

## **Garçon Manqué: A Queer Rereading (of) *The Sheik***

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**Abstract:** This article reads E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) through the lens of queer and trans studies, centering the analysis on the beginning of the book where Diana Mayo, the main character, is portrayed as an imperial boy. Starting with a consideration of how the readership of the novel has been used to interpret *The Sheik*, I argue that a focus on a heterosexual woman reader who herself desires the novel's hero, Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, has obscured the queerness of Diana's gender. Instead, I consider how we might read Diana with a trans lens and take seriously her masculinity, paying attention to the opening of the book rather than the ending where her ordeals and developing love for Ahmed have rendered her womanly. Diana's initial masculinity crucially intersects with her English imperialism and her identification with the position of masculine power. I compare *The Sheik* to another interwar British novel with a masculine heroine—Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). While *The Well of Loneliness* places its heroine within a queer framework, it is ironically in part because of *The Sheik's* lack of positioning of Diana within any queer or trans community or identity category that the novel can be read as presenting an alternate vision of past trans joy. Finally, I consider how lingering on Diana's masculinity reveals her and Ahmed Ben Hassan as doubles of each other, each exploring the ambiguities of inheritance and upbringing in both gender and race. While some readings might then focus on what this reveals about the instabilities of gender, I end with a trans reading that instead embraces Diana's attachment to her boyhood, before the plot closes off that possibility.

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## Introduction

Near the end of E.M. Hull's bestselling 1919 novel *The Sheik*, Ahmed Ben Hassan, an Arabian sheik who has abducted and raped the English Diana Mayo, lies delirious in his tent, recovering from rescuing Diana from a rival sheik. With his longtime friend, Raoul de Saint Hubert, sitting vigil by his side, Ahmed feverishly relives the past four months with Diana. "I have not tired of you yet, you lovely little wild thing, *garçon manqué*," he mutters (Hull 239).[1]

What might it mean to take seriously this description of Diana Mayo—a *garçon manqué*, an almost but not quite boy? In the early chapters of *The Sheik*, Diana is consistently described in masculine terms, as an athletic, forceful boy. This masculine identity is firmly tied up with her asexuality—her disinterest in and refusal of male romantic and sexual interest, alongside an absence of even the suggestion of either romantic or sexual desire for women. This asexuality is broken down violently in the book and reformed through the romance plot, as Diana finds herself in love with Ahmed and, as Hull puts it, "the feminine weakness that she had despised and fought against [...] triumphed over her unexpectedly" (192). The novel ends with Diana smiling in an embrace with Ahmed, having convinced him to let her remain with him in the desert.

This is *The Sheik's* resolution: rape, love, a revelation that Ahmed is in fact by birth English (and Spanish), and marriage, to be followed in the sequel *Sons of the Sheik* (1925) by the birth of twin boys. But I want to focus here on a reading of the novel that refuses the resolution, a reading that lingers in the queer opening, the moment where Diana is an imperial boy, with all the unearned benefits that entails, free and happy. Beginning in the 1990s, scholars in queer studies (and later in trans studies) have approached canonical and non-canonical texts with a view not of recovering queer or trans characters, but of reading with queer and trans possibilities in mind. These readings have often involved the presence of the situated scholar in the act of reading the text—that is, the scholar as a queer man, a queer trans woman, and so on. These readings make visible our own investments in queer and trans pasts and texts—what Carolyn Dinshaw has called "touching across time" (36).[2] In this tradition, in this piece I read *The Sheik* from my position as a white cis lesbian. Reading Diana with a queer and trans lens, the novel takes on a different shape. The opening of the book is suffused, not for *the* reader, but for *a* reader, me, with bitter pain, because Diana is so happy and yet, I know what happens next.

Over the twentieth and twenty-first century, scholarly analysis of *The Sheik* has moved from straightforward feminist critique of its oppressive rape narrative (for instance, Cadogan), to analyses of what the book may have offered to contemporaneous female readers (for instance, Melman; Raub), alongside engagements with the imperial and racial structures of the book (for instance, Jarmakani; Blake; Teo, *Desert Passions* and "Historicizing *The Sheik*"). I wish to regressively return to a critical analysis, and its negative feelings, in order to think about *The Sheik* in a new way. In this I follow works of queer scholarship like Love and Shahani that consider the queerness of looking backwards. In this paper, as much as I love a happy ending (and I do), I want to refuse the happy ending Hull gives us and to consider what I can find in the happy beginning, what view it offers of queer gender. As such, I read against the grain of the novel's reader as she has been represented in recent scholarship on *The Sheik*—a heterosexual woman who through her

readerly desire for Ahmed shapes the meaning of the book and the meaning of Diana's journey through the plot. I argue that a focus on this reader has obscured the queerness of Diana's gender. Instead, I consider how we might read Diana with a trans lens, unpacking how her masculinity intersects with her English imperialism. This lens leads me to compare *The Sheik* to another interwar British novel with a more famously masculine heroine—Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928)—which presents an explicitly queer protagonist (who might today identify as either a butch lesbian, a trans man, or a nonbinary person) who echoes many of Diana's characteristics, but ends her novel very differently. Ironically, I suggest, it is in part *because* of *The Sheik*'s lack of positioning of Diana within any queer or trans community or identity category that the novel can be read as presenting an alternate vision of past trans joy. Finally, I consider how lingering on Diana's masculinity reveals the ways in which she and Ahmed Ben Hassan are doubles of each other, each exploring the ambiguities of inheritance and upbringing in both gender and race. While some readings might then focus on what this reveals about the instabilities of gender, I want to allow a trans reading that instead embraces Diana's attachment to her boyhood, before the plot closes off that possibility.

