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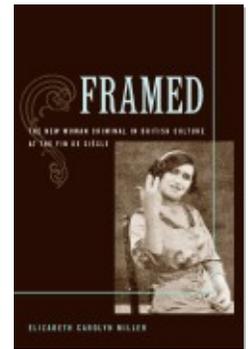
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BEAUTIFUL FOR EVER!

*Cosmetics, Consumerism, L. T. Meade,
and Madame Rachel*

At the end of the last chapter, I turned from the criminological gaze to the consumerist image: let me briefly recapitulate why this move is central to my project. As an image and representation, the female criminal unites two distinct and conflicting conceptions of visibility in late-Victorian crime fiction. In criminological discourse, as we saw in the last chapter, imagistic semiotics was understood as a powerful new domain of knowledge for positivist social science and the empirical science of social control. Consumerism, in contrast, was an “image centered” rather than “gaze centered” discourse. Women were increasingly targeted by marketing and advertising in the final decades of the nineteenth century, and the message embedded in these media was, as in criminology, a message about vision and power. While criminologists envisioned enhanced power through observation and the gaze, however, consumerist rhetoric fed women an essentially opposite theory of the image: to be looked at can be a position of power, if one vigorously consumes in order to construct the image that affords the most power and control.¹

Thus late-Victorian women were increasingly encouraged to exercise power via image and consumption; at the same time, fictional female criminals in detective series emerge as an anxious foil to a popular, consumerist, pseudofeminist discourse about the power of feminine influence through image. The last chapter, for example, concluded with

a discussion of shop-window photography and the anonymous avenger of “Charles Augustus Milverton.” At the end of the story, the detective “identifies” the criminal, as is typical of detective fiction, but identification in this case does not correspond with the disappearance or containment of the criminal. Rather than repressively pinning down her identity, the reproduced image of the female criminal instead serves as an object of display to encourage other women’s purchases.

This chapter treats another fictional female criminal who promotes women’s consumption and whose power emerges from image manipulation; L. T. Meade’s detective series *The Sorceress of the Strand* depicts cosmetics, beauty, and feminine consumption as powerful deflectors of the criminological gaze. Meade’s series is in many ways very much like Arthur Conan Doyle’s: it was published in the *Strand Magazine* with numerous illustrations, it follows Conan Doyle’s successful format of autonomous serialization, and it theorizes the relationship among femininity, visibility, and criminality. Both series explore what I argue is a central paradox of late-Victorian crime fiction: they depict women’s suddenly expanded visibility in the public sphere, via consumerism and first-wave feminism, but simultaneously emphasize the opaqueness and indecipherability of female criminality. The central difference between the two series is in Meade’s feminist perspective: she addresses pertinent feminist questions about gender, body, image, and visibility far more explicitly than Conan Doyle.

An extremely prolific author, L. T. Meade is chiefly remembered as a writer of fiction for girls, but she also made extensive contributions to the literature of crime.² She was an advocate of feminist causes, and critics such as Sally Mitchell and Mavis Reimer have argued that her writings facilitated mainstream Victorian feminism by depicting strong female heroines and by establishing a separate subculture for girls.³ While her stories were printed in the same organ as Conan Doyle’s, in a similar form and with a similar visual context, they would not necessarily have been viewed as having the same audiences or goals. In Reginald Pound’s history of the *Strand*, he describes Meade’s work for the magazine as part of an effort to meet “women’s fiction needs” in a publication that sometimes “went to press with no story or article of compelling interest to women” (70). Meade’s stories are an important feminist intervention into the gender narrative that the Holmes series puts forth, yet as the latter section of this chapter explores, they fail to account for the limitations of a liberal feminism grounded in economic empowerment and imperialist consumption.

To assess Meade's depiction of vision and image in these stories, my analysis goes back to a hitherto unnoted source for her series: *The Sorceress* is an overt rewriting of the strange case of Madame Rachel, a notorious female criminal of the 1860s. *The Sorceress* features a master criminal named Madame Sara, a thinly disguised—but far more lethal—impersonation of Madame Rachel. The connection between Meade's stories and her source would have been quite obvious to contemporary readers: the villain of her series is named Madame Sara, and Madame Rachel's full name was Sarah Rachel Levenson.⁴ More strikingly, the two women share an unusual vocation: like Madame Rachel, Meade's Madame Sara is a "professional beautifier" who operates a perfumery and cosmetics shop in London's West End ("Madame Sara" 388). Both Rachel and Sara purport to make women look younger and more beautiful through cosmetic products and procedures, but this promise is primarily a lure that allows them to inveigle wealth and riches from unwitting clients. Madame Sara's name, shop, and business clearly identify her with Madame Rachel, and Meade even uses real incidents from Rachel's life to form some of the plots in *The Sorceress*.⁵

Meade evidently found a wealth of inspiration in Rachel's well-documented criminal saga, which she employs less prominently in another crime series called *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings* (1898). Her recycling of Madame Rachel's case was unusual, however, in the length of time that elapsed between Rachel's mid-Victorian crimes and Meade's fictionalization of them. Crimes with a lot of coverage in the press guaranteed audience interest for Victorian writers, and Richard Altick notes that many authors "thrived on the public's consuming appetite" for coverage of contemporary crimes (531). If Meade was seeking to feed a "consuming appetite" for stories about Madame Rachel, however, her audience's gratification was quite delayed: *The Sorceress* was published twenty-two years after Rachel's death.⁶

The gap between Rachel's 1868 trials and Meade's 1902 series provides a fascinating case study of how turn-of-the-century feminist writing transformed the terms of cultural debate about women's visibility in Victorian society. As handed down in newspapers and other popular sources, the story of Madame Rachel had been used to legitimate broad cultural apprehension about women's foray into the expanding urban commercial marketplace in the second half of the nineteenth century, but Meade alters her source material in significant and fascinating ways. She transports Rachel into the fictional setting of 1899 London, where women's social and economic position was considerably different from

the 1860s, and thus traces the shifting character of consumer capitalism and “the woman question” in the late-Victorian period. Her stories connect earlier discussions about women in the commercial sphere with turn-of-the-century debates about women’s entry into new bastions of male economic privilege, such as science and the professions. At the same time, the series seeks to redefine what constitutes British female identity in the wake of women’s expanding social and economic roles. Exploiting the exotic and foreign elements of Madame Rachel’s commerce, Meade imagines a new kind of feminine identity defined not by exclusion from the economic sphere, but by a global marketplace for women’s consumption. The rapidly escalating demands of feminine image, fashion, and appearance are framed, in this series, as manifestations of women’s new economic agency *and* exemplars of England’s imperial dominance.

“SHREWD WOMEN OF BUSINESS”: THE CASE OF MADAME RACHEL

Critical work on *The Sorceress* has not yet acknowledged Madame Sara’s real-life prototype, but historians and critics have documented the strong cultural resonance of Madame Rachel in the Victorian period.⁷ Madame Rachel, or Sarah Rachel Levenson, was indicted for fraud three times: in 1865, 1868, and 1878. The 1868 case was particularly momentous, protracting for nearly a year and occasioning a media frenzy.⁸ In this case, Rachel was charged and imprisoned for swindling money, jewelry, and goods from a wealthy lady customer of her Bond Street shop. Her five-year prison sentence was unusually harsh for the crime of fraud, suggesting how much the case unsettled her contemporaries. Over the course of two trials, the first of which closed without a verdict, the press struggled to understand what “Madame Rachel” signified about her society. The London *Times* alone ran no fewer than fifty articles, reports, letters, and editorials about the 1868 trial, from June 1868 to June 1869. Rachel also spawned cartoons and lampoons in *Punch*, parodic vaudeville renditions, a popular street ballad, and literary allusions that persisted for more than a century.⁹ In September 1868, Madame Tussaud’s wax museum prominently promoted Rachel’s induction into their collection, and the next month, the Stereoscopic Company advertised portraits of Madame Rachel and her accuser, made “from sketches in Court,” in the *Times*. The slogan for Rachel’s shop

engendered the widespread Victorian catch-phrase “beautiful for ever,” signifying puffery (Altick 542), and Rachel even became the namesake for a New Zealand spring called Madame Rachel’s Bath (Boase 323). The cultural impact of the trial was enormous and far-reaching. In court, the prosecutor himself admitted the case had not “involved a great catastrophe or a grave crime,” but still called it “one of the most extraordinary which had ever been brought into a court of justice” because “it was one of such a remarkable nature” (4).¹⁰

What was so “remarkable” and “extraordinary” about the case? In the years leading up to the proceedings, Madame Rachel had become famous by marketing and vending her own line of beauty products. Though illiterate, she had even authored via dictation an 1863 “how to” manual entitled *Beautiful For Ever!*¹¹ George Boase, writing in *Notes & Queries* in 1894, asserts that Rachel originally set up shop around 1860, but that “on August 13, 1861, she was insolvent on her own petition . . . [and] remanded to Whitecross State Prison” (322–23). Upon her release from debtor’s prison, Rachel reopened her business, and this time was far more successful because of the hyperbole and omnipresence of her advertisements. A 1908 memoir called *London in the Sixties* recalls her shop as phenomenally popular: “Everybody consulted Madame Rachel” (280).

