



2018-06-01

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L. T. Meade's Avaricious Anomaly: Madame Sara, British Imperialism, and
Greedy Wolves in *The Sorceress of the Strand*

Laurie Langlois Denning

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

L. T. Meade's Avaricious Anomaly: Madame Sara, British Imperialism, and Greedy Wolves in *The Sorceress of the Strand*

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Critics interested in the prolific late Victorian author L.T. Meade have primarily focused on her work as an author of girls' stories and novels for young people, which enjoyed fantastic commercial success in her lifetime but fell into obscurity after her death. Recent scholarship on her detective fiction shows Meade's significant contributions to the genre as well as her engagement with social and political discourse. Scholars have noted ways that Meade's popular series, *The Sorceress of the Strand*, contributes to the New Woman debate and expresses anxiety over the British imperial project. This project examines Meade's villain in the series as a social anomaly that functions to interrogate the greed at the heart of imperialism.

Examining the series' conclusion and the unusual nature of its ending sheds new light on Meade's contribution to debate over empire at the *fin de siècle*. Meade's fascinating villain, Madame Sara, is doggedly pursued by two detective figures—one is considered the top forensic specialist in the British police force and the other is the head of a business fraud agency—but the detectives are never able to bring Madam Sara to justice. Instead, it is a wolf that finally defeats the brilliant criminal mastermind. Why a wolf? Madam Sara's unusual demise serves as a *deus ex machina* that invites the reader to consider the Dante symbolism embedded in the text. Other critics see Meade's ending as reinforcing the empire; however, given the Dante imagery that has Madam Sara symbolizing a greedy imperial force, Meade's series indicts imperial greed and warns British citizens about failure to apprehend the evil in empire.

Keywords: L.T. Mead, Madame Sara, anomaly, *The Sorceress of the Strand*, imperialism, Dante's Inferno, greed, Dante's wolf, Victorian detective fiction

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. Many thanks to my chair, Dr. Thorne-Murphy, who spent countless hours with me over the course of a year encouraging my work and pushing me to become a better scholar. Her singular support and unwavering patience will never be forgotten. Thanks to Dr. Christianson for his theoretical expertise and guidance through many revisions and especially his mentorship that began over nine years ago. And thanks to Dr. Watts for her encouragement and a key insight that led to the full synthesis of this project.

Most of all, thanks to my amazing husband, children, and grandchildren who knew I would take this journey before I did, and emboldened me to accomplish my dreams. This thesis is dedicated to them: Rick Denning, Jeff, Lindsey, Simon, and Esther Denning, Jillian Denning and Robert Plantier, Joel Denning, Jenna, Andrew, and James Ditto, and Jessica Denning. With a special tribute to my father, Reed Vernon Langlois, whose love of learning inspired us all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Anomaly and Empire	6
Madame Sara and Dante	18
Conclusion	26
Works Cited	29

Introduction

Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith (pen name L.T. Meade or Mrs. Toulmin Smith)¹ was a popular, prolific, and financially successful late Victorian author who published close to 300 works in a variety of sub-genres including sensation fiction, ghost stories, adventure tales, school stories, historical romances, fantasies, science fiction, detective fiction, and medical mysteries.² The daughter of a Church of Ireland rector, she was born in 1844 in Bandon, County Cork Ireland. At a young age, Meade displayed a strong imagination, but her father discouraged her dream of becoming an author by denying her writing paper; nevertheless, she published her first book in 1866. After the death of her mother, Meade moved to London and began working daily in the Reading Room of the British Museum (Meade, “How I began” 252). She went on to enjoy a long and successful writing career. Although extremely popular in her lifetime, Meade fell into obscurity after her death in 1914. Scholars remembered her primarily for her work as editor of the *Atalanta* magazine and as the author of best-selling girls’ stories. However, in recent years she has been recognized for her substantial work in detective fiction (Rodgers 146).

Janis Dawson recognizes Meade’s significant contributions to the genre of detective fiction including: imagining the first female gang member, producing the first medical detective, and creating the subgenre of the medical mystery (“Rivaling” 70). Meade published many popular mystery stories alongside Doyle’s famous Sherlock Holmes stories in *The Strand*

¹ L.T. Meade was known as Mrs. Smith for all but thirteen years of her extensive career. For a discussion of her pen names and the possible reasons behind them, see Winnie Chan’s article “The Linked Excitements of L.T. Meade,” 2008.

² Sally Mitchell in *The New Girl* credits Meade with inventing the medical mystery (11). Meade was ranked as a literary celebrity along with H.G. Wells by *The Strand Magazine* but fell into obscurity after her death. Janis Dawson has done work to recover her work for critical study, “‘Write a little bit every day’: L.T. Meade, Self-Representation, and the Professional Woman Writer” 2009, “Not for girls alone, but for anyone who can relish really good literature’: L.T. Meade, *Atalanta*, and the Family Literary Magazine” 2013, “Rivaling Conan Doyle: L.T. Meade’s Medical Mysteries, New Woman Criminals, and Literary Celebrity at the Victorian *Fin De Siècle*” 2015.

Magazine. *The Strand* was an extremely popular magazine and an important part of Great Britain's print culture at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. With its “prurient fixation with urban violence, crime, and disorder,” *The Strand Magazine* was fertile soil for the rise of detective fiction (Cairney 65). Meade was among the magazine’s most active writers from 1893 to 1903 with six series of short stories based on scientific detection.

One of her popular series in *The Strand* is *The Sorceress of the Strand*, a six-story series written in 1902–1903 in collaboration with medical doctor, Robert Eustace Barton,³ who was given attribution in *The Strand* but not in the subsequent book publication. In this series she creates a cunning and unscrupulous serial murderess, Madame Sara, who is based on a real-life female criminal.⁴ Meade’s unique villain did not go unnoticed in detective fiction; indeed, famous writing duo Ellery Queen took note of this astonishing female villain who “made [traditional] rogues like Colonel Clay and Raffles look like sissies” (Halloran 176). Meade’s fascinating villain in *The Sorceress of the Strand* eludes capture at the end of each story, only to return and wreak criminal mischief in the next story. Madame Sara is an innovative and fascinating *femme fatale* character who challenges the conventions of nineteenth-century Britain during the period of late imperialism.

