her main female character links her to a distancing or falling from sexual purity, and in line with this idea, White Fell's appearances increasingly endanger the family and disrupt the harmonious relationship the twin brothers have until then shared. Loved by Sweyn and recognised as a beast by Christian, who acts as the focaliser of the tale, she is noteworthy for her strength and athleticism, and intimations of something approaching non-hetero sexual desire are recognisable in Housman's consistent attention to White Fell's masculine attributes and Sweyn's explicit attraction to them. The story appears to be on the side of sexual convention when White Fell is described as 'a monstrous horror – a ghastly, deadly danger, set loose and at bay, in a circle of girls and women and careless, defenceless men – so hideous and terrible a thing as might crack the brain or curdle the heart stone dead'.²⁴ Her monstrosity is also conveyed through the acts of violence she commits, both of which transgress traditional female family roles: after acting as a nurturer to Rol, the youngest son of the family, she lures him away and presumably devours him; a similar fate befalls Trella, an elderly woman who has welcomed and treated White Fell as a daughter. The ending of the story features a detailed description of a long race between Christian and White Fell through the snow. Ultimately, Christian is killed by White Fell, but

she herself dies in the effort and is turned into a wolf at the moment of her death. The next morning, Sweyn sees two pairs of footprints leading through the snow and, thinking that Christian has pursued White Fell with a view to seducing (or perhaps raping) her, follows them with revenge in mind. When he finds both Christian's body and the corpse of a white wolf nearby, he realises he has been mistaken all along, and lovingly embraces his dead brother. There is much detailed description of the state of Christian's corpse, and he is portrayed in the *Atalanta* illustration by Everard Hopkins in a Christ-like pose with arms outstretched and feet crossed, the shadow of a cross looming over his left shoulder. This tactic not only fetishizes Christian's physicality but also has obvious allegorical implications, which are made explicit in the story's closing lines, when Sweyn is described as knowing 'surely that to him Christian had been as Christ, and had suffered and died to save him from his sins'.²⁵ Yet the delineation of the hero and villain roles in the story is never as clear as Housman's explanations make them seem.

Scholars have suggested that 'The Were-Wolf' evidences a fear of female degeneration and non-traditional femininity, and such a reading is consistent with the story's early 1890s context, a point at which the Decadent movement was well established and the New Woman was nascent.²⁶ This interpretation is disturbed, however, by the description of White Fell dying 'causelessly – incomprehensibly', and through the evidence of Housman's own suffragist politics.²⁷ In its portrayal of a woman with desires that extend beyond traditional family roles and alternatives to heteronormativity, the story of White Fell – forced through circumstances over which she has no control to pursue illicit desires via elaborate disguise and under cover of darkness - can just as readily be seen as an allegorical tale which details the dangers inherent in repressing women's access to power and alternatives to heteronormative sexual identities. Such a reading is made more explicit in Housman's subsequent full-length treatment of the same tale, published by John Lane/the Bodley Head in 1896, and graphically apparent in the illustrations by her brother Laurence Housman, which portray White Fell as a highly masculinised figure and, in the final image in the volume, show the twin brothers in a sexualised embrace.²⁸

In the ensuing volume of *Atalanta* (October 1891 – September 1892), Meade would, for the first and only time, publish a short story of her own, 'The Yellow Dragon Vases'. In combination with other works including E. Nesbit's 'The Poor Lovers' and Evelyn J. Sharp's 'The Wraith of Turville', Meade's story evidences a new proclivity to challenge traditional ideas about female sexual desirability, women's agency and the purposes of marriage. Critiques of capitalism and industrialism also feature in these tales alongside a questioning of class-based and social hierarchies and their formation, and such shifts in thematic and moral content attest to Meade's growing confidence as an editor, tastemaker and influencer. In 'The Dragon Vases' (December 1891), financial problems within marriage are a central concern; so, too, is marital equality and a strong matrimonial bond.²⁹ After she

