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The sheik returns

Imitations and parodies of the desert romance

Ellen Turner

When E. M. Hull's novel *The Sheik* was first published in 1919 it was denounced by the *Literary Review* as a 'poisonously salacious piece'.¹ *The Sheik*, held 'beneath contempt' by contemporary critics, has stubbornly refused to pass into obscurity.² Barbara Cartland's condensed version of the novel made it widely available to romance readers in the late 1970s,³ and its 1996 reissue by Virago marked the beginning of a new wave of engagement with the text, which has meant it is no longer possible to talk about *The Sheik* in terms of scholarly neglect.⁴ In her introduction to the Virago edition, Kate Saunders describes the novel as 'pornography so soft you could give it to your grandmother', a statement which is indicative of the non-chalance of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century sex-savvy readers.⁵ Though the craze for the desert romance that Hull's novel ignited died down in the early 1930s, it is a genre which, like *The Sheik* itself, has persisted, and to this day it is a significant money-spinner for publishers of romance fiction. Since 2010, Harlequin Mills & Boon have published over 70 'sheik'-themed romance novels, including such titles as *The Sheikh takes a Bride*, *The Playboyboy Sheikh*, *Vampire Sheikh*, *How to Seduce a Sheikh*, *Sheikh's Ransom*, and *Secret Agent Sheikh*.⁶

In this essay, the imitations which *The Sheik* spawned paved the way of the complex symbiotic relationship between the original bestselling novel (arguably *the* bestseller of the 1920s) and its numerous parodies. Not only did some of these texts, which parody the bestseller, become bestsellers themselves, they also assisted in

cementing the reputation of the original by directing present-day readers back to the origins of the tale. Though Hull's imitators have enjoyed varying degrees of commercial success, they all are engaged in the collective act of keeping *The Sheik* alive through a process that ensures that the source novel is, in the words of Clive Bloom, 'constantly reinvented ... to retain freshness' thus prolonging its otherwise 'limited shelf life'.⁷ Bloom suggests that though certain texts ape their source and along with it, its accompanying conventions, they also evolve to appeal to the sensibilities of a modern-day readership. As such they represent not an 'improvement' on the original but instead are 'recycled' and therefore necessarily 'contemporaneous', embodying as they do the spirit of the age in which they are rewritten, simultaneously with that of the past.⁸ Nevertheless, the enduring appeal of the novel's formula in which the capture and subsequent rape of the heroine is the catalyst to love and devotion, remains immensely problematic, especially in light of Virago's classification of *The Sheik* as an 'erotic novel.'⁹

This essay seeks to examine the legacy of Hull's first novel for the cultural landscape some forty years, and beyond, after its initial publication. Though there were many (often comic) imitations of the desert romance novel during the Twenties and Thirties (in addition to the frequent disparaging references to *The Sheik* in more 'literary' fiction of the era), texts parodying the genre have kept pace with publications of 'straight' desert romances in the latter part of the twentieth century. As Teo puts it, even during the Twenties the influence 'on Western popular culture was already indelible, particularly as fodder for spoofs and satires.'¹⁰ Indeed, *The Sheik*'s ripeness for parodic pickings is evident even to the present day, where new texts poking fun at Hull's novel and its subsequent 1921 film adaptation starring Rudolph Valentino,¹¹ keep appearing with an irrepressible regularity. My purpose here is threefold. Firstly I will briefly chart the genre's slide into parody in the decade following the publication of *The Sheik* in 1919. Secondly, and by way of a theoretical framework for this essay, I will turn to the concept of the 'parody' and its relation to popular culture and the bestseller. As case studies, I examine a selection of intimations or parodies based on *The Sheik*, including

Violet Winspear's romance novel *Blue Jasmine* (1969), John Derek's film *Bolero* (1984), Larry L. Dreller's *Valentino's Curse: The Sheik Returns* (2011), Lavinia Angell's *The Sheik of Araby: Pride and Prejudice in the Desert* (2010), and Victoria Vane's erotic romance *The Sheik Retold* (2013), among others. *The Sheik* is indubitably a troubling narrative in which rape and violent domination are represented as vital tools of seduction. In *A Very Great Profession*, Nicola Beauman remarks that of all the varieties of sexuality permitted in the fiction of the early 1920s, none 'were such bestselling ingredients as sexuality as sadism,' and that 'sexual pleasure for women was closely linked with cruelty'; writers like E. M. Hull and Ethel M. Dell took firmly to heart Elinor Glyn's observation that 'a woman will stand almost anything from a passionate lover'.¹² Thirdly and finally, this essay seeks to address the issue of the legacy of this particularly derided bestseller by evaluating the paradoxical influence that imitations and parodies of the text have in simultaneously upholding and undermining the disquieting desert romance formulas of sexual violence against women as a means of erotic pleasure.