This period of New Imperialism was a time of unprecedented colonial expansion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1875 and 1914, the British Empire

³ Meade worked with two medical doctors when she wrote her medical and science-based short fiction. Metropolitan police surgeon Edgar Beaumont, pseudonym Clifford Halifax, collaborated in Meade’s *Stories from the Diary of a Doctor* series, the series that critics name as creating the new subgenre of the medical mystery. Robert Eustace Barton, pseudonym Robert Eustace, contributed to *The Sorceress of the Strand* series. See Janis Dawson’s introduction to *The Sorceress of the Strand and Other Stories* for more information.

⁴ Madame Sara is likely based on Madame Rachel, the defendant in a sensational criminal trial that dominated the headlines in 1868. Victorian readers would have made the connection between the two women because of the obvious similarities. (Elizabeth Carolyn Miller “Shrewd Women of Business”: Madame Rachel, Victorian Consumerism, and L.T. Meade’s *The Sorceress of the Strand*.”)

doubled in size. The ideals of empire building were ubiquitous. A book for children published in 1899 shows how pervasive imperial themes were:

E is our Empire
 Where sun never sets;
 The larger we make it
 The bigger it gets...
 K is for Kings;
 Once warlike and haughty,
 Great Britain subdued them
 Because they'd been naughty. (MacDonald 8)

The poem echoes the sentiments behind Britain's mission to civilize the world. Because the empire was so great and other nations were "naughty," it was Britain's duty to subdue them. Iveta Jusova⁵ explains that, "the empire was a source of much national pride, its existence presumably making the idea of cultural and racial superiority of the British self-evident" (3). This belief was connected to Rudyard Kipling's notion of the White Man's Burden, which posited that because England and Englishmen were considered more civilized and racially superior, it was therefore incumbent upon them to spread their values to the less enlightened and racially inferior people of the world. Along with this imperialist zeal came anxiety over racial degeneration resulting from interactions with putatively inferior races abroad. Ambivalence about the imperial project was developing as Britain came under criticism for the Boer War that

⁵ In *The New Woman and the Empire*, Josova examines gender, race and colonial issues in the work of four New Women, including Sara Grand, a famous author of New Woman fiction and fellow member of the New Woman Pioneer Club along with L.T. Meade. For more information on Meade's role on the organizing committee of the Pioneer Club and her image as a New Woman author, see Sally Mitchell's chapter on L.T. Meade in *The New Girl*.

had just ended.⁶ Some British began to see a comparison between their imperial nation and the Roman Empire and warned that Britain could be headed for a downfall similar to that of Rome (Josova 3). *Fin de siècle* Britain experienced a growing tension between the glorious justifications for the imperialist project and the moral realities of colonization.

Several scholars have examined how Meade exploits British anxieties over the imperial project. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller notes the imperial themes in the series and explains how Meade engages with discourse surrounding imperialism and capitalism through Madame Sara's cosmetic business ("Shrewd Women of Business"). In her subsequent book, Miller dedicates a chapter to Madam Sara pointing out that the character is based on a decades-old criminal case and that Madame Sara exemplifies the "New Woman Criminal," who "represents that which cannot be accounted for within modern systems of social control" (*Framed: The New Woman Criminal* 5). Jennifer Halloran observes that the series also engages gender and nationalist discourses as Meade subverts the traditional relationship between detective and criminal and pits Madame Sara against British masculinity and the bastions of British power (190–1). Although the series may reveal some problems with existing hierarchies, Halloran believes that ultimately the stories show that the best way to deal with women and foreigners with different visions of England is to assert masculine control. She admits that Meade leaves readers with uneasy feelings about issues of empire similar to popular *fin de siècle* invasion narratives, but ultimately reinforces the patriarchal imperial system (192).

Rather than showing how the Madame Sara stories reinforce existing hierarchies as Halloran suggests, I will examine the ways Madame Sara interrogates the British imperial system

⁶ The second Boer War (1899–1902) was fought over the Empire's influence in South Africa. The First Boer War (1880–1881) was fought over British expansion in South Africa and resulted in an independent South African Republic.

by exposing the underlying greed that drives it. Scholars recognize how literature engages with the ongoing debate over imperialism and the greedy impulse to obtain power, land, and natural resources, but thus far the scholarship has not acknowledged Meade's contribution to conversations of imperial greed. Other works that take up this discussion include Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) which portrays the death and disaster that follows a imperialist lust for diamonds. Kipling's "The Man Who Would be King" (1888) contributes to the debate by portraying the demise of Carnehan and Dravot, two Englishmen greedy for power, who ultimately meet awful fates as the result of their avarice. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) is probably the most famous example of literature that demonstrates the corrosive effects of greed-driven imperialism; Kurtz's lust for ivory propels him into madness and death. Conrad portrays the entire imperial system as savage, evil, and doomed to failure.

Meade weighs in on this debate about imperialism with Madame Sara and a similarly cautionary plot narrating her ultimate demise. In each of the six stories, two detective figures doggedly pursue this devious and depraved villain—one is considered the top forensic specialist in the British police force and the other is the head of a business fraud agency—but these detectives are never able to bring Madame Sara to justice. Instead, it is a wolf that finally defeats the brilliant criminal mastermind. Madame Sara's unexpected death by wolf, not capture and punishment by the system, alerts the reader that something is unusual; why a wolf? Madam Sara's unusual demise⁷ serves as a *deus ex machina* that leads the reader to consider the symbolism embedded in Meade's text.

⁷ Winnie Chan discusses the ending and suggests that Madame Sara is killed by "womanly jealousy and greed" but there is room for further study on the wolf and the subject of her demise.

The way that Meade begins the collection of stories offers a potential explanation for what the wolf signifies. The opening lines frame the series as a tale about greed: “men do curious things for money in this world” (117). Reading the stories as a single narrative shows that the avarice theme bookends the series and also permeates the individual stories. Throughout the series, Madame Sara’s greed impels her to plot, manipulate, defraud, and murder to obtain her “dreams of avarice” (142). In the figure of Madame Sara, Meade emphasizes the relationship between imperialism and greed throughout the series. To underscore the avarice theme, Meade evokes symbols from Dante’s 14th century epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*. In fact, Meade interrogates greed-driven imperialism with repeated references and images from Dante’s *Inferno*. When the seemingly invincible Madame Sara is finally defeated by Dante’s primary symbol for greed, a wolf, Meade dramatizes the central place of avarice within British imperialism, making the series an allegorical warning about the dangers of empire building. Madame Sara’s symbolic power is a function of her status as a social anomaly. According to Bruce Lincoln, anomalies are things that escape classification and are dangerous to the system that creates them. Meade indicts imperial greed through the figure of Madame Sara whose anomalous status imbues her with a unique subversive power. Madame Sara’s portrayal as a taxonomic anomaly becomes integral to Meade’s general allegory, which draws upon imagery from Dante to condemn the greed at the heart of British imperialism at the *fin de siècle*.