It was not simply her fame that made Rachel’s case “remarkable,” however, but what she herself represented. In journalistic and popular sources, the discourse surrounding Madame Rachel is predicated upon a vexed entanglement of gender, ethnic, and economic anxieties: Rachel’s villainous persona came to symbolize threats to traditional English national identity posed by feminism, immigration and cosmopolitanism, and consumerism. To position Meade’s series in the context of such representations is to locate both *The Sorceress* and the Madame Rachel case within a network of late-Victorian cultural debate, largely conducted in the periodical press, about femininity, nationalism, and consumerism. Meade’s particular redaction of Rachel’s story exemplifies not only the dissemination of feminism in popular discourse, but also feminists’ intervention into cultural narratives that cordoned women off from various forms of public and economic engagement.

When considering Victorian writing about Madame Rachel, the boundaries between accuracy, embroidery, and hysteria aren’t always easy to determine. Contemporary sources suggest Rachel’s “beauty shop” provided more services than the merely cosmetic, but Victorian authors are not forthcoming about what precisely these entailed. Boase

wrote in 1894, “it would not do to enter into the particulars of the various services which Rachel rendered to some of her clients, in addition to selling them enamels and perfumes” (323). Some accounts indicate Rachel was a “madam” in more ways than one: William Roughead claims she “dealt in other wares than those exposed to public wonder in her windows,” and that her shop’s “primary purpose” was “procurement and blackmail” (96). If this is true, it lends a particularly ironic tone to the slogan posted over her shop door: “Purveyor to the Queen.”

Wilkie Collins’s 1866 novel *Armadale* suggests another source for the iniquitous legacy that surrounded Madame Rachel: through Mother Oldershaw, a character modeled on Rachel, Collins implies that back-room abortions were provided in her shop. *Armadale* predates the media frenzy surrounding Rachel’s 1868 trial, suggesting that unsavory rumors had developed prior to her indictment. Mother Oldershaw’s shop is in Pimlico rather than on Bond Street, and thus is of a lower social status than Rachel’s shop, but Oldershaw sounds very much like Rachel when discussing her vocation. She tells Lydia Gwilt, the villainess of the novel: “I have had twenty years’ experience among our charming sex in making up battered old faces and worn-out old figures to look like new. . . . If you will follow my advice about dressing, and use one or two of my applications privately, I guarantee to put you back three years. . . . when I have ground you young again in my wonderful mill, you [won’t] look more than seven-and-twenty in any man’s eyes living” (160). With the image of her “wonderful mill,” Oldershaw becomes an industrial capitalist, a woman of industry, which corresponds with Collins’s depiction of her abortion racket.

Oldershaw does not perform abortions herself, but her shop adjoins the office of Doctor Downward, “one of those carefully-constructed physicians in whom the public—especially the female public—implicitly trust” (341). The novel refers to “the risks the doctor runs in his particular form of practice” (499), and a lawyer in the novel, who “has had a large legal experience of the shady side of [women]” (358), whispers to protagonist Allan Armadale some awful secret about Oldershaw’s business. Collins thus indicates that Downward provides abortions under the sponsorship of Oldershaw’s shop. Oldershaw tells Lydia, “One of the many delicate little difficulties which beset so essentially confidential a business as mine, occurred . . . this afternoon” (209), and Lydia later refers to this incident as “some woman’s business of course” (214). Both Oldershaw and Downward are “filled with wicked secrets, and . . . perpetually in danger of feeling the grasp of the law” (345–46). Toward the

end of the novel, the shop closes down because of an apparent problem with the medical side of its commerce: Downward refers to a “business difficulty connected with our late partnership in Pimlico” (586). In its correlation of makeup, commerce, and female criminality, *Armada* anticipates depictions of the New Woman Criminal in the new crime genres of the fin de siècle.

We cannot know how much Collins borrows from the Madame Rachel story, how much he invents, and how much he paraphrases from rumors circulating about her shop. Altick maintains, when discussing *Armada*, that “Madame Rachel may not, in fact, have been involved in an abortionist racket” (543), but it is also true that she may well have been. In 1928, crime chronicler Horace Wyndham made the same insinuation as Collins, writing that Rachel supplied clients with “‘medical treatment’ of a description upon which the Law frowns” (242). Some of the rhetoric in Madame Rachel’s *Beautiful For Ever!* does echo advertising copy for late-Victorian abortion-inducing patent medicines: her method of “cleansing the system from many of its impurities, which may arise from different causes” (20) is perhaps an oblique reference to abortifacients, which were discreetly advertised in the Victorian periodical press in such terms. The title *Madame*, by the same token, was common among providers of abortions or abortifacients in nineteenth-century culture.¹²

Despite speculations about a greater extent to her illegal activities, Rachel’s actual indictment concerned only the relatively minor crime of fraud. Her seemingly petty crimes nonetheless occasioned an astounding degree of vitriol among her contemporaries. Tammy Whitlock notes that Rachel’s trial performed cultural work well beyond its alleged purpose of determining Rachel’s “guilt” or “innocence” of defrauding customer Mary Tucker Borradaile of fourteen hundred pounds: “there were actually a series of ‘trials’ within the larger frame of the criminal trial. Rachel was on trial as a perpetrator of fraud, but she was also on ‘trial’ for her participation in retail trade” (“A ‘Taint’” 30); consequently, she was judged “guilty not only of her crime, but of lacking the respectability, class, ethnic origins, and morality of a Victorian lady” (36). Rachel was illiterate, thrice-married, separated from her husband, and Jewish, yet she had managed to amass a degree of social capital unusual to her situation. Over the course of her trials, newspaper readers learned that she held a box at the opera and owned a home in the suburbs, that her children had traveled and been educated in Paris, and that Lord Ranelagh frequently visited her shop. She represented an affront to Vic-

torian class and gender strictures, and such effrontery gave contours to the presumption of guilt that hung over the trial. Newspaper coverage, for example, marshaled public opinion against Rachel's character. The *Express* argued: "Criminals do not acquire the deep cunning and terrible proficiency in evil displayed by Rachel without having served a long and painstaking apprenticeship . . . how many other victims are there who have sunk quietly and unresistantly out of sight!" (117). Even the *Times*, which doubted there was enough evidence to justly convict Rachel, reasoned: "whatever may be the difference of opinion about the prisoner's legal guilt, about her moral guilt we take it that there can be no doubt whatever" (107).

