

An Arundel Tomb

This poem takes on the form of situational poem, or an anecdote, and sparks off a wider meditation. The speaker sees the tomb, which is the medieval (“pre-baroque”) effigy of a noble couple, and notices that they are holding hands. This couple was Richard Fitzalan, the tenth Earl of Arundel, and his second wife, Eleanor of Lancaster. The event that inspired “An Arundel Tomb” was a visit Larkin and Monica Jones paid to Chichester Cathedral in the winter of 1955-6. The poem acknowledges that the couple’s handholding pose is probably “A sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace” and a “stone fidelity/ They hardly meant”. After the poem’s publication Larkin discovered that the linked hands were added when the monument was restored in Victorian times. He, however, did not feel that this new knowledge invalidated his poem in any way.

Rhyme Scheme and Structure

The technique is masterly and the poem is beautiful. The integrated ABBCAC rhyme scheme with its understated use of minor rhyme words (“until”, “and”, “in”, “they”), and the natural linking of the last three stanzas are typical features. See also how the gentle “tender” is framed within the alliterative “sharp... shock”; how “Persisted” is withheld to the start of the next stanza, somehow increasing its obstinate, enduring sense; how breaking the line between “light” and “Each summer” seems to imitate the repetitive renewal of the years, and breaking the line between “bright” and “Litter of birdcalls” has an almost onomatopoeic effect; how the alliterated phrase “smoke in slow suspended skeins” lingers like the smoke itself.

Analysis

Beautiful and often lyrical, with resonant, affirmative final line, “An Arundel Tomb” has given rise to widely varied critical interpretations. Many of these focus on arguments about Larkin’s pessimism or optimism: how much weight can we attach to that final line, in light of the constant interplay between the stone love-story that has “Persisted” linked through “altered people” to an “unarmorial age” when time has changed the air to “soundless damage”, on the one hand; and, on the other, the suggestions that lasting love is a delusion, an “Untruth” they “hardly meant” and no more than “a sculptor’s sweet commissioned grace?