Critical and popular responses to *The Sheik*

Late twentieth-century responses to the republication of Hull's novel have been somewhat surprising in their offhand attitude given the above-mentioned problems. To many, *The Sheik* seems to be yet another harmless piece of fashionable 'retro-kitsch'. As Juliet Flesch says, 'it is difficult to comprehend the breezy insensitivity of the introduction' to the 1996 Virago edition.¹³ However, such blasé attitudes seem to be a commonplace reaction to such texts in the current consumer climate. In August 2012, *The Telegraph* reported that *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), the first in E. L. James's trilogy of erotic novels,¹⁴ had taken its place at the top of Britain's all-time bestseller list with sales reaching 5.3 million.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the overwhelming response from its mainly female readership, and its commercial success, stand in stark contrast to the novel's critical reception which has, on the whole, been scathing.¹⁶ In an article for the *New York Review of Books*, Emily Eakin ventures so far as to suggest that the trilogy might feasibly signal 'the apotheosis of a

new industry paradigm, in which power has shifted from high-status cultural arbiters—agents, publishers, and professional reviewers—to anonymous readers and fans.¹⁷ Salman Rushdie, for instance, is reported to have said that he has ‘never read anything so badly written that got published.’¹⁸ Of course, the general reception to the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon is not unproblematic, with many of the most outspoken critics prefacing their acerbic attacks with the qualification ‘I have never read *Fifty Shades*, but...’ And of course the derogatory treatment of *Fifty Shades* cannot be separated from the broader problem of the denigration of women’s genre fiction as a whole. That said, the bewildering success of a novel that was slated for both its appalling prose and its representation of practices such as sadomasochism and the sexual domination of women is not unparalleled in the history of the bestseller.

More than ninety years earlier, the publication of Hull’s *The Sheik* provoked a remarkably similar frenzy, with widespread condemnation from morally outraged reviewers, literary commentators, and a variety of other bodies claiming to speak in the interests of national decorum. Despite this, sales figures continued to defy the judgements of these cultural arbiters of ‘appropriate’ taste.¹⁹ In the 1920s a strange infatuation with Arabia and all things ‘sheik’ was taking hold across Britain and North America. Rudolph Valentino’s starring role in George Melford’s 1921 film adaptation of E. M. Hull’s now infamous novel, *The Sheik* (1919), had grown women behaving like teenagers and men attempting to mimic his exotic allure; *The Sheik* infiltrated popular culture on a multitude of levels influencing not only reading matter but also fashion, music, holiday destinations, and even interior design.²⁰ According to Emily Leider’s work on the life of Rudolph Valentino, in 1931 ‘Sheik-brand rubber condoms’ were the final straw in corrupting the word ‘sheik’ from its original meaning of ‘Muslim cleric’ to ‘a synonym for the potent young heman.’²¹ The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides clear evidence of the development of the word in its second definition of ‘sheik’ as ‘A type of a strong, romantic lover; a lady-killer. [After *The Sheik*, a novel by E. M. Hull (1919), and its cinematic adaptation *The Sheik*, 1921, starring Rudolph Valentino.]’

Hull’s novel, which marked the beginning of a decade-long

obsession with the genre, may have been much maligned by literary critics as 'not merely a bad novel but a chief representative of cultural degeneracy',²² but the publishing phenomenon that it sparked was sensational. Melman cites *The Sheik* as the most 'conspicuous' reflection of the 'dramatic rise in the number and size of editions' at the turn of the decade. According to Melman 'between 1919 and 1923 [*The Sheik*] ran into 108 editions in Britain alone.'²³ The success of the genre is especially surprising given the formula of rape fantasy that is its mainstay. According to the contemporary critic Heywood Broun, *The Sheik* and its imitators reinforce the assumption that assault is the way to earn the devotion of a woman; that 'the quickest way to reach a woman's heart is a right hook to the jaw.'²⁴ Though *The Sheik* inspired many imitators across fiction and film (there was even a sheik-inspired musical produced in 1926), it was also mocked in equal measure. As the decade progressed, the desert romance novel increasingly became a parody of itself.

Imitation and parody

The past thirty years have seen rapid advances in the theory of parody and, for many scholars, parody and pastiche (two related but distinct concepts), have come to be seen as defining features of the postmodern age.²⁵ Definitions of parody are much contested, with the only consensus being that it is 'a notoriously vague phenomenon'.²⁶ On a simplified level, parody is an imitative cultural product that mocks or trivializes the original text. According to Linda Hutcheon, parody in its present-day form is 'repetition, but repetition that includes difference'.²⁷ It is, she claims, 'imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways.' Hutcheon emphasizes the ability of parodic texts to perform sometimes competing functions through the inversion of their source materials; the stance that these parodies take towards their originals can, she states, range from 'scornful ridicule to reverential homage'.²⁸ For the purposes of the present essay, I define parody broadly to encompass a range of text types, which use irony in their imitations of the source text. Here, my definition is aligned with that of Simon Dentith, who argues that the term 'should be thought of, not as a single and tightly definable genre or practice, but as a range

of cultural practices which are all more or less parodic.²⁹ By utilizing the term broadly, as Dentith does, I am able to here to incorporate the more subtle nuances in the 'straighter' imitations of the genre in addition to those texts which self-consciously seek to parody.