Popular depictions of Rachel as a procuress, a prostitute, and an abortionist hovered over the press coverage, suggesting that her villainous appeal was due to widespread apprehension about women's participation in public, capitalist enterprise. Reports from Rachel's various trials suggest that she was perfectly cognizant of such apprehension, and was willing to manipulate it to her own ends when it suited her. During her 1865 trial, when Rachel was sued for fraud by Aurora Knight, the defense attempted to discredit Knight by depicting her as a woman overly engaged in the public sphere and thus "not a lady, as she represents herself." Not only had Knight "lately come from America," which linked her with travel, traffic, foreignness, and domestic unrootedness, but she was also "known at the Café de Lyons by various names." Most telling of all is Rachel's argument as to why her course of beauty treatments didn't work for Knight: Knight "had suffered from an attack of smallpox and wished to have the marks removed. Madame Rachel . . . recommended her to take baths. Of course Madame Rachel would not admit a woman who had just recovered from smallpox into her private baths, and she sent her to some baths in Argyll-place. But the complainant went to the Endell-street public baths" ("Marlborough-Street"). Rachel's testimony suggests that her beautifying treatments aren't effective in "public" baths, because such places are impure. By telling this story in court, Rachel associates her accuser with public, transnational contagion. The irony, of course, is that she relies here upon the same conventional associations—between privacy and purity, publicity and contamination—that corrupted her own character in the minds of her contemporaries. Rachel's expansive, ubiquitous advertising campaign and her engagement in public commercial exchange had exposed her to exactly the same kind of censure.

Rachel was not only a woman, however, but a "Jewess," so her pub-

lic image was tainted by ethnic as well as gender and class stereotypes. Newspaper reports of her trials often reminded readers of Rachel's Jewishness, evoking not only anti-Semitic fears of racial difference and cultural otherness, but also fears associated with immigration, job competition, cosmopolitanism, and the dilution of English national identity. Rachel's first appearance in court, for example, was in 1858, when she sued her landlord for assault after he allegedly locked her up and attempted to push her down a flight of stairs. In its coverage of the case, the *Times* describes Rachel as "an English Jewess," and at the trial itself, the defense attempted to gain sympathy for the landlord by appealing to ethnic stereotypes. As evidence against Rachel, though it had nothing to do with the alleged assault, the defense produced one of her advertising circulars, where she refers to herself as "Madame Rachel, of London, and also of New York" ("Court of Queen's Bench"). At another point, a witness testified that Rachel often spoke German with her mother. Rachel denied to the court that she had ever been in New York and denied that she spoke German, but such allegations were clearly intended to cast doubt on her "Englishness," to present her as foreign and cosmopolitan, transnational and untrustworthy. The United States and Germany were Britain's primary economic competitors, so Rachel's commercial endeavors are figured as threats to English capitalist enterprise rather than manifestations of it. Similarly, when Rachel was convicted of debt in 1862, the *Times's* account began: "The insolvent, a young Jewess . . ." ("Insolvent"). Representing the bankrupt Rachel as an economic drain on her society, the report takes pains to emphasize her Jewishness. Coverage of her 1868 trial performed similar discursive maneuvers. The *Saturday Review* called her a "Jewish purveyor of feminine charms" (119), associating Rachel's business with exotic Eastern mysticism, which, in this account, is racially and commercially antagonistic to Englishness.

If Rachel's gender and ethnicity were on trial, the 1868 case also served as a trial of the victim, the widow Mrs. Borradaile, whose own failure to adhere to Victorian standards of respectable feminine behavior nearly lost her the case. According to Borradaile, Rachel had swindled her by leading her to believe Lord Ranelagh wanted to marry her, provided she underwent a series of expensive beautification treatments and lent him a good deal of money through Rachel's intercession. Borradaile was around fifty years old, which made this story seem ludicrous enough to Victorian readers, but rumors surrounding the trial painted a much more sordid picture: that Ranelagh had watched Borradaile bathing in Rachel's back room, with her consent, and that Rachel's baths were spe-

cially designed to allow such voyeurism. Other rumors indicated that Borradaile had had an affair with Ranelagh years earlier, while she was still married, and that he had fathered one of her children. Most damaging to Borradaile was the argument used by the defense: that the Lord Ranelagh story was completely false, and that Borradaile was using it to shield her real “paramour,” William.

The prosecutors denied all of these allegations, but Borradaile’s image and appearance didn’t attest to her respectability. Her lawyer later described her as “a spare, thin, scraggy-looking woman . . . her hair was dyed a bright yellow; her face was ruddled with paint; and the darkness of her eyebrows was strongly suggestive of meretricious art. She had a silly, giggling, half-hysterical way of talking” (qtd. in Roughead 109). To be visibly made-up was still considered indecent in the 1860s, according to Neville Williams’s history of cosmetics in England, and the falseness of Borradaile’s appearance perhaps led jurists to doubt her testimony: in the first attempt to try the case, the jury failed to reach consensus because of disagreement about her reliability as a witness. Commentators on the case, too, were critical of her. The *Saturday Review* said her letters, brought as evidence in the trial, were a “very ugly romance of a vulgar and disgusting chapter of sin and shame.” They were skeptical of her claim that she wrote them while bewitched by Rachel (121). Even the prosecution, aware of their star witness’s limitations, called her “weak, credulous, foolish, and vain” in closing statements (94).

The trial came down to the question of which of these two repugnant women the jury would believe: Madame Rachel or Mrs. Borradaile. Accordingly, both lawyers were at pains to prove their clients’ allegiance to an ethos of proper Victorian femininity, and emphasized their devotion to their families while playing down their savviness in the consumer sphere. Transcripts from the trial suggest the extent to which, in the late 1860s, proper feminine character was established not only by proof of domestic ties, but by opposition to all forms of financial intercourse. The prosecutor repeatedly referenced Borradaile’s familial and social status, calling her a “gentlewoman . . . for she was gentle in birth, manners and demeanour” (100), and noting that her husband had been a respected army officer. According to the *Times*, he “asked [the jury] to believe Mrs. Borradaile upon the ground that she had been a virtuous wife, and since her husband’s death a virtuous widow, and that the slightest stain or slur could not be cast upon her. It was true that charges against her had been whispered, but he challenged [them]” (6). He also portrayed her as the innocent dupe of Rachel’s business acumen, em-

phasizing that she was “a lady fresh from the country” (96) and that “Rachel, being a woman of great craft and very considerable mind, brought that craft and mind to bear upon her victim” (95).

The defense, on the other hand, implied that Borradaile was “a woman of loose habits” (9) and questioned her commitment to the feminine sphere of home and family: “That there was something strange on the part of Mrs. Borradaile was clear, else why was she living in London, moving about from coffeehouse to coffeehouse, while her daughter and other relations were all living in Wales?” (“Central Criminal Court, Sept. 24”). Emphasizing Borradaile’s nomadic life and supposed domestic negligence, they presented her as more comfortable in the public consumer sphere than she let on: the defense brought in a jeweler whose shop Borradaile had visited, and he testified that “she took a look round as ladies will do. She appeared to understand what she was about, and to be a shrewd woman of business” (66). They also put a linen draper on the stand, who said that Borradaile had spent 150 pounds in his store and had “appeared to be a woman of business” during the transaction (66). In his closing statement, Rachel’s lawyer revisited this line of argument, insisting that “so far from being a fool, [Borradaile] appears to have been a shrewd woman of business, and quite capable of knowing what she was doing” (78). Given her profession, it was not possible for the defense to deny Rachel’s involvement in the consumer sphere, so her lawyer portrayed her efforts at commercial success as prompted by devotion to her children, an appropriately feminine motivation, rather than the mere desire for financial gain. Emphasizing that Rachel’s seven children were enormously well educated, considering their mother’s social standing, the lawyer reasoned, “whatever might be said against the prisoner, this must be admitted that she had given her children a good education” (77).

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION: FEMINISM, VISIBILITY, AND CONSUMERISM

As these “trials within trials” suggest, Rachel’s case resonated with Victorian cultural debates about the status of gender and social identity in the expanding commercial marketplace and economy. As the ideology of consumerism spread and the accumulation of wealth became enough to ensure one’s social capital, fears about the denigration of established social hierarchies came to the surface of popular discourse. That

Rachel was a vendor of cosmetics heightened her symbolic relevance to such debates: her very trade entailed making people appear more attractive than they “really” were. Paula Black notes that the beauty industry and the beauty salon as an institution emerged in tandem with the mid-nineteenth-century rise of advertising aimed directly at women (20); thus Rachel’s shop represented not only consumer culture’s penchant for obliterating supposedly “natural” divisions among gradations of humanity, but also its feminization of public culture and the visual landscape of public life. Rachel’s case represented a trial of Victorian femininity and English national identity in the face of rampant commercialism, and an attempt to determine what would happen to respectable, domestic women as the city and the marketplace expanded to include them. As women became established as the preeminent consumers in the new commercial economy, Rachel’s trial posed profound questions, questions that Meade would take up in her fictionalization of Rachel’s story: What kinds of financial intercourse were socially permissible for women in the modern marketplace? What social changes were entailed in Victorian ladies becoming “shrewd women of business”? And what did all of these changes mean for the status of English national identity?