## A Queer Reader

E.M. Hull's *The Sheik* follows the young Diana Mayo as she takes her first independent journey into the Algerian desert. A British aristocrat, Diana has been raised in the manner of a boy by her brother after the death of their parents, spending much of her time travelling the circuits of empire with him. During her time in the desert, she is abducted by Ahmed Ben Hassan, a sheik who proceeds to hold her captive and rape her repeatedly. Diana attempts to escape numerous times, but over the course of the novel she falls in love with Ahmed. She is abducted by Ahmed's enemy Ibraheim Omair, who murders a woman in front of her. Ahmed rescues Diana, killing Ibraheim and becoming seriously injured in the process. Admitting that he loves her, Ahmed tries to send Diana away, but she convinces him that she will not live without him and remains in the desert. Along the way, Diana discovers that Ahmed is in fact not by heritage Arab, but was instead adopted by his father the sheik, and born to an aristocratic British father and Spanish mother.

Essential to much of the more recent critical analysis of *The Sheik* is a juxtaposition between "the reader" (an assumed woman who sexually desires men) and "the critic." The critic, an assumed man, disdains the novel as too sexual and violent. While *The Sheik* was also positively reviewed at the time of its publication, almost all scholarship on it quotes a negative review, whether or not their own analysis is negative. For instance, Chow (80), Blake (68), and Teo ("Historicizing *The Sheik*" 5) all cite a 1921 review describing the novel as "poisonously salacious in conception." [3] Beginning in the 1990s, new readings of the novel pointed to the reader, and specifically the female reader, as recuperating *The Sheik* for feminist readings. As Teo puts it, these readings "looked at the radical and potentially liberating aspects of sexual representations" ("Historicizing *The Sheik*" 6). In a 1992 article that argues *The Sheik* is a forerunner of current Harlequin Romances, Raub states that the novel's:

frank expression of sexuality and its exploration of the limits and scope of female power and independence struck a chord with thousands upon thousands of female readers of the period and distinguish it today as a significant work in the development of popular women's fiction. (126)

In a 1999 article examining popular discourses of sexuality in the 1920s, Chow argues that "*The Sheik* may be seen as empowering the female reader, for Ahmed transforms from a sexual brute into a tender lover" (71). Chow goes on to argue that "ultimately, it is not Diana the character but the woman reader, writer, and filmgoer in the material world who is liberated by reading these steamy passages" (73). This framing has continued into more recent analyses, as, for instance, in a 2015 article on embodiment and the space of the desert in *The Sheik*, Deal states that "the staggering success of the novel suggests there was a previously unmet need for a book which sought to provide a sexual thrill for its female readership, marking *The Sheik* out as a thematically innovative work of fiction" (76). She goes on to argue, "*The Sheik* provided a voice to this specifically female sexuality and a framework for female desire" (92-93).

These readings point to an important aspect of *The Sheik's* historical reception by both men and women and provide a valuable critical analysis of the complications of the novel as regards a certain kind of readerly desire. Yet, they also depend on the construction of a rhetorical reader who is neither representative of all readers (an impossible task, as Teo argues in *Desert Passions*, 17-18), nor based on any individual readers. In fact, in most of these analyses the only specific readers cited are male reviewers who critique the novel. The rhetorical reader is represented by the female masses, interpreted through the book's popularity and its critics' negative statements concerning the female readership. An approving male reader is unexpected by these analyses. But so is a reader outside of heterosexual cis femininity.

What does it mean to read as a critically unexpected reader? One who, while female, cannot find herself in the "specifically female sexuality" Deal references? To read as an unexpected reader is perhaps quintessentially queer. For instance, Lynch, Sternglatz, and Barot argue that "women in the queer community are accustomed to reading themselves into works of literature" (3). In a related move from her position as someone experiencing homoerotic desire, Burley argues that regardless of the sexuality of readers, we can see an unexamined homoeroticism in the romances of the 1980s and 1990s, one which is managed through "the recuperative strategies that always seem to drag popular romance back to its heterosexual moorings" (130). Rereading *The Sheik*, a book I wrote about in relation to women's popular Orientalism more than ten years ago (Taylor), from a queer perspective is a significantly different experience. While I was a lesbian then, as I am now, and a reader of much heterosexual romance then, as I am now, this book *felt* different to me. Reading *The Sheik* again with a queer lens of the 2010s, with my own greater knowledge of the flourishing of trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer frameworks of gender, I experienced an overwhelming sense that there was no way out of the problem Hull presents us with and offers her own solution to. The book began with the freedom of a rich white boy, who is also a woman, and then reminded me that all women are trapped, even those who are also boys.

Looking back from the present as a queer reader is emotionally fraught. Queer theorist and medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw has written about a "queer historical impulse"

which makes connections “between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now,” extending “the resources for self- and community building into even the distant past” (1). Nishant Shahani, likewise, is interested in the look back in queer American writing, what he calls “queer retrosexuality.” For Dinshaw, these “queer histories are made of affective relations” (12) which do not depend on an identical similarity between the past and the now, but instead involve the possibility of “new relations, new identifications, new communities with past figures who elude resemblance to us but with whom we can be connected partially by virtue of shared marginality, queer positionality” (39). Diana Mayo is a fictional character, but in this article I reach out to her based, not on our overlapping identities, but instead on queer affinities. This is not an uncomplicated affinity, as many of Diana’s unearned privileges (given to her by her whiteness, as well as her wealth) are mine as well. As Heather Love argues in *Feeling Backward*, “for groups constituted by historical injury, the challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it” (1), for as she says “the history of Western representation is littered with the corpses of gender and sexual deviants” (1). The formation of a queer affinity with *The Sheik* involves not only joy, but also sadness for the way the novel gives away Diana’s masculinity and freedom.

Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, *The Sheik* is not littered with the corpses of gender deviants (instead, the most prominent death is that of an Arab woman whose death serves as a warning to Diana). Unlike Stephen Gordon’s gender in the 1928 classic *The Well of Loneliness* (which I discuss later in this article), Diana’s queer gender is not negative. Rather, it is initially joyful. Yet Diana’s queer possibilities are foreclosed by the plot. As Burley puts it, a queer reading strategy often depends on going “against the grain” (129). Reading *The Sheik* against the grain does not require uncovering hidden queerness in the novel, or a subtextual trans history, but rather stopping before the end of the novel rewrites the beginning. The joy of the opening chapter is bittersweet, as Diana’s queer gender is text, not subtext. Reading queerly, the knowledge of the future within the book makes all the statements Diana initially makes about her happiness feel like terrible foreshadowing. The night before her departure into the desert, Diana thinks to herself, “it’s the life of lives, and it’s going to begin all over again to-morrow morning” (Hull 16). As a queer femme, I want to reach into the book and save this radiant genderqueer youth from the future I know is ahead. Instead, if I read on, I must read how, near the end of the novel, Raoul St. Hubert describes the changes Diana has undergone: “the alert, vigorous boyishness that had been so characteristic was gone. Her slim figure drooping listlessly in the big chair, her white face with the new marks of suffering on it, and her wide eyes burning with dumb misery, were all purely womanly” (243). As Love puts it, “as queer readers we tend to see ourselves as reaching back toward isolated figures in the queer past in order to rescue or save them. It is hard to know what to do with texts that resist our advances” (8). This book resists my advances precisely because it does not consider Diana’s journey a loss, but rather a gain.

I am not arguing that the focus on the contemporary cis heterosexual female readership of *The Sheik* is wrong, nor that it hasn’t produced important insights into the novel and its place as a cultural phenomenon. Rather, I point to the ways that the unexamined heterosexuality of “the female reader” and “female sexuality” guides us toward a reading of *The Sheik* that accepts the ending rather than the beginning of the book as the

“truth” of Diana’s character, gender, and sexuality. In the next section I turn to the beginning of the novel for what it tells us about Diana as an imperial boy.

## **Diana Mayo: *Garçon manqué* and imperial boy**

I want to introduce a reading of Diana that takes at face value Hull’s descriptions of her in the novel’s opening, and read Diana as a trans character. In the opening chapters of *The Sheik*, Diana Mayo is consistently described as boyish in ways particularly shaped by aristocratic white British masculinity. Her name, Diana, echoes the virginal, athletic, and homosocial Roman goddess. Diana’s gender presentation has, in scholarship on the novel, often been glossed as independence or as tomboyish (although the term is never used in the novel). For instance, in a piece on Hull’s other gender-crossing heroines, Ellen Turner describes Diana as “a haughty, white, young and independent woman” (172) and Teo describes her as “an aristocratic but tomboyish English virgin” (“Historicizing *The Sheik*” 1).

The novel opens with a reminder to the reader of Diana’s “real” sex, at a party in Biskra in French-controlled Algeria, where the elderly Lady Conway gossips about Diana’s forthcoming trip into the desert. Lady Conway considers Diana’s trip “with no chaperon or attendant of her own sex” (Hull 1) to be reckless and improper. Yet, the opening also introduces us to Diana’s masculinity, as Lady Conway’s gossip is overheard by two men who describe Diana in more male terms. One of them comments that “she was sure meant for a boy and changed at the last moment. She looks like a boy in petticoats, a damned pretty boy—and a damned haughty one” (2). At this point one of two uses of “queer” in the book appears, as one man asks the other about the rumors surrounding Diana’s family: “There’s a queer streak in the family, isn’t there? I heard somebody yapping about it the other night. Father was mad and blew his brains out, so I was told” (3).[4] This familial queerness is associated with both an excess and an absence of love. Diana’s father, Sir John Mayo, killed himself after her mother (unnamed and simply identified by her kin terms: “her mother” and “his wife”) died giving birth to Diana. Diana was then raised by her 19-year-old brother Aubrey, a young man for whom “the problem of bringing up a girl child was too much trouble to be solved, so he settled the difficulty by treating her as if she was a boy” (3). Aubrey himself has a queer subtext.[5] One of the gossiping men describes him as “not a bad chap underneath if you can swallow his peculiarities” (5). Like Diana he is uninterested in romance. Yet Diana is going into the desert “alone” (that is, surrounded by only male Arab employees) because Sir Aubrey is going to America to find a wife—a duty he is fulfilling only because of his obligation to the family name.