Particularly significant in terms of the present study of desert romance parodies is the inherent value judgement that any given parody bestows on its source. According to Dentith, parodies 'allude, with deliberate evaluative intonation, to precursor texts.'³⁰ The assumption is that parodies can be either deferential or disrespectful (or somewhere on this scale), towards their originals. Dentith maintains that 'If one includes under "parody" texts that make respectful allusions to precursor texts in order to take a polemical attitude to the world, then one is unlikely to see the activity of parody as a predominantly subversive one.'³¹ On the other hand, he continues, parodies can be read as texts which contain 'subversive possibilities', in which the parodic text 'attacks the official word, mocks the pretensions of authoritative discourse, and undermines the seriousness with which subordinates should approach the justifications of their betters.'³² In other words, parody has the 'capacity to act as criticism'.³³ The parodies of *The Sheik* that I explore in this essay, then, can be situated somewhere on the gauge of relative respectfulness towards the novel. As their status as parodies dictate, each text makes an implicit assessment of value.

As a text held in low cultural esteem, Hull's novel is easy fodder for those seeking material for parody. As Beate Müller says:

acceptance of parody is in inverse proportion to the greatness of the writer whose work is parodied: the more respect and admiration a given writer inspires, the more unwilling the readership is to put up with parodic adaptation of that writer's works, whereas they tend to gloat when a parodist has picked a work of art for his purposes which is disliked for some reason or other.³⁴

In choosing the frequently vilified *The Sheik* as the object of their parodies, the authors discussed in my essay are plumping for an easy target. However tacitly couched, in the production of the parody is also an element of ratification; 'parody is,' according to Hutcheon, 'doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that

which it parodies.³⁵ It may ‘indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there.’³⁶ Jonathan Gray, too, articulates a similar approach to parody, stating that parody has the ability ‘to talk back to more authoritative texts and genres, to recontextualize and pollute their meaning-construction processes, and to offer other, “improper”, and yet more media literature and savvy interpretations.’³⁷ My assumption in the following is that each of these parodies is engaged in, to greater or lesser degree, a measure of collusion with the troubling plot of *The Sheik*. However, the element of ridicule and humour that are present in these parodies also implies a rebellious subversion, a challenge to Hull’s disconcerting representations of gender, submission, and sexuality.

The Sheik returns, again and again ... and again

The Sheik is ideally suited for parody, and many elements of its plot-line have proven to be easily imitable. Before going further with my discussion of Hull’s imitators, it is necessary to outline some of the more problematic aspects of the novel. As the novel opens in the city of Biskra, *The Sheik*’s heroine Diana haughtily defies the wishes of her brother and her would-be suitor to venture into the desert without a European male chaperone. Diana expresses her (subsequently undermined) resolve to never bend to the will of another: ‘my life is my own to deal with, and I will deal with it exactly as I wish and not as anyone else wishes. I will do what I choose when and how I choose, and will *never* obey any will but my own.’³⁸ After being carried off on horseback to the Sheik’s camp in the desert, Diana asks ‘Why have you brought me here?’ to which the Sheik replies with the line, whose infamy was immortalized in the Melford film adaptation, ‘Are you not woman enough to know?’³⁹ In a nutshell, though Diana is forcibly held—‘His touch was torture. Helpless, like a trapped wild thing, she lay against him, panting, trembling, her wide eyes fixed on him, held against their will’⁴⁰—she falls in love with her abuser and comes to enjoy his sexual advances. Her love for the Sheik, who is paradoxically both tender and brutal, apparently the combination that makes him so sexually alluring, is cemented when she is kidnapped from her supposedly civilized Sheik by the

thoroughly uncouth, filthy, and irredeemable rival sheik, Ibraheim Omair.⁴¹ The Sheik is wounded in his 'rescue' of Diana and in the delirium of his recovery he reveals his true feelings for her. From her earlier proclamation that she would never be bound by the will of another, Diana appears to undergo a complete about turn, and by the end of the novel we are told that 'she longed so desperately for happiness, and she loved him so passionately, so utterly, that she was content to give up everything to his will.'⁴² In a final twist it is revealed that Ahmed Ben Hassan is not actually the Arab that he purports to be but the son of an English Lord and his ill-treated Spanish wife. In what nowadays could only be described as blatant racism, learning that the Sheik is actually a European legitimizes Diana's feelings for her lover, feelings which she could never have felt for Omair, who is the antithesis of supposed European civility.