By the time Meade was writing in 1902, the presence of “respectable” women in the city marketplace was a reality experienced by millions of British urbanites. The expanding consumer economy had created a whole new class of young, single, working women, often from the country, who came to London to work and support themselves. Such women found jobs in a service economy that included shopgirls, office workers, typists, and other occupations that had not existed for women of Rachel’s generation. At the same time that such working-class “girls” were negotiating a legitimate presence in the city, leisured middle-class women had established their own urban status as shoppers, charity workers, and political agitators. The New Woman had become a staple of popular discourse, articulating real shifts in the relative freedom and occupational choice available to women.¹³ In *The Sorceress*, Meade creates Madame Sara as a New Woman by emphasizing not only her commercial success, but also her scientific and medical prowess; in this way, her stories translate the gender anxieties aroused by Madame Rachel into the era of the New Woman.

Feminist critics who have discussed women’s role in the nineteenth-century consumer sphere have tended to take either a Marxian or historicist position. Marxian critics have read the expanding consumer marketplace as merely another arena for sexist oppression, in many ways

worse than the domestic sphere. When women become enmeshed in modern consumer capitalism, the argument goes, they are subjected to an illusory false consciousness of the world in which their very perceptions and desires are afflicted by commodity ideology. Because of their lack of power in relation to men, women have a heightened vulnerability to the dehumanizing, objectifying prerogatives of consumer capitalism. Susan Buck-Morss claims that “Sexual liberation for women under capitalism has had the nightmare effect of ‘freeing’ all women to be sexual objects (not subjects)” (124). Rachel Bowlby has similarly argued that consumer capitalism in the nineteenth century developed according to preexisting models of domination supplied by the example of patriarchy: “the making of willing consumers readily fit into the available ideological paradigm of a seduction of women by men, in which women would be addressed as yielding objects to the powerful male subject forming, and informing them of, their desires” (20). Consumer capitalism, according to Bowlby, instills the illusion that customers, in buying, exercise a mode of power that echoes male sexual domination: “the very image used of the relation between commodities and buyers is one of seduction and rape: commodities cannot ultimately ‘resist’ the force of him who would ‘take possession of them’” (27). According to this model, the attraction of the consumer marketplace for Victorian women was the allure of a masculine, rapine form of power available in the sphere of the shop, if not anywhere else. Needless to say, in shopping, women were actually not powerful at all, but were recapitulating and reinforcing an oppressive gendered division of labor and an oppressive patriarchal-capitalist system.

In contrast to these readings of the nineteenth-century consumer marketplace, some recent feminist critics have taken a more broadly historicist approach, rather than one based on critiques of ideology, and concentrated on the impact consumer culture had on the daily lives of Victorian women. Doing so, they have viewed the expansion of consumer culture quite differently. Sally Ledger, for example, reflects that “the department stores, like the arcades, boulevards, and cafés, constituted a half-public, half-private social space which women were able to inhabit comfortably, so that the rise of consumerism was not *all* bad as far as women were concerned. The metropolitan department store enabled leisured women in particular to look, socialise, and simply to stroll” (*New* 155). Judith Walkowitz, discussing women in 1880s London, suggests that the road to women’s public and political engagement was in many ways smoothed by the growth of consumer society. Female shoppers,

enticed by new metropolitan retail development, carved out a space for middle- and upper-class women in the public spaces of the city. Along with lower-class shopgirls and “girls in business,” such a presence made the urban landscape a “contested terrain” rather than the sole bastion of men and prostitutes (*City* 11). This was a necessary prerequisite for women being “drawn into the vortex of political and religious activity” in 1880s London (73).

The conflict between these two critical perspectives revisits many of the same questions at issue in Madame Rachel’s trial. As Rachel’s success suggests, there *was* a connection between the growth of the consumer economy and women’s emancipation in late-Victorian culture, which is one reason that entrepreneurs like Rachel elicited such anxiety from their contemporaries. To view patriarchy and consumer capitalism as utterly analogous is to ignore how the commercialization of culture broadened the lives of many women in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and how consumer culture participated in the weakening of strict social hierarchies such as Victorian gender roles. The memoir *London in the Sixties* by “One of the Old Brigade,” for example, offers a glimpse into upper-class male resentment at the gender-leveling consumerism occasioned. The text is a nostalgic account of clubs, drinking, gambling, and after-dark carousing in the 1860s, but it was written in 1908, six years after Meade’s stories:

London in the sixties was so different from the London of to-day. . . . Streets have been annihilated and transformed into Boulevards . . . night-houses and comfortable taverns demolished and transformed into plate-glass abominations run by foreigners and Jews, whilst hulking louts in uniform, electro-plate and the shabby-genteel masher have taken the place of solid silver spoons and a higher type of humanity. . . . [I]f any night-bird of those naughty days were suddenly exhumed, and let loose in Soho, he would assuredly wander into a church . . . and so unwittingly fall into the goody-goody ways that make up our present monotonous existence. (1)

The author goes on to bemoan the loss of “recreations which, if indulged in now, would be tantamount to social ostracism, or imperilling the ‘succession’” (1–2), and the existence of “vigilance societies . . . and fifty institutions with their secretaries and staff . . . supported by seekers after morality” (43). Many of the changes that the author decries were occasioned by a consumerist-feminist effort to “clean up” the city, eas-

ing urban access for women. The widening of the streets, the installation of large windows, and the presence of vigilance societies made the urban center a more attractive place for “respectable” women, working girls, and bourgeois female shoppers. To court women customers, businesses were perfectly happy to contribute to this effort, facilitating greater public freedom for women by making the city marketplace a safer and more respectable place to be.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to theorize late-Victorian consumerism as a straightforwardly progressive step toward female emancipation. The relationship between consumerism and sexist oppression, I would argue, was not one of opposition or partnership, but of multiple contingent and variable effects. Women’s new urban “freedom,” for example, offered little benefit for poor, disenfranchised women who could profit neither from new jobs in the consumer sphere nor from new opportunities for female consumption. Likewise, prostitutes were adversely affected by urban commercial development at the end of the nineteenth century, as Buck-Morss and Walkowitz (*Prostitution*) both describe. Less obviously, the extent to which even bourgeois women “paid a price” for new freedoms at the end of the century is a significant question for critics of culture, and one that is particularly crucial in discussions of image, body, and appearance.

Meade’s stories highlight the crux of this issue by associating the rise of feminism and the rise of cosmetics in the second half of the nineteenth century. The proliferation of cosmetics and other feminine beauty products signifies how the feminization of consumer capitalism shifted the terms of women’s oppression, so that women became increasingly sexually commodified under the auspices of an image-centered consumer culture. As recent feminist critics have argued, since the Victorian period, the category of “femininity” has been constituted more and more by self-administered regimens of health, beauty, fashion, and appearance.¹⁴ Women’s bodies have shifted from being the property of individual men (such as fathers or husbands) to being social property, in need of constant maintenance to meet the new cultural standards of femininity. Such a condition is oppressive for women, but not in conventionally “patriarchal” terms, wherein power is held or exercised by men. Consumerism afforded women greater access to and engagement with the public sphere, but did it also distort their desires so that they “advanced” merely to become their own oppressors—or the oppressors of others?

