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Required Reading for “Revolting Daughters”?: The New Girl Fiction of L.T. Meade

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<1>Marginalized by their triple identification with children’s literature, mass culture, and “the feminine,” the popular novels written for the *fin-de-siècle* English girls coming of age during the heyday of the New Woman—dubbed “New Girl” fiction by Sally Mitchell—have not experienced the renewed scholarly attention enjoyed by other “feminine” and “juvenile” Victorian genres.⁽¹⁾ With few exceptions, they are still generally either patronized or ignored or assumed to simplistically reproduce dominant ideologies (especially with regard to gender) in the same way that they endlessly reproduce the same formulae. For example, *The Oxford Companion to Children’s Literature* asserts that although these popular authors “were writing at a time when female emancipation was a burning topic, they gave no real support to it and implied that higher education and other such activities of the ‘modern girl’ or ‘new woman’ were just an unusual prelude to married domesticity” (Carpenter and Pritchard 207). Judith Rowbotham’s tellingly titled *Good Girls Make Good Wives* argues that such novels, though “responsible for the creation of a more independent female tradition” (80), ultimately offered only a more “robust version of the domestic ideal” (266). And Kimberley Reynolds claims that the girl rebel who initially appears to be a youthful version of the New Woman heroine is in fact, upon closer examination, “as reactionary as its adult counterpart was radical” (98-99). This essay challenges the conventional understanding of these books as either escapist entertainment or culturally conservative propaganda for middle-class daughters. It calls for a re-reading of this neglected fiction as vital part of the cultural histories of adolescence, “first-wave” feminism, and the *Fin-de-Siècle*. To this end, I take the most prolific and influential writer working in this genre, L.T. Meade, as a case study.

<2>Though Meade’s girls’ novels (the bulk of her approximately 280-volume *oeuvre*) collectively enjoyed a wider circulation than the works of most Victorian writers for either “general” or juvenile audiences, this is not the only reason for their cultural importance. As mass fiction written specifically for teenage girls, her novels both fueled and explored two markedly gendered sources of *fin-de-siècle* cultural malaise: the perception of a growing and purportedly uncritical female readership and a new recognition of adolescent girlhood as an increasingly distinct, prolonged, and vexed stage of development.⁽²⁾ Moreover, Meade’s New Girl novels complement and extend the parallel, feminist discourse associated with the contemporaneous New Woman novel, a short-lived proto-feminist genre of the 1890s associated with such writers as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, and Ella Hepworth Dixon. Indeed, Meade’s books consistently engage with and appear to support social issues associated with New Womanhood: professional and educational opportunities for women and girls, advocacy for single women, and marriage reform. They also, like so many New Woman novels, recognize fiction as a crucial channel for promoting feminist social change.

<3>Yet Meade’s work has received only scant critical attention. And with few exceptions, this criticism, like many *Fin-de-Millennium* responses to New Woman fiction, is shaped by contemporary feminist readers’ discomfort with the apparent contradictions of Meade’s gender politics, with those moments in the novels that seem to compromise or qualify her support for the New Woman and that, as Lyn Pykett observes of the New Woman novel, “make a smooth recuperation of [her] work for feminism difficult” (209). Indeed, Meade’s feminist critics tend either to respond apologetically, explaining these moments as necessary concessions, like Mitchell and Mavis Barkman Reimer, or more often, to decry them as points of betrayal, as with Reynolds, Cadogan, and Craig. Yet just as with the New Woman novel, as Pykett (209) and Teresa Mangum (7) have argued, the very inconsistencies that have made Meade’s novels such uncomfortable subjects of feminist criticism are precisely what make them so important to study. Particularly where they are most confusing or troubling, they reveal something significant about the complicated ways in which new ideas about gender were resisted, modified, negotiated, and

assimilated in the 1890s. They also broaden our appreciation of the ways in which fiction, regardless of its perceived literary “value,” participates in this process.

<4>Today the name L.T.[Elizabeth Thomasina] Meade (1854-1914) elicits only vague recognition at best, even among Victorian and children’s literature scholars. Yet at the turn of the century, Meade was something of a household name, appearing on the cover of over 250 novels, mostly for girls, as well as on the by-line of numerous contributions to popular periodicals.(3) Her literary biography reads much like one of her “New Girl” tales. Like many of her heroines, Meade began seriously to pursue a literary career while only a teenager, and she did so over the vehement objections of her family, insisting on earning her own money despite her father’s deep discomfort with the idea of a middle-class girl pursuing paid employment (Mitchell 10; Reimer, “Tales” 20). At age twenty-one, she left her family home in County Cork, Ireland and moved by herself to London, where she took up lodging in the East End and joined a group of professional writers who labored in the British Museum. Unlike many of the nineteenth-century female writers of children’s literature who preceded her, Meade saw writing as a legitimate commercial enterprise, and she supported herself by her pen from the outset. Moreover, she continued to do so (and to publish under her maiden name) even after her marriage to solicitor Alfred Toulmin Smith and the subsequent birth of her three children. Once established as a writer, she averaged six books a year but sometimes published as many as fourteen, and she probably earned £600-1000 a year (Reimer, “Tales” 28-32) at a time when less than one in five novelists earned over £400 (Besant qtd. in Cross 233). She also contributed to magazines for adults, like *The Strand* and *Shafts*, as well as to juvenile publications like *Girls’ Realm* and *Atalanta*, which she co-edited from 1887-1893. Though best known for her thirty or so school stories, Meade is said to have popularized “the chief varieties of formula fiction that came to dominate girls’ voluntary reading for fifty years after her death” (Mitchell 14).