So how have later twentieth- and twenty-first-century imitations dealt with the imitation of such clearly sexist, racist, and politically incorrect material? In accordance with Hutcheon's definition of parody, these *Sheik* imitators 'cut both ways', sometimes reinforcing Hull's problematic notions of sexual violence and implicit racism, sometimes tackling them head on. Violet Winspear's *Blue Jasmine*, published in 1969 before politically correct thinking gained traction, can be placed firmly on the side of reverence to its original. *Blue Jasmine* was a precursor to the recovery of the 'sheik novel' in the 1970s after it had more or less lost its interest by the end of the 1930s. This revival, according to Teo, came 'particularly in the form of the newly emerging, female-authored, erotic historical romance novel (also known more disparagingly as 'bodice ripper') produced primarily in the United States.'⁴³ Author of over seventy romance novels, Winspear is infamous for her admission that the heroes of her novels 'must be the sort of men who are capable of rape: men it's dangerous to be alone in the room with.'⁴⁴ Winspear's novel is more of a straight intimation of *The Sheik*, which appears to revere Hull's message that the way to a women's heart is through force. A real woman, according to Winspear, is one who can be mastered. Echoing Hull's line, 'Are you not woman enough to know?' Lorna's captor, Kasim ben Hussayn, imitates the Sheik's implicit intention of rape: 'you tell me you don't know what a man means when he

brings you to his tent. *Ma belle femme*, I think you do know.²⁴⁵ Closely following *The Sheik's* plot line, as Teo notes, *Blue Jasmine* pays 'self-conscious homage to Hill's novel and its ilk.'²⁴⁶

It is the self-consciousness of Winspear's imitation desert romance which puts it on the first rung of parody. As *Blue Jasmine's* Diana counterpart, Lorna, declares, 'You can't alarm me with tales of ardent and dangerous Arabs who carry off lonely girls to their *harems*.'²⁴⁷ But it is these very tales of 'ardent and dangerous Arabs' who have drawn Lorna, much like the readers of contemporary desert romances, into the arms of her sheik: 'Something beckoned you in the desert, eh? You followed and everything conspired to hold you there. Think back, *madame*. Those who hear the call of the desert hear it long before they see the reality.'²⁴⁸ The reverberations of Hull's novel can be felt throughout much of Winspear's 1970s oeuvre.

Winspear's *Tawny Sands* (1970) contains shrewd allusions to *The Sheik* with the suggestion that tales of 'captivity by a sheik of the desert' will make for a suitable asset for a 'tea-shop proprietress' to which 'The good ladies of the seaside resort will flock in for tea and cakes,' and, presumably, stories of abduction and rape.²⁴⁹ The knowing nod to Hull is even more apparent in her later novels *The Burning Sands* (1979) and *The Sheik's Captive* (1979) whose plotlines, like *Blue Jasmine*, are very much indebted to Hull. The heroine of *The Burning Sands*, Sarah Innocence, answers a job advertisement—'Young woman of British birth required to live abroad in the capacity of companion, in the household of a gentleman of means'—and travels to Casablanca, 'the gateway of the desert, where women had no souls and where men were the absolute masters.'²⁵⁰ Sarah is taken captive by the Khalifa of Beni Zain, whom of course, as the convention goes, she comes to love and subsequently agrees to marry. Though Sarah protests that she is not 'on the lookout for some sheik who'd drag me off to his tent!'²⁵¹ she is told by the Khalifa (who is at this stage concealing his true identity) that her venturing out on her journey amounts to an invitation to sexual violation. She must, she is informed 'be asking for a dose of semi-rape, if not the real thing.'²⁵² *Tawny Sands*, then, reasserts *The Sheik's* message that in treating the heroine thus, the hero is only giving the woman what she secretly desires despite her protestations to the contrary—

that 'no' does not really mean no. Though Winspear lightly mocks the conventions within which she writes, and Sarah is told not to take too seriously the 'novels of repressed women writers',⁵³ she is of course fully complicit in Hull's agenda. When Sarah asks the Khalifa if he intends to hold her against his will, he uses precedent as a justification for his lawless actions; 'everything that happens,' so says the Khalifa, 'has a way of repeating itself.'⁵⁴

The after-effects of Hull's novel can also be seen in texts which do not so closely hug the figure of Hull's prototype. Elizabeth Ashton's *Moonlight on the Nile* (1979), for instance, approaches the source text much more derisively. This time, the heroine, Lorna Travers, finds herself haplessly stranded in the Egyptian desert after the car she is driving breaks down. Suffering from the effects of the desert sun, she sees a sheik-like figure on horseback coming to her rescue. This rescuer, Miles Faversham, turns out not to be who he at first appears, but is in fact a film stuntman-cum-government secret agent; and the film set where he is working, predictably perhaps, is producing 'one of your good old-fashioned desert melodramas.'⁵⁵ Lorna remarks mockingly to the film's director that the desert romance storyline is 'rather old hat',⁵⁶ to which he replies that though rather passé, the theme is 'due for a revival and it always appeals to females.'⁵⁷ Though Miles's tent on location lacks the romance of a sheik's camp—'No Bokhara rugs, or Oriental hangings, no silken divan and leopardskins, the scent of insecticide instead of jasmine'⁵⁸—Lorna is evidently sufficiently enamoured of her pseudo-sheik to fall truly, madly, deeply in love with him. Lorna's infatuation is no doubt helped along the way by the fact that she finds herself a last-minute stand-in on the film set in the role of kidnapped heroine; 'Her horse would be shot beneath her by her ruthless pursuer. She must run, and when caught and thrown across his saddle she must struggle and fight until she was subdued by his superior strength.'⁵⁹ So, Lorna gets to live out her desert romance fantasy in the controlled environment of the film set. It is interesting to note that in Ashton's later novel, *Egyptian Honeymoon* (1981) the conventions of the desert romance are dismissed as unfashionable—"The idea of the romantic Arab sheik is long outdated"—and yet are predictably utilized; the figure of the sheik is still seen to cause more than a 'very faint stir of excitement'.⁶⁰