Meade’s stories and the case of Madame Rachel suggest that neither a Marxian nor a historicist approach can fully account for the complex

relationship between feminism and consumerism at the end of the nineteenth century. While many feminist objectives were aided by the expansion of consumerism, some may have become unrecognizably altered in the process. Rachel's story is a case in point: she was a lower-class and illiterate woman who became a successful business-owner, but she attained success by exploiting economically autonomous women and by insisting that women conform to commercialized "norms" of feminine image and appearance. Indeed, Rachel's sales tactics, as exemplified in *Beautiful For Ever!*, could be Machiavellian. In one section, she claims: "How frequently we find that a slight blemish on the face, otherwise divinely beautiful, has occasioned a sad and solitary life of celibacy—unloved, unblest, and ultimately unwept and unremembered" (18). Yet "if ladies bestow an extra hour at the toilette, it is to delight and please the sterner sex. It is therefore our endeavor to prove that a lady cannot be too careful in the arrangement of her toilette, as the future happiness of her life may depend upon her first appearance in society" (18). Black notes that in the late nineteenth century, the "beauty business provided one of the few sources of employment open to women where their expertise propelled them to the highest levels of authority and entrepreneurship" (28). Yet clearly, Rachel's success also depended on her capacity to bolster oppressive ideology as a means of selling her products. Rachel owed her business success to women's increasing consumer independence in the 1860s, but by insisting such women have an obligation to "buy" physical femininity, her advertising prose forges them a new set of manacles.

L. T. Meade revises Rachel's story, in part, by complicating the degree to which her cosmetic business corresponds with patriarchal interests. Meade's Madame Sara gains her influence over women with quite a different tactic than those employed in Madame Rachel's *Beautiful For Ever!* Instead of encouraging her female clients to beautify themselves to please men, Sara encourages them to disobey men by taking advantage of her services. For Sara's female clients, physical transformation and bodily modification become acts of ownership, independence, and rebellion rather than capitulation or compliance. The male relations of her female victims are continually complaining to Eric Vandaleur and Dixon Druce, the detectives on the hunt for Madame Sara, about their wives' and relations' use of Sara's services. In the first story of the series, for example, Jack Selby describes his wife's attraction to Sara as though it's a disease: "my wife is also infected. I suppose it is that dodge of the woman's for patching people up and making them beautiful. Doubtless

the temptation is overpowering in the case of a plain woman, but Beatrice is beautiful herself and young. What can she have to do with cosmetics and complexion pills?" ("Madame Sara" 394). In another story, "The Bloodstone," Vandaleur worries that one of his patients is seeing Sara. A police surgeon, doctor, and forensic detective, Vandaleur is a powerful representative of masculine authority, but he worries that Sara's appeal overwhelms his influence: "I warned Lady Bouverie on no account to consult [Sara] medically, and she promised. But, there, how far is a woman's word, under given circumstances, to be depended upon? . . . She is losing her looks; she gets thinner and older-looking day by day. Under such circumstances any woman who holds the secrets Madame Sara does would compel another to be guided by her advice" (199). Here, far from being a means of covering up a blemish that could occasion "a sad and solitary life" without men, the use of Sara's services constitutes a rebellion *against* authoritative men.

Indeed, part of Sara's genius lies in how she manages to criminalize or corrupt her female clients at the same time that she victimizes them, by encouraging them to disobey their husbands and doctors. In order for the victims to expose the crime, they must also expose themselves, and thus Sara achieves the perfect crime: one in which no one is innocent. The prosecutor in Rachel's case, as Whitlock also discusses, likewise emphasized her sullyng influence. According to the *Times* he "wished all the ladies who had heard or read this case would learn that if once they crossed the threshold of such places [as Rachel's shop] they would come out with a taint upon them" (*Extraordinary* 96). Meade literalizes this concept of the "taint" in "The Blood-Red Cross." Here, a young woman named Antonia Ripley asks Sara to remove a disfiguring mole from her neck. She has been warned not to consult Sara, but wants to get rid of the mole before her wedding, where she must wear a low-cut dress to show off an heirloom pearl necklace. Sara has uncovered a secret from Antonia's past, and after giving her chloroform, she tattoos the secret onto her body: "The words were very small and neatly done—they formed a cross on the young lady's neck . . . : 'I AM THE DAUGHTER OF PAOLO GIOLETTI, WHO WAS EXECUTED FOR THE MURDER OF MY MOTHER.'" Sara writes the words with nitrate of silver, so they will be invisible until exposed to light; once exposed, they will be permanently indelible (513–14). An illustration in the text realized this chilling scene for readers (figure 17).

Sara's plan is to blackmail Antonia with a cross-shaped necklace that will prevent the tattoo from being exposed to light, in return for the



"MADAME WROTE SOMETHING ON HER NECK."

Fig. 17. From "The Blood-Red Cross"

heirloom pearls. Antonia has literally left Sara's shop with "a taint upon her": hereditary theories of crime were prevalent at the turn of the century; thus her body will be visibly criminalized if she refuses to abet Sara's theft.¹⁵ Vandaleur uncovers the plot, however, and treats her neck with "cyanide of potassium," an antidote that obliterates nitrate of silver: "You have nothing to fear," he says, "your secret lies buried beneath your white skin" (517). Meade had a source for this story in Rachel's real-life interactions with Mrs. Pearce (see note 5), but the tattoo is wholly her invention. With the trope of the tattoo, her version forcefully asserts the significance of *writing* in determining how women's bodies are interpreted, viewed, or "read." Whether fiction, journalism, or advertising, the written word has the power to direct the way women's bodies are seen. Vision and perception in this story are not transparent, immediate, or unmediated processes, as in criminological discourse, but are structured by language and words. Meade's task as a feminist writer thus emerges clearly: she exposes how women's bodies are "written on" and

protests women's bodily subjection to the perilous semiotics of image and respectability.

That the perception of female respectability is a particularly malleable sensation would be no surprise to Madame Sara. Her penchant for ruining her victims' reputations, as a means of preventing the exposure of her crimes, is most patently illustrated in "The Bloodstone." Here, Sara first casts doubt on the good name of her victim, Violet Bouverie, by involving her in a series of clandestine monetary transactions. Violet had been under the guardianship of Druce while still unmarried and named Violet Sale. Now, she enlists his help in accessing her fortune without her husband's knowledge; she won't tell why, but later it comes out that Sara had duped her into believing her brother was in trouble. She tells Druce: "I am in great trouble just now . . . I have not told my husband anything about it, nor do I wish him to know. It is not my duty to tell him, for the affair is my own, not his." Druce replies, "I cannot understand any circumstances in which a wife could rightly have a trouble apart from her husband" (201).

Violet's mother left her in "complete control of quite a large property" (198), but she cannot access it independently. She tells Druce, "I want to realize [some rupee coupon bonds] into cash immediately. I could not do so personally without my husband's knowledge" (201). Though unable to retrieve her own inheritance, Violet is clearly capable of being a "shrewd woman of business," as her maiden name (Sale) implies. Her married name (Bouverie) evokes Madame Bovary, of Gustave Flaubert's 1856 novel, whose surreptitious economic transactions ruined her husband and signified her deep moral corruption. Unlike Madame Bovary, however, Meade's Mrs. Bouverie resorts to secrecy to access her *own* property, not her husband's, and she herself has a detailed understanding of the financial markets: "I want you to sell them for me at the best price. I know the price is low owing to the fall in silver, but as they are bearer bonds there will be no transfer deeds to sign, and you can take them to your broker and get the money at once" (201). Druce reluctantly agrees to help, but is obviously uneasy about facilitating Violet's private financial dealings.

Having first cast doubt on her victim's reputation, Sara next impersonates her while stealing the "bloodstone," a Persian treasure owned by a guest of the Bouveries, ensuring that there is a witness to the crime. Seemingly in possession of eyewitness testimony, even Violet's husband believes her guilty, and calls the police to arrest her. Violet's recent ploys to obtain money have considerably damaged her credibility. Vandaleur

eventually clears her, however, through scientific analysis of a handkerchief left on the scene; he determines that the chemical composition of the residual bodily fluids does not match Violet's. Nevertheless, like "The Blood-Red Cross," this story highlights how all women who get involved with Sara become "tainted"; the rouge, eyepencils, and other "paint" she vends symbolize how women's reputations are conventionally sullied—unjustly, in Meade's stories—by engagement in commercial intercourse.