<5>The reception history of Meade’s popular fiction is difficult to document authoritatively, as only a very small sample of her correspondence, contracts, and financial records are archived; as Reimer notes, there is “no published collection of letters...no comprehensive bibliography...[and] no documented collection of papers” (“Tales” 17).(4) Despite her present obscurity, sales figures, extant copies of her novels, reader polls, and book reviews testify to Meade’s extraordinary popularity on both sides of the Atlantic. *A World of Girls* (1886), for example, went through four editions in its first two years on the market and sold at least 37,000 copies in England between 1886 and 1902. Additionally, an undocumented number were issued by at least four different American firms as late as 1910, twenty-four years after its initial run. Similarly, *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1891) sold at least 21,000 copies in England between 1891 and 1902 and was also reprinted by at least four American publishers.(5) *The Palace Beautiful* (1887) sold at least 24,000 copies in England by 1902; my own copy of this novel is dated 1915, a full twenty-eight years after its initial publication. Similarly, five of the nine inscribed volumes in my personal collection are dated at least twenty years after the original publication. Three polls of *Fin-de-Siècle* girl readers offer further evidence of the wide (and long) circulation Meade’s fiction enjoyed. *Girls’ Realm* identifies her as its readers’ favorite author in 1898 (Cadogan and Craig 55). Florence Low’s 1906 survey of high-school girls aged fifteen through eighteen ranks Meade as the fifth most popular author, and she is the only “juvenile” author among the top five (278). She also ranks fifth in Constance Barnicoat’s poll of “Colonial and Indian Girls” of the same age (939-40). Moreover, a 1904 *Saturday Review* discussion of girls’ reading regrettably names Meade among the most widely read authors (Flint 156-58).

<6>*Saturday Review* was hardly the only mainstream periodical to take note of Meade’s growing body of fiction or of her increasing influence, and many of these responded more positively. Edward Salmon, who frequently wrote about late-century children’s reading, counts her among those girls’ writers “not less brilliant and worthy” than the most notable boys’ writers (515). A *Review of Reviews* essay titled “The Woman Novelists of the Day” includes her in the group of twenty-three writers it identifies (587). *Strand* magazine featured her in its monthly “Portraits of Celebrities” series (674). The prestigious and progressive weekly *The Athenaeum* frequently reviewed Meade’s novels—three times in 1890 and 1892, and four in 1899. Even when the book described is one the reviewer didn’t particularly like, as with *All Sorts*, it is evaluated in relation to “L.T. Meade’s usual standard of excellence” (832).

<7>Meade’s personal investment in the New Woman movement is evident in her membership in the Pioneer Club. This organization brought together “independent professional women” who “took ‘an active personal interest in any of the various movements for women’s social, educational and political advancement’”(Friedrich 304 qtd. in Mitchell 10). Other prominent

members included New Woman novelists Sarah Grand (*The Heavenly Twins*, *The Beth Book*) and Mona Caird (*The Daughters of Danaus*). The Club's meetings often took the form of debates and lectures. They addressed perennial women's issues, like spousal abuse, as well as new trends in thinking about gender. Its magazine, *Shafts*, "saw itself as sponsoring a new society by building a community of women;" in November 1892, this publication identified Meade as "among a group of writers who are working 'in the cause of progress.'" Meade's membership in the Pioneer Club was not merely nominal; she served on its managing committee and participated in many of its public debates on both literary and social issues (Reimer, "Tales" 34-46).

<8>A brief survey of some of Meade's most popular 1890s girls' novels yields further evidence of her support for the New Woman and the social issues with which she is associated. *Merry Girls of England* (1896), for example, explicitly defends this much-maligned figure. Early in the novel, the family solicitor discourages sixteen-year-old Barbara from leaving her sisters' farm to pursue a London literary career. He exhorts, "'Oh, fudge! child; then you are really going to become one of those monsters of the present day—a New Woman?'" Barbara's vehement response provides a corrective to the negative popular perception of these women. "'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,'" she defiantly explains, "'then I am going to become one'" (127).

<9>The New Woman and the so-called "Odd Woman" were often collapsed in the public imagination, and issues that most significantly affected single women were central to New Woman politics. In *The Temptation of Olive Latimer* (1899), Meade celebrates these socially, culturally, and economically marginalized women. This novel opens with Olive and her closest friend, Freda Fairfax, leaving Newnham College and contemplating their futures. The soon-to-be Anglican sister explains to the soon-to-be-married protagonist, "'[S]o many girls marry. We want some of the women who have the best in them to remain single, and I dare say I shall join that noble army. Oh, the single woman is not a martyr now, don't think so for a minute; I often think she has the best chance of all—such freedom, so many opportunities, so varied an existence'" (3-4). Thus Meade questions the popular image of the starving, lonely, neglected Victorian spinster, an image invoked by feminists sympathetic to her plight, like the New Woman writer Mabel E. Wotton ("The Fifth Edition"), as well as by those a bit less sympathetic, like George Gissing (*The Odd Women*).