While everyone who describes Diana’s upbringing seems at least faintly disapproving, Diana herself is described as very happy. When we first meet her through these two men’s eyes, she is described as “vividly alive,”

with the easy, vigorous carriage of an athletic boy, her small head poised proudly. Her scornful mouth and firm chin showed plainly an obstinate determination, and her deep blue eyes were unusually clear and steady. The long curling black lashes that shaded her eyes and the dark eyebrows were a

foil to the thick crop of loose, red-gold curls that she wore short, clubbed about her ears. (4)

Her boyishness is characterized in terms of physical ease—"the easy, vigorous carriage of an athletic boy"—and mental vigor—"an obstinate determination." She is confident, perhaps overconfident, in the way of a rich young man. She is both beautiful *and* boyish.

Diana's masculinity is often situated by scholars within post-World War One shifts in gender relations in Britain. Laura Doan, cited often in this work, argues that in contrast to later periods, in the 1920s masculine dress on a woman did not stably mean "lesbian" to the British public and in fact "did *not* register any one stable spectatorial effect" (664). Masculine dress was a fashion trend in the style of flappers. Masculine dress was also practiced by individuals "passing" as men (that is, those assigned female at birth, who might identify today as trans men). As Oram argues in her book on coverage of gender-crossing in early twentieth century British newspapers, between 1900 and the 1920s newspapers represented working class "passing women" as "exciting, sensational figures, yet applauded them for successfully following what were quite conservative ideals of masculine behavior" (17). Masculine clothing was also a fashion taken up by various queer women (who might today identify as lesbians, bisexuals, butch women, or trans men) (see Doan; Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*). As Doan discusses, for instance, in the early 1920s, author Radclyffe Hall's clothing, which might later be read as lesbian, could alternately be read as fashionably modern and distinctly of her class (688).

This polysemy may be one factor in a gap which seems obvious to today's reader—while Diana is clearly boyish and masculine in the novel, there is no suggestion or even faintest rumour of her desiring women. Scholars, too, have exclusively considered Diana within the framework of heterosexual women. For instance, Deal identifies Diana with the flapper, arguing that:

her association with this fashion positions Diana within a place of relative freedom in terms of her gendered identity and the societal expectations associated with that. However, the female appropriation of the masculine did not constitute a complete liberty; it remained fundamentally a performance, restricted to clothes and hairstyles. (77-78)

An emphasis on fashion, however, overlooks the fact that Diana's masculinity is not exclusively, or even predominantly, one of fashion. Her clothing is not, for the time, exceptionally masculine. At the start of her journey she changes from riding clothes into a "dress of clinging jade-green silk" (24), to the disapproval of her brother. Beyond fashion, the novel emphasizes Diana's participation in sport and travel as central to her masculinity. As Turner describes it, Hull's fiction, including novels she wrote beyond *The Sheik*, is part of "the post-war fashion which adopted and played with notions of androgyny" (172). While drawing on Laura Doan's work on the ambiguities of 1920s cross-dressing and androgyny, Turner argues that Hull's "portrayal of women dressed as men apparently reinforces gender binaries rather than breaking them down" (172), without ever directly referencing lesbians or trans men. That is, masculinity in Hull's work, Turner argues, is predominantly an expression of women's search for power, rather than gender identity (179).

I want to examine Diana's masculinity beyond a historically situated cissexual and heterosexual female androgyny. I am not suggesting here that Diana was *written* as a trans man, a non-binary person, or a butch woman (butch being a social category beyond simple masculinity). These are present-day categories which, while they describe a range of practices that were indeed in existence in early twentieth century Britain, were not in use in 1919. Yet, I want to draw on what Halberstam calls a "perversely presentist model of historical analysis" (*Female Masculinity* 52), which while not "simply projecting contemporary understandings back in time" instead applies "insights from the present to conundrums of the past" (52-53). Can we read Diana *into* both trans and queer literary history, then?

Reading Diana into trans and queer literary history requires revising both straight (if one could call it that) and queer theory's interpretation of gender. In the 1990s queer scholar Judith Butler argued "the subject of gender 'neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves'" (Butler quoted in Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* 119). From this perspective, while Diana's masculinity has been developed in response to her brother Aubrey's desire for a companion, her womanhood (as Hull understands it) likewise emerges in response to Ahmed's desire for a companion.[6] Neither gender expression, in a Butlerian sense, is necessarily more "true" than the other; both emerge from the "matrix of gender relations" and from Diana's relationships with others (mostly men). An analysis of this type, however, disregards the degree to which trans identity is not simply a performance upon the body. As Heaney argues in an examination of the trans feminine within modernist novels and queer studies, "texts from the 1970s by Barthes and Foucault that provided the conceptual scaffolding for Queer Theory proper [...] installed the trans woman as the proof of the social construction of the gender binary" (13-14). In literary readings, then, the trans feminine often became a figure standing in for gender construction, rather than "a category with its own history and theoretical insights" (205). This critique can apply to readings of the trans masculine in the 1920s, where trans masculinity is read as revealing something about women's oppression, rather than something about trans social histories. While I will later examine how Hull juxtaposes Diana's polysemous gender with Ahmed's polysemous race, I don't wish to read Diana's gender as simply a commentary on the construction of gender. Her boyhood in the first part of the novel is *also* about her own masculinity. Her gender is not fully volitional—no one's is. But it is fully felt by Diana as herself. As her upbringing is described, "from the first Diana had responded gallantly, throwing herself heart and soul into the arduous, strenuous life mapped out for her" (20).

