

Introduction to the special issue on The Sheik

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Burge, A 2020, 'Introduction to the special issue on The Sheik', *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 9.
<<https://www.jprstudies.org/2020/12/introduction-to-the-special-issue-on-the-sheik/>>

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Introduction to the special issue on *The Sheik*

Amy Burge

Published online: December 2020

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Three cheers for E. M. Hull, who wrote
That masterpiece, “The Sheik!”
I proudly state I’ve read it eight-
No, twenty times, this week. (Anthony)

One hundred years ago, readers in Britain and North America were captivated by *The Sheik*. E. M. Hull’s novel, published in 1919 and adapted into a film in 1921, was a “transatlantic phenomenon,” outselling every other bestseller in the interwar years (Teo 248). *The Sheik*’s publication amplified the existing craze for all things ‘Oriental’ in both Britain and the USA, although many claim it was Hull who “first put the desert on the map as being a good place for sex” (Anderson 184). The film version, starring Rudolph Valentino as the eponymous sheikh, had an estimated audience of millions (Trotter 185).[1]

The Sheik emerged between “the decline of the moralizing Victorian romance and the rise of the mass-market woman’s romance” (Hipsky 153), a period of “radical change” in which “exoticism and feminine sexuality make their appearance in texts destined for a female readership” (Bettinotti & Truel 185). Indeed, “[b]y the 1920s the female market for popular culture was of considerable economic importance” (Wintle 291). Contemporary critics, who were largely dismissive of the novel if not outright condemnatory, were perhaps “threatened by the fact that women were active in producing and buying material that was considered autoerotic and which affirmed their sexual drives” (Chow 81).

Scholars have noted the importance of *The Sheik* as a literary and cultural artefact, studying its contemporary reception, historical influences, depictions of race and gender, and its legacy for more recent romance novels. E. M. Hull’s novel has been recognised as widely influential for the contemporary sheikh romance genre and romance fiction more widely. The late twentieth and twenty-first centuries in particular have seen a revival of academic and reader interest in sheikh romance, with much of this scholarship focusing on the subgenre’s Orientalism in the context of the Gulf Wars and 9/11.

This special issue marks the centenary of *The Sheik*, looking back at its release and taking stock of its continuing, and sometimes problematic, legacy for popular romance. It is

designed to showcase existing research and expertise on *The Sheik* while also introducing new scholarly perspectives. It gathers researchers, authors, teachers and students of *The Sheik* and sheikh romance to offer new, original research as well as reflections on the novel and sheikh romance genre and a review of existing scholarship.

Structure of the special issue

1. *Research articles*

The special issue opens with three original articles, which draw on and expand existing work on *The Sheik*'s representations of race and gender, and its historical influences.

Pauline Suwanban looks anew at literary influences for *The Sheik*, arguing that the articulation of Ahmed (the Sheik) as 'dangerous lover' is older than scholarship has thus far indicated. Suwanban looks back to the eighteenth-century fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast', arguing that *The Sheik* shares an affinity with the French source's 'bestly lover' and its Orientalism. She identifies a new hero-type – the 'Oriental beast' – and argues that it is with this model that *The Sheik* engages. Suwanban concludes that *The Sheik* "exposes a racist mingling between the two identities of animal (bestly lover) and 'Other' (desert lover); a movement that can be explained by how the European fairy tale tradition of the eighteenth century developed in tune with the emergence of Orientalist fantasy."

Jessica Taylor proposes a queer reading of *The Sheik* that takes as its focus Diana's labelling in the text as a *garçon manqué*: "an almost but not quite boy." She asks: "What might it mean to take seriously this description of Diana Mayo?" Is it possible to "read Diana *into* both trans and queer literary history?" Taylor moves beyond reading Diana's boyishness as "historically situated cissexual and heterosexual female androgyny" to argue for Diana as an "imperial boy," with the attendant power and privilege of class, gender and race. Reading the novel alongside Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Taylor argues that Diana's depiction at the start of *The Sheik* "offers a past trans masculine joy that ... is fully aligned with mainstream masculine power." Taylor suggests that reading *The Sheik* against "the unexamined heterosexuality of 'the female reader' and 'female sexuality'" – reading "against the grain" – opens up possibilities for a joyful, queer reading of Diana's identity.

Finally, Francesca Pierini explores the legacy of *The Sheik* in twenty-first century Harlequin romances with Italian heroes. Pierini considers *The Sheik* as a model for "the construction of Arab and Southern European male exoticism" and points to the conflation of Southern European machismo and conceptions of masculinities in Middle Eastern culture, in particular a "perceived discontinuity with the modern world." Pierini's work builds on the body of existing scholarship on twenty-first century sheikh romance and extends this to draw on ideas of masculinity and nationality more widely, an approach that is relatively new to popular romance studies.

2. *Scholarly reflections*

The second section of this special issue consists of five short reflective essays by established scholars of *The Sheik*, its film adaptation, and popular romance.

Two reflections, by Ellen Turner and Laura Vivanco, consider *The Sheik's* literary contexts. Laura Vivanco, author of *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (2011), *Pursuing Happiness: Reading American Romance as Political Fiction* (2016) and *Faith, Love, Hope and Popular Romance Fiction* (2020), reflects on the position of *The Sheik* as “the ur-romance novel of the twentieth century” (Regis 115). Vivanco offers a close comparison of Hull’s novel with Berta Ruck’s *A Land-girl’s Love Story*, also published in 1919. Vivanco suggests that where *The Sheik* is escapist, Ruck’s novel is more realistic, although both novels address similar anxieties around gender. Vivanco prompts scholars to “widen our travels in genre history” and pay closer attention to Hull’s contemporaries.