<10>Implicit in this affirmation of the single woman, who is necessarily locked outside of an economic system grounded in the traditional nuclear family, is an affirmation of women's pursuit of middle-class professions. Several of Meade's titles directly announce her support for the "professional girl": *A Sister of the Red Cross: A Tale of the South African War* (1900), *Nurse Charlotte* (1904), and *Mary Gifford, M.B.* (1898) (Mitchell 27). Elsewhere, her position is revealed through her plots—which often turn on the attempts of newly impoverished orphan daughters to attain economic self-sufficiency—and in her characters' conversations. *A Girl in Ten Thousand* (1896), for example, opens with the heroine's efforts to embark on a nursing career. Effie Staunton is inspired by the example of her new friend Dorothy Fraser but stymied by the objections of her reluctant physician father, who "dreads and dislikes" no one more than the "modern girl," with her "advanced ideas" (8). That very evening, however, when Dr. Staunton finds himself in need of an exceptional nurse to help save a dying child, Dorothy proves wonderfully competent, introducing him to a new, life-saving medical technique and preventing the spread of the disease through the household. Within a few moments of their arrival in the sick room, the skeptical doctor proclaims, "'That girl is one in ten thousand...She will keep us all on our mettle, I can see, but there is plenty of heart underneath that cool exterior'" (34). Shortly thereafter, he exclaims, "'What a blessing a good, properly trained nurse is!'" (41). His change of heart debunks popular myths of the professional girl: social status does not compromise work performance, nor *vice versa*; "womanly" sensitivity and the ability to perform emotionally demanding work are not mutually exclusive; and women's professional competence, even when it exceeds that of men, need not threaten men's job security or their professional authority.

<11>In any case, however, female professionalism is shown to be inseparable from rigorous academic and pre-professional opportunities for girls, at the secondary and university levels. Meade repeatedly reminds the reader how closely the two are related, not only by explaining why formal education is a prerequisite for professional opportunity, but also by dramatizing the economic and moral consequences for girls denied such schooling. *Turquoise and Ruby* (1906), for example, contrasts the experiences of two sisters. While Penelope falls under the positive influence of a wise headmistress and a noble classmate as she pursues her teaching certification, Brenda, lacking any professional credentials, accepts a poorly paid governess position for which

Brenda, lacking any professional credentials, accepts a poorly paid governess position for which she is not at all qualified. Not only are Brenda and her charges both made miserable by this arrangement, but Brenda also turns to petty crime in order to “secure [a young man] and so end the miseries of [her] present lot” (28). Desperate to attract his attention, she pressures her sister into extorting money from classmates, pilfers from her charges’ clothing budget, and finally steals a valuable bracelet, all to enhance her wardrobe.

<12>Meade’s schools are a far cry from those described in fiction by Charlotte Bronte at mid-century and later by Julia Horatia Ewing and Frances Hodgson Burnett—and also from those lamented by Victorian educational reformers and biographers. Serious academics replace frivolous “accomplishments” and stimulating discussions replace rote learning. Faculty are competent teachers and judicious disciplinarians who treat students equally and respectfully, regardless of family income. Accommodations are comfortable, and many pages are devoted to describing the students’ pleasure in shared social pursuits. Yet through these novels, Meade ultimately challenges more than the popular mythology of the girls’ school as places of misery or wastefulness. She also attempts to debunk the more authoritative social and medical discourses of the period, which argued that girls’ education was not only unnecessary and unpleasant, but that it compromised their precarious health, femininity and marriageability.

<13>When Prissie, the heroine of *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1891), is assured that “the freedom from care, the mixture of study with play, the pleasant social life, all combine to make young women both healthy and wise,” what seems a rather banal observation to twentieth-century readers is actually, in Meade’s time, a fairly radical claim (97). Although the educational reforms of the 1870s made serious study more accessible to many girls, late-Victorian medical discourse warned that such study could have dire consequences. The delicate body of the pubescent girl was said to impede the development of her mind and the need for rest to preclude intensive work of any kind. Moreover, any effort to exercise the intellect was thought to result in the further weakening of the pubescent body. This notion was most closely associated with Henry Maudsley, whose 1874 “Sex in Mind and in Education” used the Victorian understanding of a fixed bodily economy to argue that the proper development of the female reproductive system and particularly that the establishment of a regular menstrual cycle left teenage girls little energy for other intensive pursuits. Rigorous education for women was thought to correlate with high rates of infertility, which could have a disastrous impact on the nation (467).⁽⁶⁾

<14>That the pursuit of higher learning does not “defeminize,” either by supplanting domesticity or by cultivating selfishness, is also affirmed in this novel. When Prissie’s vicar first encourages her to prepare for the university entrance exams, she initially parrots the dominant discourse, questioning, “Why do you encourage me to be selfish?” He assures her (and Meade’s young readers) that matriculation would, to the contrary, be anything but selfish: “[W]hen it becomes a question of a woman earning her bread, let her turn to that path where promise lies... You must not give up your books, my dear...for independently of the pleasure they afford, they will also give you bread and butter” (55-56). Later, when she asks him whether it would be better to return home and care for her seriously ill aunt, he actually co-opts the moral vocabulary of filial duty and selflessness elsewhere used to keep girls at home in order to argue the opposite. He promises, “You were meant to lead that life for the present; you are meant to do your duty in it” (216).