Since *The Sheik* and its status as a bestseller is so indebted to the colossally successful 1921 film adaptation, it is hardly surprising that parodies of the sheik are often directed at the film and its star, Valentino. John Derek's 1984 film *Bolero* is a case in point, which follows a young virgin's journey into the desert in search of the Valentino substitute who will deliver her sexual awakening. As Teo notes, the film, set in the Twenties, alludes to Melford's film by beginning outside of a cinema in the US with a close-up of Valentino's face on a poster.⁶¹ The title credits are accompanied by the scene from Melford's film where Diana is abducted by the Sheik and his band of men as they gallop across the sand dunes with the caption, 'Lie still, you little fool' as Ahmed Ben Hassan takes the swooning Diana in his arms. *Bolero* is particularly interesting as now it is the young woman who is more predatory, actively going in search of her desert man, who incidentally fails to live up to expectations and is a sexual let-down. *Bolero* was not a critical success and as Michael Ferguson notes, 'The entire story is predicated on Bo Derek [who plays the films female lead] coaxing a hard-on.'⁶² In a 1984 *New York Times* review, typical of the responses that *Bolero* evoked, the film was slated for a plot that 'sounds like that of a straight porn film.'⁶³ *Bolero* is no great work of art and by situating Bo Derek as the object of the male gaze it cannot be said to constitute a feminist reworking of the plot, but even so there is something liberating about a female lead who revels in her sexuality and outmanoeuvres the pathetic and fragile Sheik.

Twenty-first-century parodies

Valentino's role as the epitome of all things sheik-like has by no means diminished in recent years; Anne Herries' Mills and Boon novel *The Sheikh* (2002) is very much a case in point. Reminiscent of the opening scene of *Bolero*, the very visual evocation of Valentino provides the opening to yet another tale that follows in the same vein: 'Justine reached for a copy of the magazine she had discovered at the library that morning. It had a full-page picture of the actor Rudolph Valentino inside and was advertising his latest film. ... "We must see this before you go away," Justine said and sighed over the picture of her screen idol.'⁶⁴ In this obvious pastiche, Herries, like so many of

her compatriots, is acutely conscious of the genre's reliance on the body of texts that have been published earlier operating through an implicitly acknowledged relationship of symbiosis; just as these recycled stories are nourished by their forerunners, they also feed a continued appetite for the 'authentic' article.

In Herries' *The Sheikh*, the heroine, Chloe, responds to her friend Justine's question about whether a real Sheik would be like Valentino by retorting that no, 'He would probably be fat, greasy and smell absolutely awful.'⁶⁵ Justine is loath to have her illusions shattered and in the by now uncannily familiar words retorts: 'I'll have you know I dream of meeting Valentino ... I see him bending down to swoop me up in his arms and carry me off to his tent in the desert.'⁶⁶ The fantasy of a sub-Valentino Sheik who preys on young virgins and teaches them their 'true' desires appears to be very much alive in the twenty-first century. Larry L. Dreller's novel, *Valentino's Curse: The Sheik Returns* (2010), though not itself a desert romance, speaks of the enduring allure of Valentino's role. Here Valentino, contacted in a séance, haunts the novel's protagonist, Emma. Valentino, we are told, 'meant nothing to her, but still, it reawakened something in her that she couldn't quite firmly grasp, something at the back of her mind that lurked, waiting for discovery.'⁶⁷ Valentino, in a quite literal sense, returns in this novel, his apparition haunting and even making love to Emma, his exploring hands 'sweeping over her unre-sisting body'.⁶⁸ Though the plotline of this supernatural romance is certainly not of *The Sheikh* ilk, it nevertheless attests to a continued infatuation with the novel and provides a very literal illustration of Bloom's assertion that 'popular women's fiction becomes a séance, reviving not merely the shadows and ventriloquistic voices of long-dead authors but also their [largely conservative] conventions.'⁶⁹ Lavinia Angell's *The Sheik of Araby: Pride and Prejudice in the Desert* (2010) is just one further example of parody taken to the extreme in its hybrid *Sheik/Pride and Prejudice* plotline: 'The Sheik finally tore his gaze from Elizabeth and glanced over his shoulder at his men, replying in kind: "She may captivate you, Yusef, but she is certainly not handsome enough to tempt me."⁷⁰

The prolific and assertively self-publicizing author Victoria Vane has been the latest in the long line of romance novelists to tackle *The*