has been ostracised from her family for marrying for love rather than money, a wife receives the titular dragon vases as her only inheritance from a wealthy and beloved aunt. The vases in the story act as a metaphor for the marriage itself: in her family's estimation the union between the woman and her husband is, like the vases, an ugly and unwanted thing. In reality, both the marriage and the vases are ultimately proven to be valuable. Their sale leads to financial solvency for the couple, whose affectionate and equable relationship is highlighted throughout the narrative.³⁰ Nesbit's 'The Poor Lovers' (January 1892), told in the form of a fable, enacts a more emphatic commentary on social inequality and gender roles within marriage. In the story, a young married couple move to London to seek out work on equal terms – he as a poet, she as an artist. Nesbit's narrative makes it clear, however, that there are financial barriers facing these two hard working people which preclude their access to artistic success: 'poetry is not marketable unless you are a lord', she writes, and 'pictures are not marketable unless you take a room in Bond Street, and hang the walls with sage-green satin, and give afternoon tea to possible purchasers'.³¹ Debarred from his chosen profession by financial need, the husband instead becomes a reviewer of the poetry written by men who have made their fortunes through what Nesbit portrays as reprehensible capitalist exploits. The wife meanwhile becomes a painter of birthday cards and decorative fans (which presumably are sold to the wives of these self-same men). The couple are nonetheless 'foolishly happy' – until, that is, their only child dies and the husband loses his job.³² Nesbit can find no way out of the psychological and financial distress they face other than their deaths - together, by drowning - which she portrays as a blessing bestowed on them by a fairy. An extended allegory for the state of society more generally and the commercialisation of art specifically, 'The Poor Lovers' carries a recognisably socialist message in keeping with Nesbit's own Fabian politics, and is among the most overtly political of the magazine's stories.

In 'The Wraith of Turville' (September 1892), Sharp extends ideas of gender and female agency developed in earlier volumes by daring to make her female protagonist sexually desirable despite her physical ugliness (which is explicitly noted). The story is most interesting for the manner in which it overturns the gender norms of the 'Beauty and the Beast' fairy tale in its various incarnations. In Sharp's version of the story, an evil father attempts to trick a rich man into marrying his ugly daughter, Lady Rilva, whom he has hidden out of sight. Yet Rilva manages to gain access to her potential future husband and, without revealing her true identity, uses her intelligence and kindness to win his love. When he subsequently refuses to marry the master of the house's daughter, whom he believes he has not yet met, Rilva's father attempts to kill him by setting fire to the building in which he is imprisoned. Like White Fell in Housman's 'The Were-Wolf', Rilva is thereafter shown to be a physically strong woman capable of carrying both her lover and her father to safety; like Christian in the same story,

she saves the lives of others but is unable to save herself. Sharp's tale acts as both a complement to and a more radical variation on the themes of Housman's tale from just a year earlier: in 'The Wraith of Turville', bodily strength in the female is life-affirming rather than destructive, sexual attraction is predicated on moral value and intellectual achievement rather than physical attributes, and the Christ-like saviour is female rather than male. Taken together, the strands of thought that emerge around the character of Rilva combine to create a new form of anti-feminine female heroine.

The final volume of *Atalanta* to be edited by Meade (Volume 6, October 1892-September 1893) was also the first she was compelled to co-edit with Arthur Balfour Symington, and coincides with the amalgamation of *Atalanta* and the *Victorian Magazine*, which until then Symington had helmed alone. Thereafter published as *Atalanta: The Victorian Magazine*, it was marked by a discernible alteration in focus and intent and, for reasons that can only be conjectured, this combination of factors appears to have precipitated Meade's exit from *Atalanta*. The result was detrimental to the magazine overall. As Janis Dawson asserts, '*Atalanta* continued to attract notable writers...though not in the numbers represented under Meade's editorship', and this first and only volume to be co-edited by Meade and Symington is notable for a lack of literary interest.³³ Of the short stories featured in it there are few that illicit further commentary: Mrs. [Margaret] Oliphant's 'Mary's Brother' is a slight but well told conventional romance; E. Nesbit and Oswald Barron's 'A Mercy by the Way, 1685' is a grim story of soldiers and poachers; Nesbit's solo effort, the fairy story 'A Rose by the Way', is a highly sentimental tale that by and large avoids the serious social commentary of her earlier work for the magazine; and A. Hammond's 'A Justice of the Peace' features a female character who is gradually brought under the control of a male. The fiction in this volume perceptibly dilutes the magazine's earlier feminist themes, even as Meade's and Falconer's prescient advice about the potential inherent in the short story and the means by which to use that form to best advantage emerge alongside it, and serve to treat *Atalanta's* readers as nascent businesswomen and potential literary innovators.