<15>One other popular argument against higher education for women was that the experience of greater personal and intellectual freedom and exposure to “advanced” ideas about gender were thought to potentially turn “girl graduates” into either free-lovers or bluestockings. Moreover, economic self-sufficiency and access to personal satisfactions outside of the nuclear family, it was said, might leave them uninterested in marriage, or else threatening (and thus unattractive) to men. *A Sweet Girl Graduate* also challenges these assumptions. At first glance, Maggie Oliphant, Prissie’s closest school friend, seems the stereotypical “Girton Girl.” Maggie is independently wealthy and therefore unlikely to need a husband for financial support. Moreover, she is not only one of the most serious and talented scholars in Heath Hall, but she excels in a historically “masculine” discipline, Classics. Yet though Maggie may adopt masculine modes of academic discourse, she also proves eminently “feminine;” the verbal “skirmishes” she enjoys are, despite the combat metaphor, “delicate” and “graceful” (87). She also becomes the first of her classmates to get engaged—to the attractive and amiable Senior Wrangler, Geoffrey Hammond. Meade even suggests that university study may be an asset in the competitive marriage market of the 1890s. Hammond is neither threatened nor repelled by intellectual women and is, in fact, attracted to them. Early in the novel, he and Prissie are guests at the same tea party. Though she is socially awkward and inappropriately dressed, she holds his attention because she can speak animatedly and intelligently about Homer.

<16>The final promise of marriage that seems to mitigate the radicalism of *Girl Graduate* is not, however, typical of Meade's fiction. Even when her heroines do wed, the courtship subplot is generally subordinated to plots focused on an individual girl's development or on the disruption and restoration of a community of girls. Moreover, even in *Girl Graduate*, until the very end of the novel, Maggie privileges her relationships with other girl graduates over the pursuit of heterosexual romance, despite Hammond's persistent advances. She not only prioritizes female friendships, but also seems to recognize herself as both subject and object of homoerotic attraction. She observes that Prissie has "fallen in love" with her, but assures her confidante Nancy, "You have no cause to be jealous, sweet pet." This remark is followed by "the sound of one girl kissing another" (46-47). Maggie also attributes her initial resistance to Hammond to her loyalty to a deceased female friend, Annabel Lee. She "often said that she never knew what love meant until she met Annabel" and mourns her with a lover's grief, as if "something had died in her which could never live again" (263-64). Annabel, in turn, was said to "look at Maggie with passionate longing" as she lay on her death bed (268).

<17>More often, Meade's novels suggest alternatives to the nuclear family and question whether marriage is always the happiest ending. *Out of the Fashion* (1892), for example, juxtaposes the pleasures enjoyed by a family of girls who run a women's boarding house against the marital prospects of the youngest sister. The world of Rosemary Gardens, with all of its flowers, freedoms, and supportive friendships, is a far cry from the dreary and isolated life Sybil endures after her fiancé Mark commands her to live with her painfully austere and repressive uncle lest she lose respectability by working for a living at the boarding house. At the same time, the girls' aptly named benefactress offers a more explicit critique of women's place in a conventional Victorian marriage. She muses, "[I]t seems to me wonderful how any girl can love a man well enough to give herself up to him for life. . . [M]any a time . . . I have thanked my lucky star that I have remained Jessica Power." Of Sybil's situation in particular, she laments, "Body and soul that child gives herself up to him. There is no saving her; the deed is done" (126-27).

<18>However, despite Meade's apparent alliance with the New Women and especially with the New Woman writers, as evidenced by the above examples, her novels are most often read as largely conservative in their gender politics. Prior to Mitchell's and Reimer's studies, critics generally agreed that before 1905 or so, girls' fiction—particularly Meade's—almost inevitably "taught" adherence to conventional "feminine" behaviors and values. Though Meade advocated educational opportunity, Judith Rowbotham argues, her novels conceived of adolescent female education as primarily involving "a complex mixture of continuing character training and the teaching of gender expectations" (111). Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig sarcastically assert that "L.T. Meade's own ideas of progressiveness were limited" to "allowing her fictional students to hold cocoa parties in one another's bedrooms, wear white silk dresses, velvets and sables, and even meet up with male students" (54). And Kimberley Reynolds claims, her books were not merely "non-feminist," but actually "anti-feminist," actively working to subvert the changes wrought by the New Women (xix-xx) by "underlin[ing] traditional ideas of femininity" and "undermin[ing] the attractions of changes to women's roles (115).⁽⁷⁾ Though these critics, I believe, oversimplify Meade's gender politics, they are still valuable to a feminist reading of Meade's work because they remind us that the novels do not cleanly support either a feminist interpretation or a New Woman agenda. On the contrary, there are many places in the novels where Meade seems to negate or to drastically qualify her support for the New Girl and to affirm more traditional visions of Victorian femininity.