Anomaly and Empire

Meade’s stories, with their singular protagonist, were published in a moment of high imperialism that used racial and political justifications for ongoing expansionist efforts (Miller, *Framed* 94). The Age of New Imperialism for Britain began in the 1870s and ended with the onset of World War I in 1914 and was an era of renewed efforts to colonize motivated by

economic, social, political, and religious forces (Sturges 86). It was simultaneously a time when anxieties about the morality of Britain's Imperial Project were surfacing (Arata 623). As previously mentioned, other authors engaged in the discourse surrounding the morality of imperialism.

Madame Sara's ambiguous nationality coupled with her ethnicity (specifically her Indian heritage) gesture to the British imperial project.⁸ As previously noted, Halloran compares the Madame Sara stories to invasion narratives (192). Dawson notes the link between India, the British Empire, and *The Sorceress of the Strand* and agrees that the series is an invasion narrative similar to G.T. Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* (1898). Both invasion narratives show England being overrun by foreigners (Germans and Martians, respectively). These narratives play on cultural guilt and fears by putting the colonizer in the position of the colonized, a type of reverse-colonization narrative where "the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized" (Arata 623). Stephen Arata notes that these "fantasies of reverse colonization" were particularly popular in late-Victorian popular fiction and argues that, "in the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms" (623). Halloran's classification of the Madame Sara stories as invasion narratives works because of Madam Sara's Indian heritage; she represents the victim who turns victimizer. As the invasive "other" she tricks, blackmails, murders, and extorts valuables from unsuspecting British clients. As a person of mixed national identity, she is ethnically Indian and Italian, and her native Indian ethnicity shows how someone from the

⁸ India was a major colony for Britain and was a particular marker for imperialism. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee notes "criminal Indian" characters that permeate British crime fiction discourse relating to empire and colonization in his book, *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Crime*, published in 2003.

colonies can terrorize the home land—the oppressed turned oppressor, a mode of reverse colonization during a time of high imperialism.

This New Imperialism⁹ at the *fin de siècle* involved a complicated and cooperative taxonomy, a system of classification that requires clear distinctions among social, legal, and political categories, such as colonizer and colonized, citizen and noncitizen. Lincoln explains how, by their very nature, taxonomies create anomalies. Any attempt to classify will result in things that resist classification; anomalies, by nature, destabilize a taxonomy because they reveal systemic weakness. Madam Sara is the disruptive anomaly that interrogates and poses a danger to imperial taxonomy, while her two male nemeses, Dixon Druce and Dr. Eric Vandeleur represent business and government in the complicated taxonomy of the British imperial project which united privately-held businesses and the British Government with the goal to extract and exploit desired resources from various lands. Establishing colonies ensured a long-term flow of resources from the colonies to the Empire in this sophisticated imperial taxonomy.

Druce is the manager of Werner's Agency, a famous Solvency Inquiry Agency that is reportedly able to discover the status of any business or individual by "methods of secret inquiry" (117). Werner's Agency is always mentioned as a business; its activities in dealing with secret information and its close relationship with the police hint that it is some type of spying agency. The details of the business operation are vague, but in general they investigate businesses and people to discover secrets or wrongdoing (122). This large agency often partners with the police for common goals such as finding missing persons (134). Druce, as the head of

⁹ New Imperialism differed from other phases of British Imperialism in subtle ways. An in-depth discussion of the phases of British Imperialism is found in *British Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by C.C. Eldridge, 1984. The article by James Sturgess, "Britain and the New Imperialism" is particularly relevant.

the agency, represents British business interests. That, in fact, is the implied mission of his agency: it is a “great safeguard to British trade and prevents much fraudulent dealing” (117).

Druce’s partnership with Dr. Eric Vandeleur is consistent through the series in that during each story, one of them encounters Madame Sara, or one of her evil plots, and calls upon the other to come quickly to try and foil her schemes. Vandeleur is a police surgeon considered to be “one of the most astute experts of the day” (131). According to Druce there is “no shrewder or sharper fellow” (131). Vandeleur serves as the detective in the series, but not in the traditional sense because he is usually a helpless observer while Madame Sara’s plots unfold. In his role as the top forensic expert, he also stands in a position of governmental authority. In short, Vandeleur is a clever forensic expert detective who deduces clues and chases Madame Sara; he is the law. Madame Sara’s foils and arch enemies, these two men represent the British Empire’s best in business and government.

As a figure within the British imperial taxonomy who resists classification and confounds it, Madame Sara is an anomaly created by this system. In his work on society and discourse, Bruce Lincoln theorizes that anomalies are things that escape classification, thereby exposing the limitations of the system that creates them. Lincoln says that all social taxonomies produce anomalies. Anomalies resist categorization within a system; they are “interstitial entities,” and Lincoln suggests such aberrations can be dangerous (162). Anomalies deviate from normal boundaries and destabilize the established order because they reveal inconsistencies or gaps in the system. The anomaly is a natural product of the system because the system encodes and legitimizes certain things while it simultaneously delegitimizes others. As Lincoln points out: “Anomalies remain always a potential threat to the taxonomic structures under which they are marginalized, for in the very fact of their existence they reveal the shortcomings, inadequacies,

contradictions, and the arbitrary nature of such structures” (166). The system creates the anomalies, and anomalies can bring down the system, causing a dialectic tension between the system and the anomaly. Lincoln’s theory informs all systems including social and political taxonomies.