Cosmetics are an apt symbol for Meade to employ in this way because they provided a very visible sign of the changes that, by 1902, had altered women's position in British society so drastically from Rachel's day. In the 1860s makeup was still considered disreputable, but by the end of the century it was widely used. In his history of cosmetics in England, Williams claims the 1890s "saw a great advance in the popularity of cosmetics among women of all ages . . . the visible signs of woman's emancipation were painted faces and rational clothes. Make-up was, indeed, one of the most striking expressions of *Fin de Siècle*. The new woman had arrived" (114). More recent scholars would dispute Williams's association of cosmetics with the New Woman, who tended to espouse a more androgynous style, but makeup did rise in correlation with women's social and sexual freedom. Hygienic dress reformer and aesthetic tastemaker Mary Haweis, wife of a prominent minister, wrote in 1878 that "because paint is considered to be a characteristic of a certain showy vulgarity which we cannot wish to imitate, an unnecessary amount of contempt and contumely has been cast on cosmetics," but that she saw no "harm or degradation in avowedly hiding defects of complexions, or touching the face with pink or white" (196). A decade and a half later, an 1894 cartoon from *Punch* depicts common use of cosmetics among "respectable" women (figure 18).

As is evident in Meade's stories, the cosmetic boom near the end of the century hinged upon women having enough social and financial freedom to buy such products. What is more, use of makeup denotes a pronouncement of one's self as a sexual being, a departure from the performance of sexual disinterest compulsory in earlier Victorian formulations of respectable femininity. For Meade's readers, Sara's business was thus a reminder of the changing social role of women. That cosmetics are a troubled signifier of women's emancipation, however, is clear from Max Beerbohm's essay "A Defence of Cosmetics," published in *The Yellow Book* in 1894. While proclaiming it "useless" for men to protest women's growing attachment to cosmetics, Beerbohm suggests, with



"A PAINTED LADY."

"O, MUMMY DEAR, WHY DID PAPA SAY HE WAS THINKING OF HAVING YOU PAINTED BY SIR JOHN MILLAIS? I'M SURE HE WOULDN'T DO IT BETTER THAN YOU DO IT YOURSELF!"

"ETHEL, DEAR, I THINK YOU HAD BETTER GO AND PLAY IN THE NURSERY WITH YOUR LITTLE BROTHER!"

Fig. 18. From *Punch*, 27 January 1894, 45

tongue firmly in cheek, that men should instead embrace the development. Makeup, he claims, will stem the tide of women engaging in archery, tennis, golf, bicycling, typing, and other New Womanly “horrors” (69), and will force them to go back to their appropriate position of “repose” (70): “When the toilet is laden once more with the fulness [sic] of its elaboration, we shall hear no more of the proper occupation for women” (74).

Meade’s stories express a conflicted response to the more general use of cosmetics at the end of the century. A visual signifier of women’s shifting sexual and social roles, potentially connoting ownership of body and self, makeup also denoted artificiality and duplicity, and was incompatible with traditional Victorian values of feminine artlessness and naturalness. This explains Beerbohm’s enthusiasm for it: claiming that “within the last five years the trade of the makers of cosmetics has increased immoderately—twentyfold, so one of these makers has said to me,” he calls makeup a “great sign of a more complicated life” (67). *The Yellow Book* was the principal aesthetic literary journal, and Beerbohm one of the movement’s key figures. His essay uses cosmetics to extol aestheticism’s antinaturalist values: “of all the good things that will happen with the full renaissance of cosmetics, one of the best is that surface will finally be severed from soul. . . . Too long has the face been degraded from its rank as a thing of beauty to a mere vulgar index of character or emotion” (71).

Outside of aesthetic circles, however, the prospect of the masked, made-up women Beerbohm describes—whose faces reveal nothing of their inner lives—was to be feared rather than welcomed. *Degeneration*, Max Nordau’s best-selling 1895 diatribe against the excesses of modernity, calls women’s hair dye a “symptom” of cultural degeneration (8). Cesare Lombroso’s criminological study *The Female Offender*, also published in England in 1895, claims that “the art of making up . . . disguises or hides many characteristic features which criminals exhibit” (101). Havelock Ellis, in 1894, similarly proposes that the “artifices of the toilet” are proof of women’s natural, “almost physiological” tendency to deceive, a trait leftover from the pressure of sexual selection: “a woman instinctively hides her defects, her disorders, if necessary her age—anything which may injure her in the eyes of men” (*Man* 175).¹⁶ Like Sherlock Holmes, Nordau, Lombroso, and Ellis are deeply unnerved by the prospect of feminine opacity, but even feminists who share few of these social scientists’ assumptions might dread the kind of developments Beerbohm predicts. In enabling performativity, makeup enhances

women's power of parody, mimicry, or masking, but also constrains them to the burden of playing "beautiful."

Meade captures this difficulty in her depiction of Madame Sara, who uses makeup to present a guileless and innocent face to the world. Novels such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) suggest broad fin de siècle interest in the disjunction between innocence and its outward appearance, but here Meade overtly connects this theme to the expanding feminine context of cosmetics and consumer fantasy. Sources indicate that Madame Rachel had not personally benefited from her beautification talents, but Meade depicts Sara as a strikingly lovely woman whose appearance is undoubtedly artificial and calculated. In "The Bloodstone," Druce claims, "Sara, by her own showing, was an old woman, and yet . . . [her] face was brilliant, not a wrinkle was to be observed; her make-up was so perfect that it could not be detected even by the closest observer" (206). In Sara, the ostensible line between cosmetic artificiality and "genuine" beauty is obliterated. Druce knows she must be made-up, but cannot find evidence for it, which as a detective he finds maddening: "I hate all mysteries—both in persons and things. Mysteries are my natural enemies; I felt now that this woman was a distinct mystery" ("Madame" 390). Here, as in the Holmes series, the female criminal is an unstable element in the scientific system of criminal detection. Just as Francis Galton believed that fingerprints were but "faintly developed" in women (*Finger Prints* 59), making female criminals difficult to detect, Sara's cosmetics help her maintain a "distinct mystery" of identity that baffles her pursuers. Though it is primarily Sara's genius, rather than her appearance, that accounts for her criminal success, she repeatedly employs her image to escape punishment and avoid detection. Sara's manipulation of others' perception suggests that the cultural shift toward commercialized femininity can be advantageous for women, but Meade also depicts the desperation gripping Sara's clients, conveying the peril of inculcating a social duty of attractiveness in women.

GLOBAL CONSUMPTION AND ANGLO-FEMINISM

By presenting Sara's cosmetically enhanced appearance as a tool of sympathetic appeal, Meade highlights a connection between the perception of virtue and the visual manifestation of whiteness in English society. In the first story, Druce and Vandaleur manage to have Sara ar-

rested (the only instance in the series where they succeed at this endeavor), but she “appeared before the magistrate, looking innocent and beautiful, and managed during her evidence completely to baffle that acute individual. . . . Thus Madame escaped conviction” (“Madame” 401). The court rules that one of Sara’s dark-complexioned Brazilian assistants, now conveniently absent from the country, must be guilty of the poisoning for which she has been charged. Sara’s escape from conviction underscores the powers of cosmetic adulteration in a society that ascribes visual, racial significations of value. At the same time, however, the stories depict a sharp disjunction between Sara’s ethnic identity and her appearance, presenting racial and national categories as surprisingly unstable. Sara is described as “a most lovely woman herself, very fair, with blue eyes, an innocent, childlike manner, and quantities of rippling gold hair. She openly confesses that she is very much older than she appears. . . . by birth she is a mixture of Indian and Italian” (“Madame” 388). Sara’s blonde and childlike appearance is doubtless a nod to Lady Audley, but it is also at odds with her Indian and Italian identity, hinting again that her appearance is unnatural. Her use of cosmetics to achieve this disjunction reinforces makeup’s role in the text as a signifier of the breakdown of social hierarchies—in this case, racial hierarchies.