<19>A second look at the novels described above confirms that they do, in fact, very much seem to undercut their own apparent endorsement of New Woman politics. Sometimes they grant credibility to unlikely speakers. Sometimes they recast New Girlhood in terms so compatible with Victorian femininity as to negate any substantive changes in normative gender roles. Sometimes sudden and unexplained turns in the narrative logic complicate the "feminist" message implied by prior events. *Merry Girls of England*, for instance, provides an example of the first through the solicitor whom Barbara contradicts. Apart from his attack on the New Woman, he seems rather perceptive. His prediction, "[S]omething awful will happen if a poor little ignoramus like [Barbara] plunges into London life" is later corroborated by her "criminal" fall into plagiarism and the resultant hysterical illness which nearly takes her life (128). This "fall" itself complicates Meade's message as well. Here the narrative logic suggests that New Girl desires for independence are naive, if not dangerous. For this reason, girls should heed the advice of protective adults and remain within the safety of the domestic sphere.

<20>In *The Temptation of Olive Latimer*, Sister Freda is described in terms that ultimately mitigate her “Newness.” We are assured throughout the novel that her work does not prevent her from fulfilling her domestic obligations to family and friends. By using her “freedom” and “opportunities” to serve the London poor, she remains the archetypal feminine, self-sacrificing caregiver, more continuous with than departing from the Victorian ideal. Moreover, though Freda declares that she has “no intention of marrying” and sometimes fears that she is perceived as “one of the hard ones,” Meade pointedly distinguishes her from the stereotypical New Women of the popular press, who remain single because they are unlovable or “unwomanly.” Freda explains, “People so seldom understand that when a young girl is just nervous, she is forced to retire into her shell and to appear cold; yes, with me it is only the outward appearance, I have a warm heart—I could love, God knows I could love strongly and well” (11). These qualities are reinforced when she plays primary caregiver to the temporarily “orphaned” Latimer family, demonstrating sympathy, generosity, and domestic competence.

<21>In *A Girl in Ten Thousand*, Dorothy Fraser’s legitimacy as both a woman and a single professional depends on her ability to remain within the boundaries of Victorian femininity. Readers are reminded that her immediate acceptance of the emergency nursing case is an act of self-sacrifice, as she risks becoming infected with diphtheria herself, loses her hard-earned holiday, and knows that she might also lose her full-time hospital position if she is quarantined. Dorothy also demonstrates exceptional domestic competence. She maintains Nightingale-esque standards of cleanliness in the sickroom, without relying on servant labor. She patiently “mothers” the worried parents, soothing their hysteria with hot tea and gentle words in an effort to keep them away from their contagious daughter. Once again, the blurry line separating the domestic Angel from the New Woman seems to limit rather than affirm Meade’s alleged support for the latter.

<22>As *Girl Graduate* Maggie Oliphant learns to open her heart to a deserving suitor, Meade’s readers learn that in the end, they too may be valued more for their charm and grace than for their intellect. Maggie’s sudden change of heart also seems to delegitimize the well-educated single woman who finds fulfillment outside of the nuclear family, replacing her with a more conventional model. Serious study is presented as a rewarding pursuit, but ideally a temporary one, a way for girls to productively fill their time *until* marriage. Especially in a book that so consistently celebrates female community through homoerotic play, the sudden invocation of heterosexual attraction also suggests an effort to defuse the sexual threat posed by the educated New Girl. Furthermore, the girl scholar shares as much with the self-sacrificing Angel in the House as the professional girl. Although school attendance is also “normalized” for middle-class girls, unburdened by financial responsibility for younger siblings, it is never defended as fervently as it is for girls like Prissie. In her case, education is a path to the more “feminine” caregiving practice of raising her dependent sisters. Moreover, Meade poignantly emphasizes the feminine acts of self-sacrifice within the “feminist” opportunities Prissie enjoys, as when she abandons the classical studies she loves to attain more marketable expertise in modern languages.

<23>In addition, we must ask to what degree Meade’s reassuring and appealing descriptions of school life might ultimately impede, rather than facilitate, women’s access to serious education. What effect might her portrayal of education as generally pleasant and not overly demanding have had on feminist battles to disprove women’s presumed, biologically-ordained intellectual limitations? Might it actually hinder the campaign to prove that women’s university studies were rigorous enough to warrant degree recognition denied to female Oxbridge students, even as Girton, Newnham, Somerville and Lady Margaret were growing annually in terms of enrollment and academic offerings?(8) Kimberley Reynolds suggests that an “emphasis...on the joys of tea, bicycling, and cocoa parties” is incompatible with a vision of girl students as “first and foremost serious scholars” and thus “raises serious questions about Meade’s real interests and beliefs and about the work she produced” (14). Moreover, in subordinating academics to leisure and pleasure, Meade seems to subordinate intellectual development to character development, ironically rehearsing rather than contesting the Victorian notions of female education against which she purports to write.

<24>Finally, *Out of the Fashion* concludes in a way that seems to undermine its earlier critique of marriage. In its final pages, Miss Power suddenly and inexplicably decides to support, rather than oppose, Sybil’s marriage. This shift is a striking and confusing one, in part because although Sybil’s irresponsible fiancé is finally gainfully employed and debt-free, this is due to the intervention of a generous uncle rather than to any real transformation on his part. Indeed, shortly

before the marriage is to take place, Miss Power laments to his relations, ““You are not likely to part him from Sibyl...and there are many reasons which make me regret that your powers are so limited” (249). Thus it is puzzling and a bit unsettling when, a few pages later, she warmly congratulates the fiancé and enthusiastically offers to marry Sibyl from her own house. However incongruous this conventional ending may seem, it still appears to negate (or at least strongly qualify) Miss Powers’ earlier reservations about Victorian marriage.