In the fictional world of *The Sorceress of the Strand*, Madame Sara stands out as an anomaly figure. In more fanciful terms, Dawson sees her as similar to the degenerate “other” that is often depicted in *fin-de-siècle* gothic fictions such as Bram Stoker’s *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) and *Dracula* (1897) with their female vampires (Dawson, “The Sorceress” 280). Meade emphasizes Madame Sara’s “other” status by calling her a “sorceress.” Sorcerer is the term used instead of “witch” in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1520), the best known treatise on witchcraft (Institoris 2). Historically, women who defied easy classification sometimes experienced “othering” and earned the label “witch.” By calling Madame Sara a “sorceress,” Meade evokes all the historical connotations of the word.

Madame Sara’s status as an anomaly disrupts the taxonomy that underlies British imperialism. Her resistance to classification raises fundamental questions of British national identity. Madame Sara owns and operates a business on the Strand, the principal thoroughfare from London’s West End to the city and knows London well, which seems to indicate that she has lived there for a long time, but her citizenship and national allegiance is unclear. She spends much time traveling and is often just returning or just leaving from a trip abroad, and yet her actual citizenship is never revealed (120).

Madam Sara’s physical appearance also makes her difficult to classify. Throughout the series multiple characters notice her quintessential British appearance. She has fair hair (246), blue eyes, and a “dazzlingly fair” complexion, the stereotypical appearance of a beautiful

English woman (121). However, her father was Italian and her mother was Indian so her racial origins are not Anglo Saxon (120). She looks British but she is foreign; in terms of physical appearance she resists easy classification. Miller agrees that “the disjunction between Sara’s ethnic identity and her appearance implies a troubling (for Meade’s audience) instability in racial and national categories” (“Shrewd Women of Business” 324). In terms of nationality and ethnicity Madame Sara exists in “interstitial spaces.” Additionally, her mixed racial heritage signals that she is a dangerous anomaly. Clare Clarke notes that “for readers in the late 1800s, hybrid national identity [was] a well-known and often-employed signifier of potential danger” (“Introduction” 25–6).

In addition to physical appearance, chronological age is another way Madame Sara resists classification. In her career as a “professional beautifier” (120) she expertly alters her appearance to conceal her true age: “Madame’s face was brilliant, not a wrinkle was to be observed . . . her *tout ensemble* gave her the appearance of a woman who could not be a day more than five-and-twenty” (219). She looks youthful, but is in fact not young at all. A middle-aged character notes that Madame Sara was a bridesmaid at her mother’s wedding thirty years earlier (122). Although she has the “innocent, frank gaze of a child,” (121) she is not as young as she seems. Also, her innocent and pleasant looks belie her devious and depraved nature. Madame Sara’s young and innocent face actually masks a character quite the opposite. The fact that her age and physiognomy are difficult to discern adds to her deceptive power as an anomalous “other” figure.

Madame Sara’s Indian heritage gestures to the colonies in ways that evoke the dynamics of reverse colonization at the turn of the century. Representing a colonized nation, she comes to British soil and, like a colonist, extracts things that she desires for her profit and use. Her perfumery shop is where she admits: “I conduct that business which brings me in gold of the

realm;” her word choice of “gold” and “realm” are obvious references to the imperial project (122). Madame Sara also evokes images of a colonizing force with symbols of the empire when she appears at a party wearing “rich Oriental stuffs made of many colours, and absolutely glittering with gems” (129). The oriental costume alone could simply reference images of foreign trade; however, the additional detail of her hair “studded with diamonds” brings to mind diamonds, Africa, and the colonies (129). And to solidify the colonial imagery, “round her neck she wore turquoise and diamonds mixed” (129). In addition to the diamonds, the turquoise reference evokes images of empire and can be seen as a symbol of British plunder.¹⁰

Madame Sara’s criminal exploits to purloin rare and precious gems and riches mimic an imperialist drive to obtain the spoils of colonization. In the inaugural story, the reader first encounters Madame Sara on board a ship returning to London from Madeira, an important international port evoking the British Empire’s sea trade routes.¹¹ In this story Madame Sara plots and murders to obtain a fortune of “over two million sterling,” which emphasizes that it is British money she seeks to purloin (119). In the second story, she blackmails to obtain a pearl necklace “worth a King’s ransom” (163). Pearls during the *fin de siècle* come from the orient, another site and symbol of British Empire and trade routes. And the word “king” evokes empire as evidenced by the children’s book quoted at the onset of this paper in which kings were “warlike and haughty” foreign nations that Britain subdued. In “The Blood Stone” the object of her imperialist drive is an exotic foreign talisman, the blood stone jewel, the “most treasured possession of the Persian Court” that is said to have powers including the ability to make the

¹⁰ Nancy Henry mentions a turquoise necklace as part of a West Indian fortune in a George Eliot novel as being a possible symbol of British plunder, see *George Eliot and the British Empire* 2002, p. 112.

¹¹ Dawson notes that Madeira was an important wine-producing region off the coast of Portugal in her edition of *The Sorceress of the Strand*, p. 117, see footnote 3.

owner invisible (216). And in the final story, the object she seeks to obtain is the Orion diamond, “the most marvellous diamond that Africa has produced in late years” (240). Africa and diamonds evoke images of empire.

Madame Sara not only seeks to acquire precious stones and wealth in her imperial drive, but also preys on people. Her victims, just like victims of imperialism, are the vulnerable and marginalized, usually young women. Halloran notes Madame Sara’s “predilection for victimizing only the most vulnerable members of the female population . . . The women Madame Sara preys upon are orphans, and are of mixed English and southern European heritage” (185). A strong colonizing power exploiting weak victims is at the core of imperialism in which weaker forces become colonies. Halloran also says the stories hint that part of what Madame Sara does as a beautifier/doctor/dentist includes abortions, which makes her victims not just young vulnerable women on the margins of society, but the entire English race (184). Madame Sara symbolizes a colonizing force let loose on British soil and society. As a colonizing power always confronting and defeating the symbols of British business and government, Druce and Vandeleur, Madame Sara is a powerful anomaly that subverts the bastions of British authority in every story. So what is it that eventually brings down the powerful foreign occupying force? The dangerous anomaly that wreaks havoc in the system actually has the answer within her; it is ultimately greed that destroys Madame Sara.