Diana's masculinity is also enmeshed with her asexuality. Diana begins the novel uninterested in love or sex. Some scholarship reads this initial removal from desire as negative, remedied through the course of the novel. Deal, for instance, analyses Diana's progression through the novel and sexual involvement with Ahmed as remedying her initial pathological state in two ways: first, she moves from an adolescent position to an adult one; second, she moves from one simply desired to one desiring (91). This movement is only necessary if we accept the novel's ending as revealing that sex is inevitable and desirable. Queer scholars like Halberstam, for instance, have argued that for participants in queer subcultures, the "separation between youth and adulthood quite simply does not hold" and we might instead see the possibilities of something instead called "queer time" ("What's that Smell?" 328). This, Halberstam argues, might help us "challenge our notion of

adulthood as reproductive maturity” (“What’s that Smell?” 321). While Diana’s brother must marry, there are no such constraints on Diana. The novel must go to the extreme of imprisoning her to create such constraints.

In fact, Diana’s removal from the heterosexual market is integral to her masculinity. She is almost universally desired by men. Yet she has no interest in men (or women) as romantic partners. For her to desire men from her position as a boy is not considered a possibility at the novel’s beginning.[7] She finds love and sex distasteful: “Love did not exist for her; from even the thought of passion she shrank instinctively with the same fastidiousness as she did from actual physical uncleanness” (Hull 40). Yet Diana does not see her own lack of interest in love as a negative but rather as a positive. It is this lack of interest that enables her freedom. As she describes it when she refuses the attentions of one young man:

I was brought up as a boy, my training was hard. Emotion and affection have been barred out of my life.[8] I simply don’t know what they mean. I don’t want to know. I am very content with my life as it is. Marriage for a woman means the end of independence, that is, marriage with a man who is a man, in spite of all that the most modern woman may say. I have never obeyed any one in my life; I do not wish to try the experiment. (11)

Boyhood means independence. And a marriage with a man who is “not” a man is not considered an option. In a discussion of stone butches (that is, butch lesbians who only take on a giving role in sex, rather than a receiving role), Halberstam has argued that nonperformance “signifies as heavily as performance and reveals the ways in which performativity itself is as much a record of what a body will not do as what it might do” (*Female Masculinity* 126). Diana’s gender performance is as much about her refusal to participate in heterosexual romance and sex as it is about her participation in men’s activities. Yet, while she is removed from the heterosexual market, she is not removed from society. Diana is described as “popular with everybody” (11). She behaves “like a younger brother” (11) to Sir Aubrey, and as she says goodbye to him before her journey into the desert, wishes him good luck with his own entry into the marriage market, adding that she will “roll up in time to be best man” (32).

Affective projects of recovery or “touching” the past at times seem to require a wholly desirable character or person to be recovered. Diana is not that. Her masculinity is an unquestioned white imperial masculinity (see, for instance, Teo’s discussion of Diana’s whiteness, “Historicizing *The Sheik*”). Diana’s masculinity is a classed masculinity that depends on her wealth and aristocratic background. As Oram has shown, in the 1920s, white working class trans men were not necessarily ostracized from their communities, even when discovered.[9] Yet wealth did shape the acceptable boundaries and possibilities of masculine behavior. Halberstam has argued in discussing Radclyffe Hall and her partner Una Troubridge, who both presented in a masculine fashion, that for British women in the early twentieth century, “masculine identification with social impunity required money and social status” (*Female Masculinity* 87). Diana has both money and social status and, crucially, she has no mother or father to oblige. Despite the gossips, she is free in a way shaped largely by her wealth and status. Yet she disregards her wealth while making full use of it. As Hull writes,

that her happiness was due to the wealth that had enabled her to indulge in the sports and constant travel that made up the sum total of her desires never occurred to her. That what composed her pleasure in life was possible only because she was rich enough to buy the means of gratifying it did not enter her head. She thought of her wealth no more than of her beauty. (38-39)

Both of her inheritances (wealth and beauty) shape the life Diana can live. Wealth enables and shapes the form of her masculinity, but she disregards it in a way that allows her to continue taking only herself (and occasionally her brother) into account.

Diana's freedom, thus, is an imperial one that depends on the service of many others, both imperial subjects and members of the British serving class. Diana finds joy in travelling imperial routes—America, India, and now Algeria, which, while under French control, was also of British colonial interest. In India, she and her brother travelled with a large tent and many servants (24). Ahmed first appears, as we later realize, as a voice singing the lyric “Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar.” Diana reacts with enchantment to this song, leaning forward, “her head raised, listening intently, with shining eyes” (13). Scholars like Garland have argued this incident foregrounds Diana's conflicted relationship with sexual desire: she disavows it, but her reaction shows her underlying interest. Yet, the song also reminds her of India and, Diana argues, of beauty rather than emotion. As Teo points out, the song is “the popular Edwardian ‘Kashmiri Song’ from *Four Indian Love Lyrics*, composed by Amy Woodfore-Finden” (*Desert Passions* 128). Diana's joy is in part the joy of the British Empire. As she describes to a young man whose proposal she rejects, “the happiest times of my life have been spent camping in America and India, and I have always wanted the desert more than either of them” (15). In this, she is not uncommon. In Britain at the time, the North African desert evoked “memories of European women who had found in the desert a space to be free from European conventions and sexual and social behavior” (Teo, “Historicizing *The Sheik*” 15). Diana is *not* free of European conventions and behavior, however; she is simply inhabiting a man's position within those conventions. For instance, during a battle of wills with Mustafa Ali, her guide, Diana snaps her fingers at him, “a trick she had learned from a French officer in Biskra” (41).