Meade herself would follow her own directive by leaving *Atalanta* in 1893 to pursue more assiduously her career as an author of novels and short stories. The development of the 'short complete story' would occupy a good deal of her time and attention for the next fifteen years and afforded her an unprecedented level of popular success. Among her most prominent projects was the creation of a first short story series for the *Strand*, *Stories from the Diary of a Doctor*, co-authored with 'Clifford Halifax' (the pseudonym of Dr. Edgar Beaumont).³⁴ Running as her stories did alongside the *Sherlock Holmes* series, they were immediately positioned as both rivals and literary equals to Conan Doyle's tales. Meade's series was also recognised in its time as innovative and subsequently has been credited with inventing the subgenre of the medical mystery.³⁵ The *Strand* would provide her with a popular audience and a lucrative market for her short fiction for the next decade. For the magazine, she would

go on to write four further short story series dealing with medical and scientific detection: *The Adventures of a Man of Science* (eight stories co-authored with Halifax, 1896-7), *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings* (ten stories co-authored with Robert Eustace, 1898), *Stories of the Sanctuary Club* (six stories with Eustace, 1899) and *The Sorceress of the Strand* (six stories with Eustace, 1902-3).³⁶ A good deal of critical attention has been paid to Meade's decision in both *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings* and *The Sorceress of the Strand* to create powerful, resourceful and highly intelligent female villains (Madame Koluchy and Madame Sara, respectively) who are never bested by her male heroes. Yet it is seldom noted that, in her narrative decision to make both Madame Koluchy's and Madame Sara's intellectual abilities obvious and their criminal methods explicit but leave their motives unexplained, Meade denies the reader access to the human interest of their tales. It is noteworthy, too, that the antagonistic relationship which is set up in these story series is consistently between men who have access to power and position through conventional channels (the police force, the medical profession, in business and commerce) and women who do not. The subtext here is clear: the criminal behaviour of these women acts as a warning about the dangers of devaluing female intellect and thwarting women's ambitions.

In 1865, Bessie Parkes noted in her *Essays on Women's Work* that the popular press afforded women a legitimate access to power that Meade's female characters lack: 'With the growth of the press has grown the direct influence of educated women on the world's affairs,' Parkes wrote, 'Mute in the Senate and in the church, their opinions have found a voice in sheets of ten thousand readers.'³⁷ Although in Meade's time the majority of magazines continued to be owned and edited by men, a few maverick women were making inroads into periodical editorship and authorship, and influencing their readerships in important ways. One of those was undoubtedly L. T. Meade, who used her position at the helm of a pioneering literary periodical aimed at a female readership as an instrument to promote the emerging form of the short story and encourage innovation in her readers. As Dawson has noted, through *Atalanta* Meade offered 'readers not only a quality girls' magazine but also a family literary magazine that promoted progressive views of women and showcased their contributions to literary culture.'³⁸ Indeed, *Atalanta* successfully entertained and sought to enlighten readers both young and old with extended articles on college and university education for women, and regular features on 'Employment for Girls' that included fields such as medicine.³⁹ But it also advised readers, many of whom Meade recognised as literary hopefuls and encouraged in that direction, to emulate her exacting professional standards. In keeping with this, Meade's publishing advice could be strongly worded: 'whatever you are,' she wrote in *Atalanta* in 1893, 'be true; write about things you know of; don't sit in your drawing-room and invent an impossible scene in a London garret. If you want to talk of hunger and cold and the depths of sordid privation, go at least and see them, if you cannot feel

them'.⁴⁰ As a result of tactics such as these, Meade's and her magazine's influence was not only immediate but lasting, and her legacy is evidenced in the achievements of those who were known to be her readers. Angela Brazil, for instance, would go on to write fiction for girls that exceeded the popularity of Meade's own body of similar works, promoting the active, educated girl as a powerful agent for change.