Sheik. Adding to her extensive oeuvre of romance novels *The Sheik Retold* (2013), which Vane 'co-authors' with Hull herself, is essentially a retelling of the novel in which the problematic elements of female subservience and sexual assault are amputated and replaced with a female lead whom no man can match. The steamy passages which Vane incorporates into the novel transforms it into the kind of erotic book more in line with the expectations of twenty-first-century readers. What interests me the most in this text is not the story itself but the paratextual elements in which Vane justifies and motivates her decision to take on Hull's novel. In the dedication, Vane openly pays homage to Hull, the woman 'who created the fascinating and exotic world of *The Sheik*.'⁷¹ Nevertheless, in 'A Word from Victoria Vane' which precedes the story itself, Vane explains that she has 'always found the "forced seduction"/rape-to-love trope appalling, and never had such mixed feeling about a book as [she] did after reading *The Sheik*.'⁷² However, it had kind of power over her: '*The Sheik* held me hostage, refusing to let me go.'⁷³ In the kind of language which could easily be used to describe the experience of a desert romance heroine in the grasp of her abductor/lover, Vane encapsulates the potency of Hull's novel.

In rewriting the novel and throwing 'the bedroom door wide open', Vane claims to have kept the elements of the novel she finds most appealing and 'changed what [she] loathed', saving the definitive appraisal of her work for the book's readership 'who will be the ultimate judge.' One of the most obvious alterations that Vane makes, aside from sex scenes, which would never have made it by the censors in the Twenties, is the fact that Diana narrates her own story in the first person providing a much greater degree of access to her thoughts. The novel uses a framing device and opens with Diana having evidently escaped her captor's grasp. She then goes on to narrate her story retrospectively, eventually revealing her decision to return to the Sheik entirely of her own free will. Vane's way around the problematic rape scene in the novel is to suggest that anything the Sheik could do to Diana, she could equally take back in pleasure from him. 'I could' she narrates, 'either let him have me in the deferent and submissive manner of a lowly servant or meet him on an equal footing, allowing myself also to take from him.'⁷⁴ Diana

comes to learn the supposed truth that there is 'power rather than weakness in being the object of a man's desire,'⁷⁵ as 'the menacing tiger,' the Sheik, 'had become her prey.'⁷⁶

Despite Vane's assertions that Diana's newfound sexuality at the hands of the Sheik is liberating, her emancipation is double-edged. On the one hand she might authentically enjoy her sexual encounters, but I would argue that her feelings of power and control are somewhat illusory. To choose to enjoy the Sheik's sexual whims is not to be in control of them—on the contrary, she still submits to his demands. Rather, I believe that Vane's apologetic tone in her justification for rewriting *The Sheik* only emphasizes the very real problem of the impossibility of retelling in a manner which remains uncontaminated by its source text. There is no doubt that, even though Vane reiterates the fact that she finds certain aspects of Hull's novel problematic, she still is complicit in its overarching message that happiness is dependent upon this archetype of masculinity, this man who, in Saunder's words, 'is such a paragon of extreme maleness that he amounts to a talking penis.'⁷⁷

Conclusion

One of the elements of the genre that seems to have helped to ensure its longevity is its ability to evolve with changing times and to reflect contemporary concerns. It is notable that there has been some degree of critical attention paid to sheik romances at times when the West's (and predominantly the US's) relationship with the Middle East has been particularly fraught, thus suggesting the genre's capacity to adapt to and reflect changing cultural and societal forces. For instance, Teo remarks on 'a deluge of largely North American-authored novels after the Gulf War of 1990–1991', in addition to a further peak in publication of sheik-centred romances in the wake of the post–9/11 war on terror.⁷⁸ Though the political climate might be a contributing factor in sustaining the popularity of the genre, genre also seems to rely on a fundamentally stable nucleus that can withstand repeated retellings. As Bloom has it, the bestseller as the 'apotheosis' of popular fiction is frequently engaged in this turn to the past; the 'grail', according to Bloom, is found in the 'author who can rewrite the conventions of

revered predecessors.⁷⁹ ‘Popular modernity’, then, can be recognized as ‘the art of literary repetition, homage and pastiche.’⁸⁰