<25>That these conflicting messages exist together in the same texts undeniably complicates any reading of how Meade addresses New Woman issues in her girls’ fiction. Previous critics have tended to resolve this problem by identifying one message as dominant and casting the other as a rhetorical strategy in the service of the first. For example, Reynolds argues that the more “feminist” moments in Meade’s otherwise conservative novels enable a kind of catharsis, in which readers’ own New Girl longings are vicariously fulfilled and then purged, leaving them more docile than before (132-33). Mitchell takes the opposite approach, arguing that the more conservative moments in an essentially feminist text might “make emulation” of New Girl heroines “safe” for readers (21). Alternatively, however, we might want to ask what these books —because of rather than despite the contradictory positions they express with regard to *Fin-de-Siècle* gender politics— suggest about the relation of fiction to feminist reform.

<26>One model for answering this question is suggested by critical approaches to the sensation fiction of the 1860s, a genre epitomized by novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Though the sensation novel and the New Girl novel represent very different genres oriented toward distinct audiences, they also have much in common. Both enjoyed tremendous commercial success in their own time but were regarded as, at best, an unfortunate substitute for more socially, morally or intellectually edifying reading material. Both were also said to encourage passive and unselective consumption (a constant and grave danger for the late-Victorian female) and to promote private pleasure over domestic duty. Until fairly recently, the sensation novel, like the girls’ popular novel, has been slighted in contemporary literary criticism, either as culturally insignificant or as embarrassingly conservative in its gender politics. The latter interpretation stems partly from the ideological gap between the middles of the novels, which seem to almost glorify “unwomanly” women whose deeds and words disrupt the sanctified Victorian family, and the endings, in which these pseudo-heroines are usually punished. Finally, critics such as Lyn Pykett and Kate Flint have drawn important connections between sensation fiction and the New Woman fiction read by the New Girls’ older sisters (Flint 15; Pykett 4-10).

<27>Despite their different emphases, Flint and Pykett both understand these women’s novels as operating in ways that imply an active, critical reader—one capable of reading against the grain—rather than a passive and vulnerable consumer. They further argue that the assumption (and promotion) of such a readership challenges the dominant Victorian discourse on gender and thus facilitates feminist social change. Both critics reject the conventional assumption of a passive female reader whose identification with a female protagonist was clear, automatic and complete—and who therefore learned, via the narrative logic, the same moral and social lessons as the transgressive woman in the story (Pykett 50; Flint 255). Flint explains that the narrative logic often precludes such identification, particularly in the New Woman novels, whose generally pessimistic endings suggest that they are “not dramas of wish-fulfillment.” To the contrary, she argues, sensation readers were able to recognize the ways that transgressive protagonists were conspicuously punished and thus became more conscious and more wary of the situation of real-life women, themselves included (297). Pykett questions the critical assumption that the novels’ conventional endings mitigate or resolve the ideological ambiguities that pervade their middle sections. Rather, she argues, they are best read—as, I argue, New Girl fiction should be read—as “a site in which the contradictions, anxieties, and opposing ideologies of Victorian culture converge and are put into play” (50).

<28>Flint further suggests that both the sensation and the New Woman novels “question dominant ideas about the relationship between women’s reading practices and their responses to what they read” through a meta-discourse on fiction within the novels (255). Part of this meta-discourse on fiction involves frequent references to reading, which “invite their readers to join in a process which involves the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation” (297). Sometimes these take the form of intertextual quotations and allusions. Flint argues that these might encourage comparative modes of reading, permit subversive ideas to be conveyed discreetly, and provide an unofficial curriculum or syllabus, pointing the reader toward books that explore questions of gender in especially interesting or provocative ways. Naming individual texts similarly offers a recommended reading list for frustrated Victorian women as well as a

means of paying literary homage, she explains. In addition, these texts often call attention to the process of reading itself, to how fictional characters engage with and are affected by certain texts. In this way, real-life readers are encouraged to interrogate their own interpretive processes (255-56).

<29>The assumption of an active readership also opens up a space for more subtle modes of instruction than those derivable from narrative logic and characterization. Under this assumption, details of characters' conversations, decision-making processes, and even their most quotidian actions become more than simply part of a realist aesthetic. Rather, in the case of girls' fiction, they offer a discreet way of conveying information that a new generation of girls cannot get from their female relatives, information that enables more independent living. Characters might model methods for thinking through new dimensions of the Victorian "woman question" and for defending subversive choices and activities to skeptical family members. They might also provide a mouthpiece through which authors can offer more "practical" guidance on matters like applying for a job, renting a flat, or furnishing a dormitory room on a limited budget.

