



## POETRY AND PREJUDICE: SEXUAL POLITICS IN 'SUNNY PRESTATYN'

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Published in *About Larkin* 7, April 1999, this essay is based on a paper delivered at the New Larkins for Old Conference in June 1997. In it Dr Reiss of the University of Bradford discusses the sexual politics of one of Larkin's most disturbing poems.

There can be prejudice in poetry and poetry in prejudice. The skill lies in the fusion. Thus Larkin, hostile himself to the very notion of sexual politics, tells as much about it as a whole anthology of worthy verses by the Men's Movement. The secret of how this can be so is the same secret as to how Pound, Eliot and Yeats, political 'reactionaries' to a man, still speak more eloquently for their times than a host of their more progressive and partisan contemporaries.

Consider for instance 'Sunny Prestatyn'. Amongst so many other things 'Sunny Prestatyn' is about violence against women and also, more precisely, about violence against images of women, especially man-made, mass-manufactured images. It is about masculinity, failed masculinity. And it is about responding to the clamour of advertising and pornography, with their endless claims in excess of what they can ever deliver. The skill of the poem is that it covers all this whilst commenting on none of it. The absence of commentary, the silence, speaks volumes. Larkin, the political naïf and misogynist, says more (and more graphically) than his censorious critics. He does so by light verse, by making light of the subject; and the lighter the surface, the darker the shadow.

The first image is the 'girl' advertising 'Sunny Prestatyn': an icon of femininity and of the life beautiful, which is the lie beautiful and the lay beautiful. Then

She was slapped up one day in March.

'Slapped up'. Not 'shockingly defaced'; not 'regrettably vandalised'; not even 'subject to obscene disfigurement'. But 'slapped up'. The phrase denotes both the initial pasting-up of the poster and its subsequent 'slapping around'. It elides the two. But the connotations are more revealing. The slang is conniving; casual (slap it on); easy-going; even artistic (Jackson Pollock). We are meant to lap it up, but we slapped it up. The Sun-speak plays up to the chaps who did it, man to man, as if Larkin, the fellow-traveller, enjoys the joke, wants to share and embellish it, as if he might have joined in himself - given an aerosol.

'Slapped up' sets things up as a prank. It says 'smile', enjoy, belong, go along with it': be

one of the boys, or be one of the kill-joys. This is the classic manoeuvre of the sexist joke.

The rape of the image and the humiliation of the woman is presented as a bit of fun, such that talk of 'raping the image' appears ludicrous and high-minded, like the misplaced earnestness of a moralist, or sociologist.

The poetry itself implicitly scorns the earnest. It enjoys. It quivers with vicarious re-enactment, with the frisson of release. She was 'snaggle-toothed' and 'boss-eyed'. The neologisms, the compound epithets, testify to a linguistic delight in the grotesque. The 'huge tits' were '*scored* well in' and she sat '*fairly* astride a tuberous cock and balls'.

The smirk is written all over the face of the poem. 'She was too good for this life'. We can almost hear the unspoken excuses: 'well, what do you expect', 'she asked for it'. The apparent compliment hides a sharp joke and an easy irony: she was advertising the good life, but she was 'too good for this life'.

Larkin could, of course, have said 'it' to refer to the image or the poster. 'It was too good for this life.' But he is explicit, the point is *it is her*. 'She' occurs twice; 'her' six times; 'it' never. She has been animated and the point is her (not its) come-uppance. The neutral pronoun would make for a less offensive poem, but a less revealing and a lesser one.

For everything has been projected onto Woman. The 'slappers up' are absolved by absence, as if it were a passive action. 'She was slapped up'. No agency, no responsibility. 'Someone' used a knife and the one clue is the 'autograph', ironic because it is an anonymous erasure of identity. And yet 'Titch Thomas' is absolutely right: John Thomas's diminutive (alter) ego, who scrawls inflated, tuberous (tumorous?) cocks and balls.

Absent too is the maker of the image. It is the girl herself who 'laughed'. She lied and the rest is nemesis. Now she is laughing 'on the other side of her face'. She, of course, is just a sign of an advertiser's mind, but there is a skill in the poem's letting that pass. An interaction probably between men - the ad's designers and its defilers - is dished up in terms of the woman.

And so to the bottom line, death. 'Now *Fight Cancer* is there.' Very just. For the poem is to some degree carcinogenic, revelling in its half-repressed, half-expressed, fully-enjoyed unhealthiness.

The critics however are too quick to criticise Larkin on that account. It is the full-blooded, poetic embodiment, enjoyment *and thus exposure* of the panoply of everyday misogyny, in its crass, complex and casual appearances, its pranks and jokes, that makes 'Sunny Prestatyn' worth considering.

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Reading magazines such as *Achilles Heel*, the literature of the men's movement and the 'Adult Child Movement', not to mention quite a bit of sociologising about gender, one wants to state: 'Larkin said this, more dramatically, more elegantly, more lightly, forty years ago.' For he writes about vulnerability, inadequacy, pretence and shame, definitely from a man's perspective.