Ellen Turner has written three articles on *The Sheik* (“The Sheik Returns”; “E.M. Hull and the Valentino Cult”; “E. M. Hull’s Camping in the Sahara”), and here reflects upon the relationship of *The Sheik* to modernism. Hull’s novel “entered a literary market place defined by an apparent ‘great divide’ (to use Andreas Huyssen’s phrase) in which high and low cultural products were pitted against each other.” While *The Sheik* may well be an “anti-modernist” text, Turner outlines a more complex relationship between the radical innovation of modernism and the “comfort food” of desert romances like *The Sheik*. The desert setting of *The Sheik*, for example, has been connected with modernist primitivism, and Turner suggests that, while clearly a genre text, *The Sheik* did “make it new” in its representation of female sexuality and desire. While modernist critics vocally and vociferously rejected *The Sheik*, its popularity made it unavoidable; Turner argues, “if modernism can be conceived as a emerging in response to the spirit of the age, then these forms of mass entertainment must come as part and parcel of the complete package of modernity.”

Jay Dixon, author of *The Romantic Fiction Of Mills & Boon, 1909-1995* (1998), expands on existing studies of gender in *The Sheik*, offering a new reading of Sheik Ahmed’s masculinity. Dixon points out that “Ahmed’s masculinity is both connected with and distanced from his national identity,” paying particular attention to his “Englishness.” Dixon argues that, in fact, Ahmed is not English at all, but Scottish by heritage, suggesting that part of his primal, passionate masculinity derives from contemporary ideas about Scottish masculinity. A reading of the Sheik as Scottish, therefore, resolves concerns about miscegenation and overcomes the text’s challenge of upholding “English chivalry”.

Film studies scholar Elisabetta Girelli offers a reflection of the cinematic adaptation of *The Sheik*, directed by George Melford (1921). Noting the success of the film and its legacy – largely via Valentino’s persistent stardom – Girelli nonetheless argues that “the gender, racial, and geopolitical contexts of *The Sheik* are persistently troubling.” While noting the offensiveness of the film’s representation of race, sexual violence, and gender roles, Girelli suggests that Valentino’s commodification (his “fetishized appearance and sex-symbol role”) constructs him as “an object of visual pleasure” which reverses “orthodox economies of desire” in which women are more often objects of the cinematic gaze. Girelli concludes that “the film provides an opportunity – for its leading characters as well as for the audience – to try on fictional, unreal identities for the sake of erotic fun” – an offering that was groundbreaking for its time.

Finally, Amira Jarmakani, author of *An Imperialist Love Story* (2015), offers a reflection on sheikh romance today and the collision of romance, politics and fantasy in contemporary media narratives about the Middle East. In this short essay, Jarmakani reflects on her own work on desert romances and the ways in which they articulate western desires

for protection and security. She considers how romantic discourse is applied to politics – reports of so-called “jihadi brides” – and how neomedievalist rhetoric, which labels the contemporary Middle East as “un-modern,” informs sheikh romance narratives. With “romanticized and orientalised sheikhs ‘way buried’ in our psyches,” Jarmakani concludes that “[w]e would do well to think more about the quotidian romance narratives that animate ... imperialist policies.”

3. *Review of scholarship; learning and teaching The Sheik; author interview*

The final section of this issue comprises items for use by teachers, scholars, students and readers, namely a review essay of scholarship on *The Sheik*, a reflection on learning and teaching the text, and an interview with an author of contemporary sheikh romance.

Amy Burge and Rachel Robinson’s review essay summarises and synthesises existing scholarship on *The Sheik*. The essay’s three sections – Context, Themes and Legacy – offer a structured outline of critical work on *The Sheik* and sheikh romance. In Context, the authors summarise historical influences on *The Sheik*, E. M. Hull’s biography, the novel’s release and reception, and the film adaptation. In Themes, the principal scholarly approaches to *The Sheik* are set out in detail: gender; race and the postcolonial; and the text’s relationship to modernism. Finally, in Legacy, the focus shifts to twentieth- and twenty-first-century sheikh romance, reviewing critical work on the hero, the heroine, abduction and sexual violence, and the desert setting. Throughout, Burge and Robinson signpost individual scholarly works and indicate key critics for each section.

In a practical and accessible piece, Eric Selinger reflects on fifteen years of teaching E. M. Hull’s *The Sheik* in the university classroom. Selinger revisits teaching materials from various course iterations, including a 2019 trans-Atlantic class collaboration with a UK university. For Selinger, the way the novel is contextualized transforms student readings of the text in positive and, sometimes, unexpected ways. Demonstrating interpretive approaches to students is an effective way, Selinger writes, to equip students with the critical skills required to engage productively with a text as complex and problematic as *The Sheik*.

The special issue closes with Elizabeth Cole’s interview with author Liz Fielding, who has authored several sheikh romances including the award-nominated *The Sheik’s Convenient Princess* (2017). In this interview, Fielding discusses reading *The Sheik* and its legacy, how living in the Middle East affected her views of sheikh romance, and how she brings realism to her sheikh novels.

[1] Contributors to this special issue vary in their spelling of sheik/sheikh. We have retained individual preferences so readers may notice variation between articles.

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