<30>The assumption of an active readership, alert to the subtleties of the text and its relation to context, is itself a form of feminist advocacy, given the dominant image of the girl reader within the larger 1890s discourse on the moral implications of "modern" fiction. Despite her social marginality, the adolescent girl figures centrally in debates over how frankly the "New Realism" can represent life before becoming a social threat. For example, she is invoked by the "Grundyists"—those seeking to restrict the publication and dissemination of "morally questionable" literature—as a highly susceptible template for standards of "decency." This deployment, famously mocked by such luminaries as George Moore and Thomas Hardy, both derived from and perpetuated an image of girl readers as especially vulnerable.⁽⁹⁾ Reading, if not carefully regulated by parents, was thought to pose great moral and social danger. This was partly because, like adult women, as earlier responses to the sensation novel demonstrate, girls were assumed to be unable either to discern "good" literature from "bad" or to control their appetite for pleasure. The latter was said to result in, among other things, addiction, incapacitation through hysteria, and the neglect of domestic duties. Moreover, because these younger readers had less "life experience" and even less freedom to move through public spaces than older married women, they were also assumed unable to distinguish accurately between fictions and realities. Thus they could be psychically "deflowered" by the sexual knowledge gleaned from the "modern novel" or almost equally unfitted for marriage by the more "innocent" romance fiction, which left them with unrealistic expectations about men and marriage.⁽¹⁰⁾

<31>That Meade recognized a crucial relationship between critical reading and feminist practice is suggested, outside of her fiction, by her involvement with the Pioneer Club and with the girls' magazine *Atalanta*. The former, as I mentioned earlier, promoted the advancement of women by sponsoring public debates, both at group meetings and in the pages of its affiliated magazine *Shafts*. Thus this organization both assumed and promoted an audience capable of analyzing and weighing multiple positions. Though *Atalanta*, despite its allusive title, is not explicitly associated with feminism, it certainly promoted New Girl causes, featuring essays with titles like "What America Does for her Girls," "How to Start a Debating Society," and "Employment for Girls." By its third volume, its editorial pages, in keeping with the spirit of the Pioneer Club, explicitly "invite[d] discussion" and at times even provoked it. That Meade, whose fictional and editorial work staunchly defends girls' education, would print an essay like R.K. Douglas's "The Forgotten Graces"—which laments the substitution of "masculine scholastic subjects of study for the graces, refinements and arts which are proper to women"—seems less shocking and more strategic in light of the flood of readers' letters which cogently refuted his points (459-61).

<32>The construction and development of a critical female readership finally does, then, enable seemingly mindless fiction by girls' writers like Meade to promote feminist social change. This is not to imply, of course, that we can read New Girl fiction, or sensation fiction, for that matter, as unequivocally or consistently "feminist," especially by *Fin-de-Millennium* standards. Certainly 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 the genre. But I do suggest here that that we should also not read Meade's apparent negations of New Woman values and positions as negations *per se*, but rather as, in many cases, the purposeful presentation of multiple possibilities for reader evaluation. Attending seriously to the inconsistencies of these understudied novels allows us to do justice to their cultural importance as well as to their ideological complexity.

<33>Revisiting some of the seeming contradictions discussed above from this perspective can broaden our understanding of how novels by writers like Meade explore the issues related to New Womanhood, and do so in ways that are finally more affirmative than they initially appear. In *Merry Girls*, for example, the relative credibility of Barbara's skeptical solicitor becomes less important than the fact that the dispute he provokes forces the reader to acknowledge and confront both sides of the New Woman debate. Barbara's redefinition of the New Woman also models both a rhetoric and an argumentative strategy which readers can themselves co-opt for their own purposes. The same is true for Freda Fairfax (faithful friend of *Olive Latimer*), Jessica Power (benefactress of *Out of the Fashion*), and Dorothy Fraser (nursing's *Girl in Ten Thousand*), who similarly offer some viable arguments affirming the pleasures and opportunities of single life. Regardless of whether these characters are proven wrong or subordinated to more traditionally feminine characters, their rather subversive viewpoints are still rendered imaginable ones, part of a range of available possibilities.

<34>Despite the conflicted messages of her plots and characterizations, Meade's characters also model some of the more pragmatic skills that are essential to a New Girl existence. Her *Merry Girls* learn how to secure a clean but inexpensive flat in London. They share this information with the reader, along with advice on furnishing the flat, negotiating wages on a job interview, and preparing nutritious meals on a tight budget. *Out of the Fashion* shows how a group of entrepreneurial girls might run a business. The readers learn, along with the sisters operating the boarding house, how to divide up work tasks efficiently, to advertise effectively, and to address the needs of a particular clientele. Prissie demonstrates the process of preparing for University entrance exams in *Girl Graduate*, while both Dorothy and Effie, in *Girl in Ten Thousand*, explain how to apply to nursing schools and to survive the rigorous and frustrating first days of hospital work. *Olive Latimer's* younger sister Hester shows how a girl unfamiliar with the London public transportation system can maneuver safely around the metropolis.

<35>When the elements of narrative logic diminish in importance, so does the authority assigned to the novels' endings. If the reader is assumed to be alert and critical, it seems, she is attuned to the suddenness of plot turns, the jarring nature of explanatory gaps. In noticing the poor fit and thus acknowledging that the given ending isn't necessarily the "right" or "best" one, the girl reader is thus encouraged to question—rather than to accede to—the inevitability of conventional narratives of girls' lives, "real" and fictional. Perhaps we are meant to leave *Out of the Fashion* uneasy about Sybil Ross's marital future and frustrated with the limited options ultimately open to her, despite her entrepreneurial talents. Perhaps we are meant to close the volume skeptical as to whether, as conventional wisdom would have it, in an age of "Odd Women," an irresponsible and domineering husband is better than no husband.