Diana's white masculinity, thus, also depends on her distance from Arab womanhood. Teo has argued that in the late eighteenth century European Orientalist romance shifted away from giving Muslim women central roles, instead founding narratives on a white European female character's distinction (*Desert Passions* 47). Unlike real life figures like Lawrence of Arabia or Isabelle Eberhardt (see Garber; Abdel-Jaouad) who were famous for dressing as Arabs, Diana is not concerned with embracing Eastern masculinity or femininity—or what Garber calls “cultural masquerade” (651). Instead, Diana constructs her identity as distinct from white femininity, brown masculinity, *and* brown femininity. Arguing with her brother about her decision to travel into the desert “alone,” against his wishes, Diana voices white womanhood and brown masculinity in order to disavow them. “Do I fall on your neck and say, ‘Take me back, dear Guardian; I will be good,’” she tells her brother disdainfully, “or do I prostrate myself at your feet and knock my head on your boots, and whine, in the language of the country, ‘Hearing is obeying?’” (Hull 31). Diana's citation of these voices creates distance from them, constructing herself

as equal to, rather than subservient to, white men. She is not the white woman who would fall on her brother's neck and promise to be good, nor the Arab man who would "whine" and obey.

Likewise, Diana's initial distance from womanhood is even more so a distance from Arab womanhood. As she enters the desert, a caravan passes by her and she muses about the lives of the women:

one or two of the camels carried huddled figures, swathed and shapeless with a multitude of coverings, that Diana knew must be women. The contrast between them and herself was almost ridiculous. It made her feel stifled even to look at them. She wondered what their lives were like, if they ever rebelled against the drudgery and restrictions that were imposed upon them, if they ever longed for the freedom that she was reveling in, or if custom and usage were so strong that they had no thoughts beyond the narrow life they led. (35)

The distinction Diana makes between herself and Arab women echoes that made by real-life explorer Eberhardt. As Abdel-Jaouad puts it, Eberhardt

saw in the Arab woman, not her alter-ego but her antitype: 'Yes, indeed,' she wrote to her Slimane [her husband], 'I am your wife before God and Islam. But I am not a vulgar Fatma or an ordinary Aicha. I am also your brother Mahmoud, the servant of God and Djilani first, rather than the servant of her husband that every Arab woman is [...]' (Lettres intimes, 336-37) (103)

Diana's dismissal of Arab women also centres around marriage:

For a Western woman it was bad enough, but for the women of the East, mere slaves of the passions of the men who owned them, unconsidered, disregarded, reduced to the level of animals, the bare idea made her quiver and bring her hand down heavily on her horse's neck. (35-36)

Here, we are reminded that Diana is the one who controls an animal, not the animal who is controlled. The East is, initially, a space that distances Diana from femininity even further, as she refuses commonality with Arab women.[10] Instead she attempts to maintain her existing power and privilege as an imperial boy.

## **Diana and Stephen: Reading with *The Well of Loneliness***

Reading *The Sheik* queerly also means putting the novel into conversation with works it is not usually considered alongside: other novels with masculine heroines. In this section, I compare Diana Mayo with Stephen Gordon, the protagonist of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), published almost ten years after *The Sheik*. *The Well of Loneliness* has been considered an essential work in lesbian (Lynch et al; Newton) and trans (Prosser;

Moore) literary history, with Stephen Gordon as a “prototypical butch lesbian” (Lynch et al 4) or, as Prosser describes Stephen, “less a manly lesbian than a man *manqué*” (136).[11] Hall and Hull were writing at the same time—in fact, both were born in 1880. Their fiction is very different in content and style, but it is also their biographical differences—Hall is a well-known lesbian, while Hull is often described, if misleadingly, as “the retiring wife of a Derbyshire farmer” (Melman 90; see Teo “Historicizing *The Sheik*” 9 for a fuller context)—that have shaped the way we consider their novels as part, or not part, of queer and trans literary history.

Three interrelated elements shape each novel’s interpretation—the author, the text, and its apparatus. Hall’s text has been read within our knowledge of the author as a public figure in a relationship with a woman. *The Well of Loneliness* engages explicitly with developing theories of homosexuality, as well as earlier theories of inversion that linked same-sex desire to gender identity. The theory of inversion considered, for instance, a desire for women and a sense of oneself as masculine as intrinsically intertwined. The 1928 edition opens with a brief commentary by sexologist Havelock Ellis, describing the book as:

the first English novel which presents, in a completely faithful and uncompromising form, one particular aspect of sexual life as it exists among us to-day. The relation of certain people—who while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest aptitudes—to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and still unsolved problems. (n.p.)

The novel was the subject of an obscenity trial in 1928 and subsequently banned in the UK. *The Sheik* has no such apparatus; neither the author nor the discourse surrounding the text lead us to view it as belonging in the same category as *The Well of Loneliness*. The novel itself, in contrast to *The Well of Loneliness*, is not explicitly “about” either lesbians or trans men. Yet, considering the two within the same frame can reveal something about the visions of gender in both texts.

Diana and Stephen share many characteristics. Both are aristocratic British women who have been expected by their family in some way to be a boy and who embrace that expectation. While neither novel offers a future for trans men or masculine women, the trajectories of the two characters and the framing of their existence reveal two different views of transmasculinity. *The Well of Loneliness* follows the life of Stephen Gordon, an upper-class Briton. Stephen’s father felt in the womb that Stephen was a boy, and he raises Stephen in many ways “like” a son and not a daughter (Hall 63). Stephen, too, feels herself to be masculine-longing, in her youth, to be a hero like Nelson (13). She finds herself out of place in the local society, especially after the death of her father, and is exiled from her beloved home when her mother discovers Stephen’s affair with a married woman. Later in the novel, in search of an artistic revitalization, Stephen goes to Paris, enters a relationship with a woman, but then breaks it off in an attempt to be “noble.”