Although Kate Saunders, in her introduction to the 1996 Virago edition of the novel, laughs off the controversial aspects of the *The Sheik* and remarks of the book that ‘it is simply divine’,⁸¹ the classification of *The Sheik* as an ‘erotic classic’ by a feminist publishing house is more than a little disconcerting. *The Sheik* perhaps sits rather uncomfortably on the bookshelf next to, say, Virago’s 2013 anthology entitled—ironically—*Fifty Shades of Feminism*. Yes, Saunders does caution readers to ‘suspend political correctness’ when picking up *The Sheik*, but she also goes on to admit that, should she find herself in Diana’s position ‘it would be several years before [she] got round to shouting for help.’⁸² Barbara Cartland echoes this sentiment in the preface to her abridged version of the novel: ‘We all saw ourselves in the role of Diana Mayo, we all longed to be abducted into the desert and to be forced by all sheer violence into obedience by an all-conquering male.’ It is impossible, though, to ignore the continued influence and appeal of *The Sheik*, however problematic it might be. It might even be suggested that the very fact that the formula is so controversial and divisive makes a case study of the desert romance as bestselling genre even more constructive in terms of developing an understanding of what makes certain books sell; the genre has remained a bestseller *in spite* of all the attacks levelled at it.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 90.
- 2 Melman 1988, 90.
- 3 E. M. Hull, *The Sheik*, abridged by Barbara Cartland (1977; rev. edn, London: Duckworth, 1979). Widely regarded as one of the most successful romance writers of all time with over 700 novels to her name, the fact that *The Sheik* was chosen by Cartland as the first in a series of classic romance reissues speaks for itself.
- 4 Melman 1988 was one of the first to deal seriously with the novel. In the last couple of decades there has been a wealth of research on the novel, including Ann Ardis, ‘E. M. Hull, Mass Market Romance and the New Woman Novel in the Early Twentieth Century’, *Women’s Writing*, 3/3 (1996), 287–96; Evelyn Bach, ‘Sheik Fantasies: Orientalism and Feminine Desire in the Desert Romance’, *HECATE*, 23/1 (1997), 9–40; Karen Chow, ‘Popular Sexual Knowledges and Women’s Agency in 1920s England: Marie Stopes’s “Married Love” and E. M. Hull’s “The Sheik”’, *Feminist*

- Review*, 63/1 (1999), 64–87; Laura Frost, ‘The Romance of Cliché: E. M. Hull, D. H. Lawrence, and Interwar Erotic Fiction’, in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 94–118.
- 5 Kate Saunders, ‘Introduction’, in E. M. Hull, *The Sheik* (London: Virago, 1996), v–xi, quote at x–xi.
- 6 Data obtained from the official Mills & Boon website: ‘Romance, Fiction Books and Ebooks from Mills & Boon’, n.d. but 10 November 2013 <<http://www.millsandboon.co.uk>> [accessed 17 November 2013].
- 7 Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 38.
- 8 Bloom 2008, 46.
- 9 As noted by Juliet Flesch, *From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels* (Fremantle, W.A.: Curtin University Books, 2004), 184.
- 10 Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 2; Melman 1988, 92 refers to the novelist Joan Conquest as a past master in the ‘knockabout burlesque which parodied the conventions of the genre’.
- 11 *The Sheik*, dir. by George Melford (Paramount, 1921).
- 12 Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession* (London: Persephone, 2008), 265–66.
- 13 Flesch 2004, 184.
- 14 *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Century, 2012); *Fifty Shades Darker* (London: Century, 2012); *Fifty Shades Freed* (London: Century, 2012). *Fifty Shades of Grey* was initially released as an e-book in May 2011 by The Writer’s Coffee Shop Publishing House.
- 15 Anita Singh, ‘50 Shades of Grey is best-selling book of all time’, *The Telegraph*, 7 August, 2012, which noted that ‘James’s follow-ups, *Fifty Shades Darker* and *Fifty Shades Freed*, have sold 3.6 million and 3.2 million copies respectively, taking the trilogy to combined UK sales of over 12 million, according to data supplied by Random House.’
- 16 Emily Eakin, ‘Grey Area: How Fifty Shades Dominated the Market’, *New York Review of Books*, 27 July, 2012, sums up the disparity between readers and critics by claiming that, in contrast to its numerous readers, critics ‘have found much to abhor about the work.’
- 17 Eakin 2012.
- 18 Continuing his reproach for a novel of which he admits he had only read several pages, Rushdie said that ‘It made *Twilight* look like *War and Peace*’ Salman Rushdie quoted in Chris Irvine, ‘Sir Salman Rushdie: ‘Fifty Shades of Grey makes *Twilight* look like *War and Peace*’, *The Telegraph*, 9 October, 2012.
- 19 Beauman 2008, 265–6 captures the absurdity of the seeming acceptability of *The Sheik* given other contemporaneous works that were banned: ‘It is one of the most mysterious aspects of the barriers and restraints a society chooses to impose upon itself that, in England in the 1920s, respectable middle-class readers cheerfully devoured ... E. M. Hull and Ethel M. Dell while denying themselves *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, *The Well of Loneliness* or *Sleeveless Errand*, all of which were banned.’
- 20 See Teo 2012, 2 where she notes that in the 1920s ‘Arabic fabrics, clothing, jewelry, cigarettes, cosmetics, interior decorations, and design motifs proliferated’; see also Melman 1988, 89.
- 21 Emily W. Leider, *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (London: Faber, 2003), 168.