The most incontrovertible example of the influence Meade and her magazine wielded on the short story and its development is Evelyn Sharp, who as a young reader of *Atalanta* received a 'commended' in its 'Original Christmas Story' prize competition (March 1888) and a Proxime Accesserunt award in the magazine's 1891-2 scholarship competition. Sharp's subsequent work as a short story author and regular contributor to *The Yellow Book*, the publication whose predilection for publishing experimental short fiction has been widely acknowledged as the forerunner of the modernist aesthetic, meanwhile placed her in the *avant garde* of the development of the short story as a 'high' literary form. Sharp's 'The Wraith of Turville' in many ways acts as a template for her later, more experimental work in *The Yellow Book*. Her story 'In Dull Brown' (*The Yellow Book*, 1896), for instance, re-tells the tale of the plain but desirable woman while also experimenting with the types of narrative techniques that Meade's magazine advocated for the short story. 'In Dull Brown' places the reader in close proximity to her female protagonist's thoughts and feelings, allowing access not only to her quick mind but also to the degree to which she feels that her physical movements and prospects for professional and personal fulfilment are being constantly curtailed. Sharp also creates a unsettling ambiguity at the close of the tale whereby the reader can never fully resolve whether the narrator's conclusion that her lover has, over the course of a single evening, switched his affections from her to her sister (a beautiful, bedridden, Victorian stereotype of femininity) are accurate. Sharp thus artfully manages, in this haunting and open-ended narrative, to re-create in the reader similar psychological responses to those the character herself is experiencing.⁴¹ In terms of Sharp's development as a short story author, we can trace a direct line from the themes of 'The Wraith of Turville' to the innovations on them in 'In Dull Brown', and thus from her reading of and writing for *Atalanta* to her experimentation in *The Yellow Book*.

But it is perhaps the example of Virginia Woolf which acts as the most persuasive argument on behalf of Meade's importance and influence as an editor. Beth Rigel Daugherty has drawn attention to the fact that Woolf kept two volumes of *Atalanta* in her personal library throughout her lifetime, and this despite the inconvenience of doing so over a series of home moves and the bombing of her successive residences at Tavistock and Mecklenburgh Squares in London in 1940. That Woolf held on to these volumes over a period of more than 50 years attests to their continued importance to her. Certainly, the volumes of *Atalanta* she retained (2 and 4) would have held personal memories for Woolf, as both

contained essays written by her 'Aunt Anny' (Anne Thackeray Ritchie), to whom she was very close, and who almost certainly introduced her to the magazine at a very young age. Daugherty argues, however, that *Atalanta* was not just of sentimental value, but acted as 'the most important' among many literary works that Ritchie bestowed on or shared with her niece.⁴² In making this argument, Daugherty also draws attention to the fact that under Meade's editorship *Atalanta* actively challenged the gendered and professional status quo, and created links between young female readers that might not have been achievable otherwise, ultimately asserting that Woolf would have learned much of import to her in later life from reading it. Because she was home schooled herself, Daugherty suggests, it would have been in the pages of *Atalanta* that the young and isolated Woolf became acquainted

with some of the education that girls who attended school gained, not only in terms of curriculum and pedagogical "how-to" articles, but also in terms of contact with other reading girls, if only through print. It showed her what women could do in publishing [...] Its conversational style and democratic inclusion of readers' responses through its discussion-oriented approach would also have provided Virginia Woolf with an early dialogic for her reviews and essays.⁴³

Daugherty's argument, while highly persuasive, can be taken even further: through the advice dispensed in its many articles and regular columns on writing and publishing, Meade's magazine not only encouraged young female readers like Woolf into the publishing industry, but also instructed and guided them in terms of literary style and genre, simultaneously pointing them in the direction of the short story as an emerging form and towards a method of writing that anticipates the later literary experiments in which Woolf herself participated so centrally. The evidence of Sharp and Woolf alone is sufficient to suggest the profound effect Meade had on her readers and, through them, the development of the short story form and the promotion of a modernist aesthetic. How many others she influenced is unquantifiable, but it is apparent that in the community of readers she created through *Atalanta* and the confidence to experiment and innovate this instilled, Meade made important and lasting contributions to both periodical culture and literature more generally.