Halloran notes Madame Sara’s avarice but sees her motivated by more than just greed. She suggests that Madame Sara’s compulsion to prey on weak members of society makes her crimes about more than just the money. Halloran posits that there is no clear motivation or simple truth that explains Madame Sara’s actions and that Madame Sara never reveals any insight into her motivations (179, 184–185). I agree that Madame Sara’s motivations are complicated;

however, she does openly admit that she is collecting priceless jewels and treasures (240) and that she is highly motivated to obtain them: “I have a passion for things unique, strange, and priceless. I go far to seek them, still farther to obtain them. Neither life nor death stands in my way” (244). Madame Sara’s self-proclaimed motivation is an avaricious drive to collect priceless objects, which ultimately leads to her eventual demise.

As mentioned before, Meade establishes the avarice theme at the onset of the series with this statement: “men do curious things for money in this world” (117). This signals the reader from the beginning that this series will engage with themes of greed. Madame Sara makes no effort to conceal that “dreams of avarice” drive her actions throughout the series (142). In “The Bloodstone” she lingers “long and lovingly over” the emeralds, sapphires, diamonds, rubies and other gems on display, openly showing her admiration and longing for the objects of her avarice (220). In the end, Meade tells the reader that Madame Sara’s death comes about because “avarice got the better of her” (249). By beginning and ending the series with references to greed, Meade carefully infuses the theme of avarice throughout the series.

The final story gives the greed theme its fullest expression. Throughout the series Madame Sara is a cunning and brilliant criminal who gets away with her crimes despite everyone’s best efforts; she seems invincible. But near the end of the series, Meade makes Madame Sara’s avarice a central focus and portrays it as a fatal flaw. In this final story, “The Teeth of the Wolf,” Madame Sara admits that her motive is avarice and explains how it drives her crime spree. She proclaims that she has “a passion for jewels, for articles of vertu, for priceless unique treasures” and admits that she is “collecting such” (240). Madame Sara’s greed drives her to collect the objects of her avarice, and she will go to any length to obtain them. While this has been a feature of the entire series, in this final story, avarice proves to be her

downfall. It is her pursuit of the Orion diamond, “the most marvellous diamond that Africa has produced of late years” that leads to her death (240).

The plot takes a deadly turn when Madame Sara decides to betray her friend to obtain the Orion diamond. Madame Sara makes this decision because of avarice; she confides to Druce that, yes, she must have the diamond and accordingly she must double cross Mrs. Bensasan (244). This fits with her confession that she will do anything to obtain what she wants. Before the diamond came into play, Madame Sara and Mrs. Bensasan, long-time friends, had plotted to have Mrs. Bensasan’s daughter, Laura, married off to a blackmailer to release Mrs. Bensasan from his grasp. Part of this plot was to have Dr. Vandeleur killed by one of Mrs. Bensasan’s wolves, something Madame Sara desired. So, they formulated a plan that was mutually beneficial to both women (249). Then, Madame Sara learns that the Orion diamond is within her grasp. The diamond belongs to the father of the man Laura loves. Madame Sara quickly sees that if she changes plans, she can obtain the Orion for herself, but she must allow Laura to marry the man she loves, not Mrs. Bensasan’s blackmailer. True to her central motivation, Madame Sara betrays Mrs. Bensasan and obtains the diamond; it is Madame Sara’s avarice that provokes this betrayal. Mrs. Bensasan discovers the betrayal and, in an act of revenge, allows her wolf, Taganrog, to attack and kill Madame Sara (249). Madame Sara’s ultimate demise is the result of her avarice and this particular cause of her downfall informs Meade’s allegory on the dangers of greed for the British imperial system.

A key scene illustrates how Meade uses Madame Sara, the anomalous figure who embodies imperial greed, to indict British imperialism. The conversation between a foreign professor and Vandeleur, the British Police forensic expert, shows their struggle to classify Madam Sara in the British social taxonomy. In the fourth story of the series, “The Talk of the

Town,” Professor Piozzi, the brilliant Italian scientist, visits Britain, spends time with Madam Sara and offers his observations to Vandeleur. The foreign professor draws upon English identity as he explains that Madame Sara has been a wonderful host showing him the sites of London. To Vandeleur he explains:

‘You English,’ he added, fixing his bright blue eyes on Vandeleur’s saturnine face, ‘are so dull, so—I might add—*triste*. And yet,’ he added, quickly, ‘you have your charm. Oh, undoubtedly yes. Your sincerity is so marvellous, so—I ought to add—refreshing. One can rely on it. But Madame has also the sincere air, and yet to her are given the brightness and vivacity which come from living under bluer skies than yours.’ (189–90)

The professor, with a foreigner’s perspective, sees Madame Sara as possessing an “air of British sincerity,” but remarks that she is more cheerful than a typical Brit and posits that this may be because she has lived abroad; in other words, he is not able to place her within the template for Englishness. Since Madame Sara’s nationality is not made clear in the text, the scientist’s observation underscores the uncertainty of Madam Sara’s classification: she looks and plays the part of a proper British host, but she does not embody the intrinsic virtues that are allegedly essential to British national identity. She looks British, is running a business in London, knows the city well, but she has a racially mixed background, her citizenship is undetermined, and her ethics belie British self-conceptions. She is an anomaly and proves to be dangerous to the professor and to Vandeleur, as both end up being targets of her murderous plots—the professor in this story and Vandeleur in the final story of the series.

Vandeleur's response to the professor represents the response of the established order. Vandeleur thanks the professor for complimenting British sincerity and then emphasizes that British nationals have a high regard for the truth:

You have just spoken of our sincerity. I trust that we *are* sincere, and I trust also that, so long as England remains England, an Englishman's word will be his bond. The best inheritance an Englishman can receive from his forefathers is the power on all occasions to speak the truth . . . my heritage as an Englishman forces me to speak the truth. (190)

Vandeleur speaks of truth telling as an innate quality of the English and emphasizes that because he is British, he must tell the professor the truth about Madame Sara; however, the complete truth actually eludes him. He does not fully comprehend the extent of her scheme to rob and kill the professor, or any of her evil plots including plans to kill him. Vandeleur attempts to warn the professor about the dangerous Madame Sara, but when confronted with the professor's angry reaction, Vandeleur retreats and seems powerless (191). Vandeleur's inability to fully comprehend and control Madame Sara's deviousness portrays the British reaction to evils of their own making, imperial greed; they think of themselves as sincere champions of truth, but are blind to the full scope of imminent danger. Vandeleur's misreading of the danger portrays a British nation that misreads and/or fails to comprehend the dangers of greed-driven imperialism. Vandeleur's inability to apprehend Madame Sara stands in for Britain's inability to identify and eliminate the danger in their own imperial system.