Note that in her portrayal of Sara, Meade alters Rachel’s ethnicity from Jewish to Indian and Italian. Meade refrains from using Madame Rachel’s story to evoke stereotypes about Jewish business owners, as many writers had before her; instead, she Orientalizes and exoticizes makeup by associating it, and Sara, with non-European countries. Sara reveals in the first story, for instance, that she learned her trade “partly from the Indians and partly from the natives of Brazil” (389). By associating cosmetics and beauty procedures with India and Native America, the stories connect the emergence of Western women as sexual subjects with the objectification of colonial subjects. Because the English women whom Sara beautifies are initiated into sexual and bodily power via colonial-derived cosmetics, their sexual empowerment depends upon the disempowerment of non-Europeans, inherent in the extraction of such products under colonial regimes; cosmetics in these stories thus generate and convey the sexual power dynamics couched in colonial conquest and domination. Krista Lysack notes in a reading of Christina Rossetti’s 1862 poem “Goblin Market” that the Victorian imperial marketplace “created the conditions for specifically gendered desires” (161), as “capital sought to incite women’s participation in Empire . . . to inscribe women within its imperial project through the construction of women

as consumers of oriental goods” (143). Meade’s series not only interpellates women into imperial capitalism, however: it renders women’s participation in the imperial market as coterminous with feminism. Women’s economic liberty to buy colonial products conveys, in this series, their emancipation in late-Victorian society; this emancipation, in turn, becomes “proof” of national superiority, justifying the colonial project.¹⁷

The rise of the “New Imperialism” in 1890s Britain, characterized by a more virulent insistence on racial and national superiority as a justification for imperial expansion, provides a context for Meade’s mode of depicting women, cosmetics, and colonialism. Madame Sara is nearly always attended by subservient colonial men, reinforcing the stories’ association of Western female independence and Western imperial hegemony. Though Indian and Italian, she represents female economic autonomy in English society, and her “dazzlingly fair” complexion (“Madame” 389) is a visual focus of the narrative. Her mastery over dark, Eastern, male servants thus reinforces the stories’ message that women’s social and sexual emancipation in Britain is evidence of national superiority. At the beginning of the series, for example, Sara appears with two Brazilian attendants and “an Arab, a handsome, picturesque sort of fellow, who gives her the most absolute devotion” (388). Her Arabian servant surfaces throughout the series, always characterized by his dark skin and slavish demeanor toward Sara. In “The Blood-Red Cross,” she brings him to a country house party, much to her hostess’s bewilderment: “she has also brought her black servant, an Arabian, who goes by the name of Achmed. I must say he is a picturesque creature with his quaint Oriental dress. He was all in flaming yellow this morning, and the embroidery on his jacket was worth a small fortune” (510). Achmed is just one example of Sara’s penchant for conspicuous displays of colonial finery. In one story, she dresses in “rich Oriental stuffs made of many colours, and absolutely glittering with gems” (“Madame” 393). In another, she engages in a series of machinations to obtain “Orion, the most marvelous diamond that Africa has produced of late” (“Teeth” 285). By dominating colonial men and flaunting colonial splendor, Sara asserts her wealth and prowess as a London entrepreneur; as a woman of Indian heritage, however, she also exhibits the perceived depravity of colonial nations, conventionally associated with femininity, sexuality, bondage, and duplicity, as Edward Said has argued.

Meade’s use of exotic colonial imagery to market Anglo-feminism was not without a source in the story of the real Madame Rachel. In

promoting her cosmetics, Rachel touted the supposedly exotic and foreign origins of her products. Wyndham claims that “a small black boy in [a] turban” ornamented her shop (243), and Rachel even trademarked her products with the so-called Royal Arabian Signet.¹⁸ Sexualized descriptions of non-European nations, in Rachel’s advertising prose, encouraged Western women to consume such nations by means of her products. *Beautiful For Ever!* describes a plethora of Eastern and Oriental cosmetics, including products from Armenia (“Armenian Liquid for Removing Wrinkles”); North Africa (“Magnetic Rock Dew Water of Sahara for Removing Wrinkles” and “Egyptian Kohl”); China (“Pure Extracts of the China Rose”); India (“Indian Coal” [sic]); and, most commonly, Arabia (“Royal Arabian Cream,” “Arab Bloom Powder,” “Arabian Perfume Wash,” “Arabian Fumigated Oils,” “Disinfecting Powder of the Choicest Arabian Odours,” and “The Royal Arabian Toilet of Beauty as arranged by Madame Rachel for the Sultana of Turkey”).¹⁹ All of these products, marketed and vended together, produced the illusion that the London female shopper had the entire globe at her economic disposal, all in the service of beautifying her body.²⁰ Particularly common in Rachel’s inventory were brand names that connote Eastern patriarchal despotism: “Sultana’s Beauty Wash,” “Sultana’s Bouquets Perfume,” “Favorite of the Harem’s Pearl White Powder for the Complexion,” or “Favourite of the Harem’s Bouquet Perfume.” References to sultans, sultanas, and harems were perhaps intended to bottle the pleasures of sexual dominance and submission. Rachel’s product names fetishize her cosmetic commodities, associating them with imaginary constructions of Eastern gender, power, submission, and sexuality. By referencing harems, for example, Rachel organizes her clients’ fantasies around conventionally Orientalist images of colonial sexual excess and debauchery. Eastern “enslavement” thus authenticates Western women’s “freedom” to buy and use Rachel’s products and to consume the exotic treasures of the East.²¹

In *The Sorceress*, Meade uses colonial imagery in much the same way that Madame Rachel did: to magnify Western women’s sexual and economic agency. This strategy was particularly salient in Meade’s time, however, not only in light of New Imperialism, but also due to the suffrage movement and the general progress of feminism. If British national identity had long depended on an ideology of female domesticity, wherein the feminized space of home and hearth constituted the “heart” of what made the nation great, turn-of-the-century feminists like Meade had the task of rewriting nationhood so that women were no longer ex-

cluded from the realm of economic, political, and public exchange. Interested in establishing women's rights and freedoms outside the domestic sphere, Meade employs empire—rather than home—as the organizing principle of British nationalism. Her series could be said to marry feminist and imperialist ideologies: women still play a key role in the construction of nationhood, but the role is independent and commercial rather than domestic.

DANGEROUS BREW: WOMEN, POISON, SCIENCE

Madame Sara's whiteness and beauty thus play a weighty role in the series, signifying both her economic empowerment and her artificial duplicity, but Meade refrains from attributing Sara's success solely to her appearance or to other traditionally "feminine" means of influence, which is a significant intervention into Rachel's story. Madame Rachel's contemporaries, unwilling to understand her achievements outside a paradigm of female power limited to the occult, conjectured that she could "bewitch" or "mesmerize" her victims; Meade, by contrast, makes Sara a far more successful criminal than Rachel, and though she does title the series *The Sorceress of the Strand*, she resists accounting for Sara's abilities via maleficent magic. Instead, Meade locates Sara's power in her "genius" and her "marvelous scientific attainments," a model of female achievement scarcely believed to exist a decade earlier.²² The stories thus employ an imperialist model of global consumption as a justification for feminism, but their principal feminist innovation is in the depiction of science.

Sara's scientific talent is apparent throughout the series, and though she exercises that talent in the cosmetics trade, she also directs it to other ends. In "The Talk of the Town," she outsmarts Professor Piozzi, a scientist who is purportedly "a phenomenon, a genius, probably the most brilliant of our times" (68). Sara manages to steal an abstract discovery Piozzi has made, which she quickly recognizes can be turned to "a means of manufacturing artificial foods in a manner which has long been sought by scientific men" (78). Hot on Sara's trail, Vandaleur tells Piozzi: "you did not grasp the deduction from your most interesting discovery . . . [but Sara] read your notes, and at a glance saw what you have not grasped at all, and what I have taken days to discover" (78). Here, Meade depicts Sara's scientific genius as an explicit challenge to traditional feminine roles: rather than making food in the kitchen, she makes food

through mathematical and chemical formulas. Like the cosmetics that she sells, Sara's crimes artificially parody femininity. In the Piozzi case, she steals a theory that enables the engineering of artificial food, thus fulfilling a conventional feminine role as feeder in a way that is both masculine—because scientific—and criminal. Indeed, Sara not only steals Piozzi's theories, but later attempts to kill him by poisoning his milk. Piozzi is stunned when he learns the source of his near-death: "Poisoned milk! I confess I do not understand. The thing must have been accidental" (73). Milk is uniquely associated with maternal nurturance, and thus Sara uses chemistry again to parody essential femininity: she bestows milk, but the milk is poisoned.