Stephen’s gendered existence in *The Well of Loneliness* mixes joy with sadness. Stephen is full of “an urgent necessity to love” (10) and finds joy in her masculine country pursuits like horse-riding. Her masculinity brings her closer to her beloved father, but separates her from her mother (22). As Prosser puts it,

Stephen's relation to maleness is repeatedly framed as a 'should have been,' the conditional perfect of the modal auxiliary (what ought to have been—the mood of transsexual loss) returning at key moments to remind us of the sexed absence that undergirds her story. (158-59)

Stephen desperately loves Merton, her family estate, but ultimately leaves rural life to be exiled to, as Love puts it, "a life of bohemian wandering" (109). At 18, she is "a social disaster" (Hall 80), who has yet to learn "that the loneliest place in this world is the no-man's land of sex" (85). As Love argues, "Hall describes the situation of the inverted as radically unhoused" (109).

In contrast there is very little angst surrounding Diana's masculinity in *The Sheik*, bringing her portrayal closer perhaps to the working-class trans men both Oram and Skidman discuss. Her boyhood is enabled by her freedom, rather than exclusion, from domestic ties, both parental (as both her parents die at her birth, while Stephen's father dies as she reaches maturity and mother never understands her) and English. Stephen's masculinity makes her a perfect "country gentleman" (Love 109), but Diana's is enabled by her absence from the domestic space of England. In fact, it is Diana's fight with a boy who tries to kiss her that leads her brother to take her with him on his imperial journeys. Diana is completely unconcerned with England as a domestic space, but deeply invested in English imperialism and the English as a white race. Both she and her brother are indeed "radically unhoused," but this is not an exclusion. Rather, they travel as part of the circulating sets of white American, English, and French colonial society.

At the centre of both novels is the question of love and sexuality for a transmasculine person, or a masculine woman. The answer is shaped by the ten-year difference in the books' publication, the authors' positions, and also the generic conventions of the two novels. In an influential article on *The Well of Loneliness*, Esther Newton argues that in Britain in the early decades of the twentieth century "the old feminist movement began to split along the heterosexual/homosexual divide" (564). A central question of this split was: "If women were to develop a lustful sexuality, with whom and in what social context were they to express it?" (564). Early on in both novels, Stephen and Diana each have an encounter with a male friend who unexpectedly reveals his love. Stephen feels terror, repulsion, and outrage (Hall 107). Diana, likewise, rejects the man's proposal but wishes to remain friends. At the time, Stephen doesn't understand her own lack of interest in men. Her father identifies it as inversion (through his reading of books by sexologists, which Stephen later finds in his study), but he doesn't tell her or her mother (126). As the book progresses, Stephen begins to understand herself as someone who loves women romantically and who is in some ways like gay men, lesbians, and other inverts. This identification with a socially excluded group of people frames the novel's perception that happiness is impossible for Stephen.

Diana's attitudes, in contrast, are not framed within a perspective of her gender as an innate flaw that joins her with other gender nonconformists. In some ways because *The Sheik* does *not* understand its heroine within a framework of identity and social exclusion it begins free of those particular expectations—offering (at least initially) an alternate past vision of trans joy. Ironically, it is a joy that depends on the lack of a trans or queer social or political category, identity, or community. Emily Skidmore argues that while "most LGBT history has utilized the optic of community as one of its main organizing structures" (66),

in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century “many trans men did not seek out communities of similar individuals, nor did they all flock to urban centers to escape close-knit agrarian communities” (179). Rather, like the fictional Diana, some of them “excelled at embodying not simply masculinity but a particular type of masculine identity: that of the white, economically independent citizen” (69). Placing *The Sheik* beside *The Well of Loneliness* throws into relief the role of (fictional) community identification or lack thereof.

This distinction can be seen in unexpected echoes between the two novels concerning the position of the fox hunted by English gentry. Each novel uses the quintessentially English activity of fox-hunting to explore power, inclusion, and empathy. While Stephen’s father is alive, she is embedded in the life of rural gentry, if unable to fully fit in due to her gender. Stephen is an excellent rider and receives the “brush” (that is tail) of the fox at her first hunt. After the death of her father, Stephen finds herself identifying with the fox during a hunt, feeling that “there’ll be two of us who are utterly alone, with every man’s hand against us” (Hall 137). Without the male familial connection, Stephen becomes disembedded from the rural community—the hunter’s position is no longer available to her, only the fox’s. This exclusion accompanies her developing empathy, however. Later in the novel, when she’s become embedded in a queer community in Paris, Stephen meets a young gay man in a bar, suffering from social exclusion due to his queerness, who sees her similarity to himself and calls her sister. Initially repulsed, she then recalls the fox hunt and that moment of empathy:

all of a sudden she perceived the eyes, and the memory came of a hapless creature, distracted, bleeding from bursting lungs, hopelessly pursued, glancing this way, then that, as though looking for something, some refuge, some hope—and the thought: ‘It’s looking for God who made it.’ (Hall 449)

As Love puts it, “Stephen cannot finally renounce her identity group; in the end her repulsion turns to shame. She reluctantly avows her bond with him” (103). This identity group is queer people, rather than men.