Vandeleur and the professor's failure to comprehend and successfully classify and apprehend Madame Sara poses an immediate threat to themselves, and, allegorically, a threat to Britain's imperial order. An obvious way she does this is by always eluding authorities; British

governing forces are never able to contain her. She is an object of constant observation, interpretation, detection; and yet, she cannot be *apprehended* in any sense of the term. Meade subverts the traditional British detective fiction genre by making the British system powerless to stop Madame Sara; she always evades punishment by British society or the justice system. As an anomaly she disrupts the standard narrative of detection in which order is restored through a rational process. She falls outside the structure of identity established in British detective fiction in which the detective always triumphs over evil in the end (Halloran 177). For example, in the first story Madame Sara puts poison inside the tooth of one of her clients that, after weeks of chewing, will eventually release into the mouth and cause instant death. After her client's death, Madame Sara is arrested on suspicion of murder, but she appears before the magistrate "looking innocent and beautiful" and is able to completely "baffle" the prosecutor and his evidence (141). She blames two Brazilians she had employed and admits that she had her own suspicions about them and dismissed them soon after the incident. The British court agrees with her accusation against the Brazilians, and Madame Sara escapes conviction. As an anomaly who exists in the interstitial spaces of British society, Madame Sara threatens and disrupts the lives of British citizens as she defies and defeats the British system of justice. At a moment of high imperialism, Meade offers this allegorical representation of the British imperial taxonomy and a dangerous anomaly figure unapprehendable by the system. Meade's allegory within the series ultimately serves as a caution about the pitfalls of greed-driven imperialism.

Madame Sara and Dante

Meade's allegorical portrayal of imperialistic greed crystalizes with a close reading of her Dante imagery. Alison Milbank posits that understanding Victorians' relationship to Dante is important for Victorian literature as it transitions to modernism. Milbank says that discerning the

reception of Dante by Victorians is essential for understanding the time period and recommends “using Dante as a key to unlock whole areas of Victorian cultural discourse” (5).¹² Milbank shows that Dante was so pervasive that there was a “Victorian cult of Dante” which privileged the Italian Dante over their own native, John Milton (1). Milbank points out the numerous Victorian public and private Dante reading groups who met to study a canto at each session with an “almost religious fervour” as evidence of the cult of Dante and his significance to Victorian culture (6). Writing history based on “the necromantic or apocalyptic aspects of Dante” offered Victorians a “de-centring episteme of the present” (49, 45). Dante provided Victorians with a particular vantage point from which to interpret their own circumstances and history; he functioned as a prophet philosopher with the power to reveal things about the past and present (49). “Victorians allowed Dante’s *Commedia* to read themselves and their social mystifications” (6). Meade’s work aligns with authors who employed Dante to make statements about current politics and also authors who offered psychological readings of Dante to explore beliefs of punishment and afterlife. Milbank particularly mentions the print culture of the 1890s and how many short stories used the imagery of “Dante’s suffering damned souls” (204). For example, in the 1894 magazine *Yellow Book* the D’Arcy story, “Irremediable,” describes two souls in a bad marriage as being locked forever in Dante’s second circle, a poetic symbol of the couple’s plight (204). Meade’s utilization of Dante in the *Sorceress of the Strand* adds to the list of authors immersed in the “Victorian cult of Dante.” In Meade’s case, the Dante references build her

¹² Milbank’s book, *Dante and the Victorians* (1998), discusses why Dante references and allusions pervade Victorian discourse and lists many Victorian authors and the ways they identify with and employ Dante in their writing. Oscar Wilde, George Eliot and John Henry Newman actually compare themselves physically to Dante. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Harriet Hamilton King, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and others praise Dante as an Italian patriot. The Rossetti family, beginning with the father, wrote extensively about the “secret lore” located in Dante’s work. Milbank makes a compelling case for the pervasiveness of Dante in the Victorian cultural landscape and offers examples of authors using Dante to engage in debates over current issues.

allegorical representation of Madam Sara as the personification of greed and also provide commentary on the flawed British imperial project.

To contextualize her narrative of greed and imperialism, Meade evokes images from Dante's *Inferno* and chooses to bookend her series with descents into Dante's hell in the first story and in the final story. Meade's two descents into Dante's hell establish a pattern that emphasizes the theme of avarice. The first time Meade invites the reader to consider Dante's journey occurs when Dixon Druce and a companion enter Madame Sara's laboratory in the inaugural story of the series. Arriving at Madame Sara's shop, Druce's companion declares: "We are on the threshold of a magician's cave" (125). This "magician's cave" evokes images of a mythical and classic journey. Dante's *Inferno* is just one story a reader might call to mind with this reference. Then, as Druce and his companion enter, they must journey "through a series of small waiting-rooms" (125). This deepens the allusion and calls to mind the classic journey of Dante and Virgil as they navigate a series of chambers and concentric circles in their journey through hell. Like Dante and Virgil, Druce and his companion both seem frightened; Druce drops his voice to a whisper before they enter (125). The room is cave-like, with no visible windows, and is lightened only from above. Similarly, in Dante's ninth circle of hell where Satan is found, the "shades were wholly covered" (Alighieri 51) and there was a "lack of light" (Alighieri 52). Madame Sara's shop has a self-locking door, similar to the "natural dungeon" in the ninth circle of hell at the center of the earth where Lucifer is found; Dante sees no way out (Alighieri 52). And even though the day is hot for Druce and his companion, inside Madame Sara's "Sanctum Sanctorum" it is noticeably cool, reminiscent of Dante's freezing hell (126). With the unique name, Sanctum Sanctorum—Latin for "Holy of Holies," the inner chamber inside the ancient Jewish Temple—Meade uses religious imagery that further evokes symbols of

heaven and hell.¹³ Meade invites the reader to imagine that Druce and his companion are pilgrims on a Dante-like journey through hell, and it is not a stretch for the reader to imagine Madame Sara as a villain who belongs there. Their journey to Madame Sara's lab shows Madame Sara as, perhaps, an allegorical figure who is comfortable in Dante's hell. This scene contributes to Meade's allegory showing that the Madame Sara stories portend the fate that could ultimately befall the British imperial system. The first descent into Dante's hell foreshadows the second descent that comes in the final story of the series.

