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

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Abstract

L. T. Meade's Avaricious Anomaly: Madame Sara, British Imperialism, and Greedy Wolves in The Sorceress of the Strand. Laurie Langlois Denning, Department of English, BYU Master of Arts. 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.

Degree

MA

College and Department

Humanities; English

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation


Date Submitted

2018-06-01

Document Type

Thesis

Handle

http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/etd10150

Keywords

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

Language

english