¹ Chan, Winnie, 'The Linked Excitements of L. T. Meade and...in the Strand Magazine', in Ellen Burton Harrington (ed.), *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by American & British Women Writers*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 60-73, p. 60.

² Hughes, Linda (2007) 'A Club of Their Own: The "Literary Ladies," New Women Writers and *Fin de Siècle* authorship'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35, p. 233.

³ 'The L. L.'s Dinner', *Scots Observer* (8 June 1889), p. 67. See also Hughes, p. 234.

⁴ Hughes, p. 244. Meade would continue to take a prominent role in the Literary Ladies for years afterwards. A seating plan for the 1894 dinner (by this point more democratically named 'The Women Writers' Dinner')

published in the *Woman's Signal* (7 June 1894, p. 395) shows Meade positioned at the head table, two places from that year's chair, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, the American biographer of Mary Wollstonecraft.

⁵ Hughes p. 244.

⁶ Having failed in his attempts to market his first volume of poetry, *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889), to London publishers, Yeats was considering publishing the book by subscription, and noted in a letter to Katharine Tynan on 8 May 1887 that 'Mrs. Mead[e] of *Atalanta* once did much the same, she says, which comforts me.' It was indeed by subscription that *Oisin* was first issued. See Roger McHugh (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Letters to Katharine Tynan* (Dublin: Clonmore and Reynolds, 1953), pp. 50-51.

⁷ An 1869 collection of Greenwood's work, *The Seven Curses of London*, features among its litany of case histories several that almost certainly inspired Meade's themes in *Scamp and I*. See James Greenwood, *The Seven Curses of London* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869).

⁸ Black, Helen C. (1896) *Pen, Pencil, Baton and Mask: Biographical Sketches*. London: Spottiswood, p. 226.

⁹ Black p. 227.

¹⁰ L. T. Meade, 'From the Editor's Standpoint', *Atalanta* 6 (October 1892-September 1893), p. 841 (pp. 838-42).

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 838.

¹² Lanoe Falconer, 'The Short Story', *Atalanta* 6 (October 1892-September 1893), p. 457 (pp. 457-9).

¹³ Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, p. 10.

¹⁴ Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont, 'Fin-de-Siècle Women Writers and the Modern Short Story', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, Number 3, 2015, pp. 291-312, p.292.

¹⁵ Hunter p. 35.

¹⁶ D'hoker and Eggermont p. 298.

¹⁷ Lady Lindsay, 'Lizzie's Pianoforte Class', *Atalanta* 1 (October 1887), pp. 32-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 37.

²⁰ Arnold Hamlyn, 'A Jewel of Price', *Atalanta* 1 (April 1888), pp. 387-94, p. 394.

²¹ Frances A. Humphrey, 'Lost on the Prairie', *Atalanta* 1 (May 1888), pp. 427-32.

²² Susan Coolidge, 'Etelka's Choice', *Atalanta* 1 (July 1888), pp. 558-66, p. 559.

²³ Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, 'The Toddlethwaite Prize', *Atalanta* 2, pp. 263-267.

²⁴ Clemence Housman, 'The Were-Wolf', *Atalanta* 4, p. 145 (pp. 132-156).

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 156.

²⁶ See, for example, Chantal Bourgault du Coudray, 'Introduction', *The Curse of the Werewolf: Fantasy, Horror, and the Beast Within*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006, 1-10; and Melissa Purdue (2016) 'Clemence Housman's *The Were-Wolf*: A Cautionary Tale for the Progressive New Woman', *Revenant: Critical and Creative Studies of the Supernatural*. Issue 3 (December 2016) *Werewolves: Studies in Transformation*, Franck and Hatter (eds), pp. 42-55.

²⁷ Housman p. 152.