In "The Teeth of the Wolf," the Dante imagery and symbols are even more pronounced, and the reader experiences a second descent into Dante's hell when Mrs. Bensasan invites Druce and Vandeleur to check the kennels for her missing daughter. She explains that under her kennels there are "three old disused cellars" (241). Three is a significant number in Dante, including the three beasts that initially hinder Dante's path (Alighieri 1). When Dante and Virgil finally encounter Satan, he has three faces (Alighieri 51). Although there are nine circles in Dante's hell, and a total of 24 subdivisions, Canto III is where Dante and Virgil actually enter hell. In Mrs. Bensasan's subterranean chambers there are three cellars, each opening into the other, including at least one secret subdivision. Druce and Vandeleur can be seen as representing the characters of Dante and Virgil, even to the detail of having their names beginning with the same letters. As the two men stand ready to descend into the cellars, Mrs. Bensasan unlocks "the iron gates" evoking an image of the gates of hell that Dante and Virgil pass through in Canto III. Druce notes that the entrance to the interconnecting cellars is a "well-like opening in the ground" giving the reader a visual image akin to Dante's circles of hell descending into the center of the earth.

¹³ Dawson notes this reference and footnotes it in her edition of *The Sorceress of the Strand*, mentioning the Latin phrase and its significance in Jewish culture as "literally the inner chamber inside the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem" where holy relics are stored as well as its meaning in a broader religious context to signify a sacred space.

The first thing Druce and Vandeleur notice as they descend is the damp and chill air. When Dante and Virgil descend to the third circle they also encounter cool and damp air described as “eternal, accursed, cold, and heavy [with] rain” (Alighieri 8). Druce and Vandeleur hear “the cries of the imprisoned wolves” over their heads as they descend (242). Likewise, upon entering the gates of hell, Dante and Virgil hear the “sighs, laments, and deep wailings” so horrible that they cause Dante to weep (Alighieri 4). The fact that Druce and Vandeleur later discover that Laura is imprisoned in a lower, secret chamber down in the cellars further adds to the Dante imagery of the circles of hell where imprisoned souls are kept and tortured (248). These two descents into Dante’s hell amplify the connections between Madame Sara and avarice.

Meade further develops the greed theme by alluding to Dante and Virgil’s visit in Canto VII to the place reserved for the avaricious and the prodigal. The eternal punishment for these souls is to continuously roll great weights back and forth into each other: “with great howls rolling weights by force of chest” (Alighieri 9). Dante explains that they are eternally trapped in this tormenting game of joust and that “all the gold that is beneath the moon, or that ever was, could not of these weary souls make a single one repose” (Alighieri 10). They are trapped crashing great stones back and forth into each other. Their eternal punishment harkens to Madame Sara’s confessed obsession with stones: “I have a passion for things unique, strange, and priceless. I go far to seek them, still farther to obtain them. Neither life nor death stands in my way. Yes, *the stone is mine*” [emphasis added] (244). In half of the six stories, the object of her avarice is a valuable stone: a priceless pearl necklace in “The Blood-Red Cross,” the royal Persian court’s most prized jewel in “The Blood Stone,” and the African’s exceedingly valuable Orion diamond in “The Teeth of the Wolf.” Mrs. Bensasan underscores Madame Sara’s preoccupation with stones when she explains why Madam Sara betrayed her: “for the sake of a

stone, a bauble, she gave me up” [emphasis added] (249). Madame Sara’s obsession with stones in life seems to foreshadow her death and punishment in Dante’s hell with those “in whom avarice practices its excess” where she will be forever rolling stones back and forth (Alighieri 10).

Meade’s reliance on Dante’s allegory culminates in the final story of the series, “The Teeth of the Wolf.” As the title suggests, this story is about wolves, both figurative and literal, and the wolf figure plays a prominent role in Dante’s *Inferno*, as well. Before his journey to hell, Dante finds himself lost in a dark and fearful wood, sees the sun on a hilltop, but a leopard, a lion, and finally a she-wolf thwart his efforts to reach the hill and drive him back down into the darkness. Much has been written about the symbolism of these three beasts and one of the most common readings understands the she-wolf as representing avarice (Gillon 15).¹⁴ The multiple wolf references combined with symbols from Dante highlight the connection between the symbol of the wolf and its tie to greed. After reading about the ingenious plots, depraved methods, and evil deeds Madame Sara enacts throughout the series to obtain the objects of her avarice, it is not difficult for the reader to imagine Madame Sara as Dante’s greedy she-wolf:

a She-Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror

ravening and wasted beyond all belief.

She seemed a rack for avarice, gaunt and craving.

Oh many the souls she has brought to endless grief!” (Ciardi 29, lines 48–51)

¹⁴ The wolf has consistently been the villain in European stories. Author Beryl Rowland notes, “The antiquity and continuity of the belief establish the eminence of the wolf as a universal baleful beast and helps to account for the persistence of its pejorative symbolism” (162). Dante’s symbolism is echoed in other literature as greedy wolves appear frequently in Western literature and folklore. Examples include the tale and opera, “Peter and the Wolf,” and the fairy tale, “Little Red Riding Hood.” The greedy wolf motif continues in modern day as exemplified in the film, “The Wolf of Wall Street” (2013) which is about the greed and corruption that led to the downfall of Wall Street.

No matter what status or treasure Madame Sara attains, she is still lean, or hungry, for more treasure which aptly fits Dante's description of the she-wolf; the reader is well aware of the many people she has "brought to endless grief" in the previous stories. Madame Sara personifies Dante's she-wolf as she roams the British empire seeking out victims in a predatory way. With the Dante allusions, Meade invites the reader to see Madame Sara as a greedy she-wolf character running from story to story showing up to wreak havoc whenever there is treasure to be had. The figure of the wolf is central to Meade's allegorical portrayal of how greed can eventually topple the British imperial system.