Late-Victorian social scientists believed the instinct to mother, nurture, and feed was the primal drive of female psychology, which made the female poisoner a particularly distressing figure.²³ That a woman might commit murder via her natural role as feeder and nurturer—seemingly the very opposite of killer—was appalling and fascinating, as evidenced by an extensive fictional, scientific, and journalistic literature about female poisoners. Criminologists said that women were much more likely to commit murder by poison than men (Morrison 151), and many real-life cases of women who poisoned their husbands made sensational headlines throughout the era.²⁴ Many criminologists believed, moreover, that most women poisoners were never detected. In his 1912 study *Women and Crime*, Hargrave Adam wrote: "there is far more secret poisoning of husbands by their wives than is generally known. If only half what the police know in this connection were made public, there would be consternation among the married men of this nation" (331–32).

Through her depiction of Sara, Meade reclaims the popular, misogynist "poison panic" for feminist purposes: in representing Sara's expert use of chemical poisons, she invariably emphasizes Sara's "scientific genius." Ironically enough, cosmetics fit into this constellation of associations as well, for during the nineteenth century, common poisons were often used as cosmetics. Arsenic was applied to whiten the skin, and belladonna was dropped in the eyes. Wilkie Collins's 1875 novel *The Law and the Lady* depicts a woman who poisons herself with arsenic, after unsuccessfully using it to treat her complexion. Madeleine Smith was accused of poisoning her ex-fiancé with arsenic in 1857, and Florence Maybrick for poisoning her husband with arsenic in 1883. In their trials, both women used what we might call "the cosmetic defense" to explain why they possessed arsenic at the time of the men's deaths.²⁵ Meade's

work draws upon such events. In the final story of the series, a woman named Julia Bensasan admits, “I poisoned my husband . . . I hated that feeble man. I poisoned him with arsenic” (“Teeth” 290). “The Blood-Red Cross” features a nurse named Rebecca Curt, recently escaped from prison after committing “forgery, with a strong and very daring attempt at poisoning” (512). This character reflects a contemporary fascination with the nurse poisoner: Nordau’s 1895 best seller *Degeneration*, for example, recounts the 1884 case of a Swiss nurse—Marie Jeanneret—who fatally poisoned nine victims out of sadistic impulses (277–78). Unquestionably, Meade exploits sensationalist preoccupation with such cases, but her three female poisoners also function to destabilize essential femininity: Rebecca Curt is a nurse, Sara poisons Piozzi’s milk, and Julia Bensasan poisons her husband presumably via food or drink. All these crimes mimic conventional feminine caregiving. Meade’s depiction of female chemical villainy thus transforms age-old stereotypes of female witchery into modern New Woman Criminals, whose powers lie in scientific expertise rather than the eye of newt.

Sara’s expertise is quite apparent to detective Druce when he visits her beauty shop. He finds a site resembling Frankenstein’s workshop or Dr. Jekyll’s laboratory rather than the collection of rouge-pots and perfumes he expects of a “professional beautifier”:

There stood a . . . table, on which lay an array of extraordinary-looking articles and implements—stoppered bottles full of strange medications, mirrors . . . brushes, sprays, sponges, delicate needle-pointed instruments of bright steel, tiny lancets, and forceps. Facing this table was a chair, like those used by dentists. . . . Another chair, supported on a glass pedestal, was kept there, Madame Sara informed me, for administering static electricity. There were dry-cell batteries for the continuous currents and induction coils for Faradic currents. . . . Madame took me from this room into another, where a still more formidable array of instruments were to be found. Here were a wooden operating table and chloroform and ether apparatus. (“Madame” 392)

The back room of Sara’s shop, with its operating table and anesthetics, may have reminded readers of rumors that Madame Rachel was an abortionist. Indeed, the specter of this prospect hangs about the stories: “[Sara’s] clients go to her there, and she does what is necessary for them. It is a fact that she occasionally performs small surgical operations” (“Madame” 388). Such insinuations represent Sara as a challenge to nine-

teenth-century medical professionalization, a trend that had led to the dwindling of midwives and other traditional female medical providers in the Victorian era. By the end of the century, a few women had managed to break the ranks of male professionalism to attain medical degrees, and 1902 (the year that Meade's series was published) also saw the passage of the Midwives' Act, which made midwifery an established profession with standards of training and regulation. Meade's series underscores women's ongoing incursion into male medical professionalism: whereas in *Armada*, Collins uses the intermediary male figure of Doctor Downward to provide abortions in conjunction with Oldershaw's shop, Meade positions Sara herself at the operating table. Sara acknowledges in "The Bloodstone" that she does not have professional medical training ("I do not hold diplomas" [206]), but throughout the series, she acts in the capacity of doctor and dentist. The back room of her shop confirms that she is poised, like the New Woman, to infiltrate not only science and commerce, but also the professions.

In her 1898 crime series *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings*, Meade provides an extended consideration of the female practitioner as a threat to medical professionalism, a theme she only sketches out in *The Sorceress*. Like Madame Sara, the villain of this series is modeled on Madame Rachel: Madame Koluchy, as she is called, is a doctor, medical consultant, and leader of a secret criminal organization, "able to restore youth and beauty by her arts" ("At the Edge" 87–88). Also like Sara, Koluchy is a scientific genius: "That woman has science at her fingers' ends" ("Winged" 146). Meade depicts Koluchy's medical success as a direct assault on male professionalism. In the first story, she heals a young boy, "succeed[ing] where the medical profession gave little hope" ("At the Edge" 87), and in the second story, "the men of the profession are mad with jealousy, and small wonder, her cures are so marvellous" ("Winged" 139). Part of their jealousy stems from the fact that she ignores professional norms of compensation, "taking, it is true, large fees from those who could afford to pay, but, on the other hand, giving her services freely to the people to whom money was scarce" ("Luck" 379). To disregard the presumption that medical services are a "labor" to be exchanged for "capital" is to deny medicine's very status as a profession. Koluchy's fellow scientists and doctors frown upon her success, and Meade pinpoints a distinctively British professionalism as the source of their resentment. The narrator of the story, an English scientist named Norman Head, declares: "I am sick of her very name. . . . She has bewitched London with her impostures and quackery" ("At the Edge" 87).

Dr. Fietta, a devious foreign physician, disagrees: “As a medical man myself, I can vouch for her capacity, and unfettered by English professional scrupulousness, I appreciate it” (90). With Madame Sara and Madame Koluchy, Meade employs the themes of science, medicine, and professionalism to adapt Madame Rachel’s story to the new front lines of feminism.

Madame Rachel’s trial turned on key mid-Victorian debates about women entering the commercial marketplace, but Meade provides Madame Sara with a much stronger grasp on the domain of capitalism than her predecessor, and her cosmetic powers reach a level of scientific and professional proficiency of which Rachel could not have dreamed. In this way, Meade zeroes in on emerging cultural debates about women’s abilities and education, debates of less consequence in Rachel’s day, when women (like Rachel herself) were routinely denied the most basic level of education and literacy.²⁶ Thus, while Meade uses Madame Rachel’s story to signify Victorian women’s expanding role in the consumer sphere in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Sara she also demarcates the boundaries of new territories that turn-of-the-century women were on the verge of penetrating. Meade presents women’s expansion into these new roles as part and parcel of British imperial ascendancy; in this way, despite her focus on an evil female villain, Meade’s series actually popularizes and normalizes the ideals and objectives of Anglo-feminism by packaging them in the rhetoric of New Imperialism. New Women’s commercial, professional, and scientific advancement, in this series, becomes a symbol of national and racial superiority. Thus, while many British feminists of this era argued against imperial domination, racial inequality, and capitalist consumerism, Meade’s series reveals that mainstream Anglo-feminism, in the heated era of suffrage agitation, also exhibited its compatibility with capitalist and colonialist ideologies as a means of ingratiating itself with mainstream audiences.