<36>Finally, these novels provide the critical and alert reader with something of a New Woman education through references to book titles, much as the New Woman novels did. For example, *Merry Girls* exhorts girls to read a range of texts that address issues of gender in provocative and central ways: *Mill on the Floss*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and a controversial series of *Nineteenth Century* essays published in 1894 that urged the liberation of "Revolting Daughters," a series that, as the author observes in her follow-up essay, "raised hurricanes and called down thunderbolts."⁽¹¹⁾ It also invites them to question *what* they learn from Victorian favorites like Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* as well as *how* they learn from methods of education—typified by *Mangnall's Questions*⁽¹²⁾—which encourage passive absorption and rote memorization. *Girl Graduate* repeatedly references Tennyson's *The Princess*, the work selected for re-enactment by the college's Drama Society. Indeed it would be difficult to argue that this work invites a neatly feminist interpretation. In fact, the sudden domestication of a radical and autonomous community of educated women at the poem's end invites comparison to Meade's own moments of seeming negation. But the ways in which the poem allows its readers to imagine such a community, one certainly not easily imaginable in the early 1850s, when it was first published, suggest compelling reasons and implications for its inclusion. To an alert reader, this earlier poem might serve to legitimize the all-female educational community represented in the novel, naturalizing it by refuting its newness, authorizing it by association with the poet laureate. It also might multiply the levels on which the reader is invited to share Meade's fictional vision of such a community and thus—through fiction—render it an increasingly imaginable possibility for "real-life" girls.

Endnotes

(1) Sally Mitchell uses this term to describe a distinctive subculture emerging in the 1880s and 1890s, contemporaneous with (and indeed both driving and driven by) the New Woman movement as well as the increasing recognition of female adolescence as a separate social, cultural, developmental, and economic space.(△)

(2) As one *Nineteenth Century* contributor explains: “A class has been developed which was practically non-existent before, namely, that of so-called ‘girls’ between the ages of eighteen and thirty. In old times the maiden who but yesterday attained to years of discretion became the bride of to-day. Marriage and motherhood followed in quick succession, and girlhood as apart from childhood had neither to be reckoned with nor provided for. Now, all this is changed.” (Gell 930). (△)

(3) It is worth noting that in 2000, the Carl A. Krouch Library at Cornell University acquired a 185-volume collection of Meade’s novels, an acquisition that implies recognition of her cultural and academic significance. Apart from Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, Meade is the only author singled out for discussion in the on-line version of that library’s 2002 exhibition “Women in the Literary Marketplace, 1800-1900,” curated by Katherine Reagan and available at <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/womenLit/default.htm>. (△)

(4) The exception, Reimer notes, is a collection of scrapbooks that are part of the W. & R. Chambers Collection at the National Library of Scotland (item DEP 341/646) and that contain some of her contracts and correspondence with that particular firm (“Tales” 31). (△)

(5) In “Tales Out of School,” Reimer (216; 286) provides the English sales figures for all of these novels and lists three American publishers for both *A World of Girls* and *A Sweet Girl Graduate*. I have located additional American editions of the latter two books. (△)

(6) For further discussion, see Burstyn, Chapter Five; Dyhouse, Chapter Four; and Mitchell, Chapter Three. (△)

(7) Other feminist critics who express their disappointment with the conservatism of Meade’s gender politics include Blain, Grundy, and Clements (729). Reimer also addresses the generally negative response to Meade among feminist critics in ““These two irreconcilable things”” (42). More recently, it is worth noting, Megan Norcia has made a compelling feminist case for Meade. (△)

(8) Although the Oxbridge Women’s Colleges all opened between 1873-79, women were not granted *bona fide* degrees here until 1920 (Oxford) and 1948 (Cambridge). For further discussion of this issue, see Mc Williams-Tullberg. (△)

(9) Moore protests the censorship practices of Mudie’s Circulating Library in *Literature at Nurse*, or *Circulating Morals* (1885) by arguing that they “cater to the masses, and the masses are young, unmarried girls who are supposed to know but one side of life.” Thus, he asserts, “English literature is sacrificed on the altar of Hymen” (21). Hardy, along with Walter Besant and, surprisingly enough, the rather conservative Eliza Lynn Linton, published a symposium titled “Candour in English Fiction” in *The New Review* in 1890. Here, Hardy argues, “It will be conceded by most friends of literature that all fiction should not be shackled by conventions concerning budding womanhood, which may be altogether false” (20). (△)

(10) See, for example, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1896), a novel by the wildly popular Marie Corelli; its plot follows a young, newly-married woman who, after years of indiscriminately reading “modern fiction,” lusts after Satan so feverishly that she kills herself when he refuses her advances. (△)

(11) See Crackanhorpe, Cuffe, Smith, Haweis, Harrison, and Amos. (△)

(12) Richmal Mangnall’s catechistic *Historical and Miscellaneous Questions for the Use of Young People* (1800) was a staple of girls’ education for much of the Victorian era and became metonymic for the shortcomings of female education. (△)

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