²⁸ John Lane/the Bodley Head was a publishing house known for its willingness to issue controversial and *avant garde* works, and closely associated with New Woman writing through its publication of George Egerton's seminal collection of short stories, *Keynotes*, in 1893 and its decision to launch a *Keynotes* series of experimental fiction in the wake of the success of Egerton's volume. Housman also contributed to the periodical the *Yellow Book*, another prominent outlet for literary experimentation.

²⁹ L. T. Meade, 'The Yellow Dragon Vases', *Atalanta* 5 (December 1891), pp. 152-9.

³⁰ This theme is also central to Katharine S. McQuoid's 'Madelaine LaRoux' (*Atalanta* 4, pp. 182-191) and Mrs. Walford's 'Three Feet of Obstinacy' (*Atalanta* 4, pp. 199-206).

³¹ E. Nesbit, 'The Poor Lovers', *Atalanta* 5 (January 1892), p. 222-4, p.223.

³² Nesbit p. 223.

³³ Janis Dawson (2013) "'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 (Winter 2013), pp. 475-498, p. 492.

³⁴ Edgar Beaumont, M. D. (1860-1921), had a general practice in Crystal Palace and according to his obituary in *The Lancet* was 'a surgeon to the Norwood Cottage Hospital [where] he kept well abreast of modern developments and never spared himself.' The Norwood Cottage Hospital was a charitably run hospital in Croydon, England, and Beaumont there treated and operated for little or no remuneration. See 'Obituary: Edgar Beaumont, M.D. Durh.', *The Lancet* (12 November 1921), p. 1028.

³⁵ Sally Mitchell has credited Meade with the invention of the medical mystery. See Sally Mitchell (1995) *The New Girl: Girls' Culture in England 1880-1915* New York: Columbia UP, 1995, p. 11. However, the pair of writers who wrote collaboratively under the pseudonym Ellery Queen argue that, although Meade and Halifax's work

is often attributed 'classic "first" position' (p. 33) in the medical mysteries genre of short fiction, some of *The Tales of Eccentric Life* written by the American Dr. William A. Hammond and his daughter Clara Lanza, 'anticipate the British "medical mystery" by a full eight years' (pp. 33-4). A much earlier and better known precursor to Meade and Halifax's work is Samuel Warren's *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* (*Blackwood's Magazine* 1830-7). Warren's work is a noteworthy forerunner: like Meade's similarly titled series, it was first published in serialised form in a monthly magazine and features a gifted doctor who relays his memories of a series of mysterious case histories via first person narration. These similarities were acknowledged by an anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator* (24 April 1897, p. 12), when he noted about the published volume of Meade and Halifax's short stories that it was 'a very interesting book, much superior to that with which one naturally compares it, Samuel Warren's "Diary of a Late Physician," superior because it has more reality about it, and less rhodomontade.'

³⁶ 'Robert Eustace' was the pen name of Eustace Robert Barton, a medical practitioner and author who gained entrance to the Royal College of Surgeons in August of 1897 and worked over the course of his career at University College Hospital, London and the County Mental Hospital, Gloucester. He later collaborated with Dorothy L. Sayers on *The Documents in the Case* (1930). See *Times* (London), Saturday, Aug 21, 1897; pg. 8; Pearson, Karl. 'A New White-Lock Case: Barton's Case', *Biometrika* 13:4, October 1921, pp. 347-349 and 'Heads to the Pole', *Times* (London, England), Thursday, Oct 13, 1932; pg. 10.

³⁷ Quoted in Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, London: Virago, 1978, p. 155.

³⁸ Dawson p. 476.

³⁹ See Miss Edith Huntley, M. D., 'Employment for Girls: Medicine', *Atalanta*, vol. 1, no. 11 (August 1888), p. 655.

⁴⁰ L. T. Meade, 'From the Editor's Standpoint', *Atalanta* 6, pp. 838-42, p. 841

⁴¹ Sharp, Evelyn. "In Dull Brown." *The Yellow Book* 8 (January 1896): 181-200.

⁴² Beth Rigel Daugherty, "'Young writers might do worse": Anne Thackeray Ritchie, Virginia Stephen and Virginia Woolf'. In G. Potts et al. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury, Volume 1*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 20-36, p. 30.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 33.