- 22 Frost 2006, 96.
- 23 Melman 1988, 46; David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895–1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 185 notes also that ‘The audience for the film version, made with Rudolph Valentino in 1921, was estimated in millions.’
- 24 Heywood Broun, ‘The Not Impossible Sheik’, in *Pieces of Hate and Other Enthusiasms* (New York: George H. Doran, 1922), 18–19.
- 25 There are copious studies on parody and the field is vast. For a general overview and discussion of parody theory, see Simon Dentith, *Parody (The New Critical Idiom)* (London: Routledge, 2000).
- 26 Beate Müller, ‘Introduction’, in *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 1–26, quote at 1.
- 27 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Vol. 874; University of Illinois Press, 2000), 37.
- 28 Hutcheon 2000, 37.
- 29 Dentith 2000, 19; meanwhile, Müller 1997, 4 notes that the concept of parody should include a wide variety of cultural forms: ‘parody is not limited to literature, nor even to the medium of text: it transcends all known genre boundaries, so that there are parodies in basically every cultural arena, whether it be the fine arts or advertisement, fashion or film, poetry or politics, science or songs, narrative or news’.
- 30 Dentith 2000, 6.
- 31 Dentith 2000, 19.
- 32 Dentith 2000, 20.
- 33 Dentith 2000, 32.
- 34 Beate Müller, ‘Hamlet at the Dentist’s: Parodies of Shakespeare’, in *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives*, ed. Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 127–54, quote at 128.
- 35 Linda Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 97.
- 36 Hutcheon 2002, 102.
- 37 Jonathan Gray, *Watching with The Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 4.
- 38 Hull 1996, 24.
- 39 Hull 1996, 48.
- 40 Hull 1996, 66.
- 41 Ann Kaler, ‘Conventions of Captivity in Romance Novels’, in *Romantic Conventions*, ed. Anne K. Kaler and Rosemary E. Johnson-Kurek (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 86–99, 91, notes the fact that Hull repeatedly stresses the cleanliness of the hero, a convention which recurs in later desert romance novels.
- 42 Hull 1996, 138.
- 43 Teo 2012, 3; Teo also notes that ‘The publication of *Blue Jasmine* heralded the revival of the British-authored sheik romance in the last quarter of the twentieth century (ibid. 218).
- 44 *Violets and Vinegar: An Anthology of Women’s Writings and Sayings*, ed. Jilly Cooper and Tom Hartman (London: Corgi, 1982), 76 quotes Violet Winspear as saying: ‘I get my heroes so that they’re lean and hard muscled and mocking and sardonic and tough and tigerish and single, of course. Oh and they’ve got to be rich and then I make it that they’re only cynical and smooth on the surface. But underneath they’re well, you know, sort of lost and lonely. In need of love but, when roused,

- capable of breathtaking passion and potency. Most of my heroes, well all of them really, are like that. They frighten but fascinate.'
- 45 Violet Winspear, *Blue Jasmine* (London: Harlequin, 1970), 35.
- 46 Teo 2012, 217.
- 47 Winspear 1970, 9, quoted in Teo 2012, 217.
- 48 Winspear 1970, 115.
- 49 Violet Winspear, *Tawny Sands* (London: Mills & Boon, 1970), 111.
- 50 Violet Winspear, *The Burning Sands* (London: Mills & Boon, 1976), 1, 41–2.
- 51 Winspear 1976, 47.
- 52 Winspear 1976, 47.
- 53 Winspear 1976, 54. The sheiks were apparently not quite the Lotharios they were cracked up to be, for, as we are wryly told, 'If desert sheiks spent all their time on the divan with a frantic woman, then their various regions would be in a state of chaos and economical collapse—as would the sheik himself' (ibid. 55).
- 54 Winspear 1976, 94.
- 55 Elizabeth Ashton, *Moonlight on the Nile* (London: Mills & Boon, 1979), 22.
- 56 Ashton 1979, 49.
- 57 Ashton 1979, 49.
- 58 Ashton 1979, 28.
- 59 Ashton 1979, 50.
- 60 Elizabeth Ashton, *Egyptian Honeymoon* (London: Mills & Boon, 1981), 72.
- 61 Teo 2012, 3.
- 62 Michael Ferguson, *Idol Worship: A Shameless Celebration of Male Beauty in the Movies* (Sarasota: Star Books, 2005), 77.
- 63 Janet Maslin, 'Film: Bo Derek in *Bolero*', *New York Times*, 1 September 1984.
- 64 Anne Herries, *The Sheik* (Richmond: Mills & Boon, 2002), 10.
- 65 Herries 2002, 12.
- 66 Herries 2002, 12.
- 67 Larry L. Dreller, *Valentino's Curse: The Sheik Returns* (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2011), [e-book].
- 68 Dreller 2011.
- 69 Bloom 2008, 46.
- 70 Lavinia Angell, *The Sheik of Araby: Pride and Prejudice in the Desert* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2010), [e-book].
- 71 Victoria Vane and E. M Hull, *The Sheik Retold* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2013), n.p.
- 72 Vane 2013, n.p.
- 73 Vane 2013, n.p.
- 74 Vane 2013, 89.
- 75 Vane 2013, 89.
- 76 Vane 2013, 92.
- 77 Saunders 1996, vii.
- 78 Teo 2012, 4 and 195.
- 79 Bloom 2008, 46.
- 80 Bloom 2008, 46.
- 81 Saunders 1996, x–xi.
- 82 Saunders 1996, v.