Not only is Madame Sara wolf-like, but Meade makes other connections between greed and the wolf. An actual wolf, *Taganrog*, is the weapon Mrs. Bensasan uses to kill Madame Sara. And to emphasize the wolf theme with even more evidence, both the weapon and the killer are wolves. Meade even imbues the actual killer, Mrs. Bensasan, with animalistic features and qualities. Mrs. Bensasan's introduction describes her mouth as "remarkably large and wide" with a flashy set of false teeth that give her "the very essence of strength" (232). Meade draws attention to Mrs. Bensasan's, "fierce, cruel look" again giving her animalistic attributes (245). Druce stands by the fire and notes that Mrs. Bensasan's "brow was low" and her eyes, "very large and very brilliant," but "altogether destitute of humanity," strongly linking her with something inhuman (235). He again notes her "hideous" mouth "cut like a slit across her face," and points out her thick nose with wide nostrils (235). Meade draws attention to "her glittering white teeth" more than once throughout the story (237). To further emphasize her wolf-like qualities, Mrs. Bensasan talks about *Taganrog* and admits that the "great wolf seems part of me. Once, in some primeval age, we must have been akin"; Mrs. Bensasan explicitly admits her

kinship with the wolf (238). As she dies, Druce notes her “awful, too bright eyes” and that her “dying eyes gleamed” (249).

Mrs. Bensasan’s intrinsic qualities are also wolf-like. She “dared to do what hardly any other woman has done before,” showing her cunning and daring (232). Mrs. Bensasan has strong features in contrast to her daughter, which adds to the idea of her strength. Her daughter, Laura is “gentle-looking” and is “in all respects as unlike the mother as daughter could be” (232). Gentle is the opposite of “cruel” and “cruel” is used multiple times to describe Mrs. Bensasan (231, 238, 245). The fact that Mrs. Bensasan kidnaps her daughter and leaves her gagged and locked in a dreary dungeon for days shows her cruel and ferocious nature as well (248). And her choice to capture and subdue wild animals gives her the ethos of a fearsome animal tamer who calls her wild animals “pets” (236). Her display of control over her wild wolves with a whip in hand portrays that she is the fiercest of the fierce animals (237). Meade gives Mrs. Bensasan features and qualities of a wolf to emphasize her connection between wolves and greed. Mrs. Bensasan’s wolf-like characteristics emphasize the greedy wolf motif in the series.

With the multiple wolf symbols and Dante imagery that create a preponderance of evidence, Meade powerfully sends a message about greed. The first wolf, Madame Sara, is a greedy imperialist wolf who is ultimately defeated by her avarice. Her murderer, the second wolf character, possesses the attributes of a wolf to emphasize that it is avarice, not a clever person, that defeats Madame Sara. And the third wolf, an actual animal, is the murder weapon that technically kills Madame Sara. Having the actual instrument of her death be a wolf is a bold way to underscore the fact that Madame Sara ultimately succumbs to a wolf, Dante’s symbol for avarice. The three wolf symbols make up a powerful and persistent motif that reinforces the avarice theme.

It is important to note that all three of the wolves are destroyed in the end; avarice is self-defeating for all of them. The greedy Madame Sara dies from a vicious wolf attack because of her avarice. Mrs. Bensasan lives only long enough to tell the reader how the story ends, and then dies from a gunshot wound inflicted by Madame Sara (248). And Taganrog the wolf is shot by Mrs. Bensasan before she dies. In the end, avarice destroys them all.

Conclusion

The Sorceress of the Strand series is an important work of detective fiction by the underacknowledged, late-Victorian author L.T. Meade. At a time of high imperialism when British citizens sought to reconcile the glorious ideals of the imperial project with the moral realities of colonization, Meade dramatizes imperial anxieties and gives her British audience insight into their response to the evil among them. Will they, like Vandeleur, claim moral superiority, yet stand by powerlessly and witness the evils of imperialism without recognizing their true cause?

The series is a previously unrecognized contribution to literature interrogating imperialism, continuing the important conversation set by authors such as Haggard, Kipling, and Conrad. Madam Sara, one of the most unique fictional antagonists of this period, resists classification and exposes underlying truths about the British imperial system. This “sorceress” is a dangerous anomaly, an “other” who is also a product of the system she interrogates and exposes. The British system is helpless to contain or apprehend the anomalous Madame Sara as she wreaks havoc on the very system she embodies. Only Dante’s wolf is able to finally explain and defeat her.

The Dante imagery plays a central role within the broader political narrative. Using Dante’s moral allegory, Meade portrays Madam Sara as a symbol for greedy imperialism. Druce

and Vandeleur symbolize British government and business interests that are either unable or unwilling to stop her relentless drive. The two descents into Dante's hell signal readers that the characters are types from Dante as well as foreshadowing Madam Sara's ultimate fate. The three wolves place special emphasis on the fact that greed, as symbolized by Dante's wolf, is the dangerous weapon that finally brings down Madam Sara. Through the wolves, Meade shows that avarice is a devastating and destructive force.

Meade's series serves as a cautionary tale about the imperial project, with a warning that greed will ultimately destroy it even as avarice brings down the seemingly invincible Madame Sara. Miller notes that "New Woman Criminals" such as Madame Sara tell cautionary tales (*Framed* 5). Madame Sara is a criminal with a warning for the British Empire.

Of course, one could argue that Meade's ending seems to reinforce the empire by concluding that invading "others" like Madam Sara will eventually receive justice and be defeated.¹⁵ However, with the Dante imagery that places Madam Sara, symbolizing greedy imperialism, as one of the damned souls in Dante's hell, Meade indicts Britain's imperial project. Meade's warning about greedy imperialism seems prescient through the lens of history since many would argue that avarice did indeed bring down the British Empire. Greed precipitates Meade's series climax which metes out catastrophe, death, and defeat to the avaricious. The reader is left to envision the eternal fate of imperialism symbolized by Madam Sara, trapped for

¹⁵ Miller suggests that while many British feminists argued against imperial ideology, Meade supports it with a "mainstream Anglo-feminism." Halloran posits that Meade's resolution to colonial problems and British national identity supports the need for traditional masculine control. Pittard says that although Meade saw herself as a New Woman writer, this series and her work in the *Strand*, support gender stereotyping prevalent at the time and especially in that magazine. The Dante symbolism suggests that rather than support gender and national stereotypes, Meade pushed against them.

eternity in Dante's hell, rolling great stones back and forth in futility. Will Meade's readers fail to apprehend the evil at the heart of imperialism and stand by helpless as avarice destroys the empire? Meade offers her readers this allegory that portends the fate that ultimately befalls the British Empire.

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