In contrast, Diana finds herself less metaphorically in the position of a hunted fox as she makes an effort to escape Ahmed’s kidnapping attempt. She does not empathize with the fox:

Diana’s mouth closed firmly and a new keenness came into her steady eyes. It was one thing to go back voluntarily to make terms with the men who had attacked her party; it was quite another thing to be deliberately chased across the desert by an Arab freebooter. Her obstinate chin was almost square. Then the shadow of a laugh flickered in her eyes and curved her mouth. New experiences were crowding in upon her to-day. She had often wondered what the feelings of a hunted creature were. She seemed in a fair way of finding out. She had always stoutly maintained that the fox enjoyed the run as much as the hounds; that remained to be proved, but, in any case, she would give this hound a run for his money. (Hull 50)

Diana’s masculinity has not excluded her from British society. Instead, it has remained aligned with power and privilege. While finding herself in the position of the fox, Diana still

takes the perspective of the hunter. Crucially, she does not consider Ahmed to take the position of the human hunters, but rather the hounds, setting him as an Arab outside of British society. The position of the fox becomes that of woman, a natural position (of disempowerment), rather than (as in *The Well of Loneliness*) that of one excluded from society through no fault of their own. The beginning of *The Sheik*, in contrast to *The Well of Loneliness*, offers a past trans masculine joy that depends on a lack of trans identity and queer community. Instead, joy is fully aligned with mainstream masculine power. Yet Diana's hold on that power is fleeting.

## The doubles: Nature and nurture

While *The Well of Loneliness* considers that there may be an innate masculinity a woman could be born with, *The Sheik* vacillates between visions of gender as innate or learned. Scholars have considered how *The Sheik* interrogates the source of racial identity—blood or culture—but they have less frequently considered how the novel similarly explores the nature of gender identity.[12] Diana and Ahmed form a pair whose progress through the novel each raise a series of questions: is membership in a social category—race or gender—innate in the body and mind, inherited from family, learned from family and friends, made in relation to others, or chosen? Diana's questions surround gender, while Ahmed's surround race. The plot resolves these questions by suggesting the truths of Diana's gender and Ahmed's race each lie in their birth rather than upbringing—thus avoiding both miscegenation and homosexuality. Yet the novel as a whole allows for an ambiguity and openness not maintained by the plot, where race and gender can be “true” because of upbringing and preferred practices. Diana is a woman, but also a boy. Ahmed is English (and white), but also an Arab. These categories of race and gender are also not separate. As I discussed earlier, gender is always raced in the novel. Diana's masculinity is specifically white and English, while Ahmed's masculinity is framed as specifically Arab.

Examinations of race in the novel have centred on Ahmed. As Susan Blake argues, “in the context of early twentieth-century racial discourse, Hull's story [...] poses the key racial questions of its time: What is an Arab? What is race? How should the races interrelate?” (75). After Diana's rescue from Ahmed's enemy, the French writer Raoul tells Diana the story of Ahmed's birth. Ahmed's parents, an English lord and his Spanish wife, were travelling through the North African desert, even though his mother was heavily pregnant. His father was a physically abusive alcoholic and after a particularly horrific incident, Ahmed's mother fled into the desert, where she was found by the old Sheik Ahmed, who fell in unrequited love with her. She died while her son was still quite young and the Sheik raised Ahmed as his own son, and as an Arab. When he was fifteen, Ahmed was sent to Paris to be educated, then to England, and back to Paris, in part under the care of Raoul's father. The life he led, then, was one of an elite colonial subject—educated in European centres, but eventually returning to rule his father Sheik Ahmed's tribe. When Ahmed discovered his birth parentage, it filled him with a hatred of the English. As Blake has argued, the book puts forward two interpretations of Ahmed's identity: Raoul believes him to be English and Diana, even after the story is told, understands him as Arab (75-78).

The novel's racism requires that we understand Ahmed as in some ways English, in order to accept his marriage to Diana. Yet he does not give up any of the things that mark him as an Arab man by practice—his position as Sheik, his dress, his refusal of his English father.[13]

Diana's family history echoes Ahmed's quite closely. She is born to a father with an unhealthy relationship with her mother. Diana's father is not abusive. Rather, when Diana's mother dies in childbirth, he kills himself. Diana is then raised by her brother as something she "isn't" —that is, as a boy. The raising of both Diana and Ahmed, then, is given to men—Diana's brother and the old Sheik. Women are removed from the picture of the formation of people (and from the picture in general—there are few female characters in *The Sheik*) and that work is given to men. Ahmed learns European manliness too through men—Raoul's father and his experience at university. At the same time, the issue of familial (rather than racial or gender) inheritance raises its head. Near the end of the novel, Diana threatens to shoot herself if Ahmed makes her leave him, nearly reenacting her father's suicide (294). Ahmed's violent behavior with Diana echoes that of his English biological father, even while it is also framed as particularly Arab. For neither of them does this inheritance flow from their mothers. Both learned and inherited behavior flow from men exclusively. Learning cultural womanhood is an impossibility for Diana—instead she learns womanhood through the desert and her sexual ordeal. Hull seems to suggest that womanhood is more natural (or at least desirable)—"she was far more beautiful now than she had ever been" (271)—while at the same time suggesting that womanly behavior is by no means inevitable, as it can be replaced by boyish nature with the right kind of manly imperial English upbringing. When Diana becomes more "womanly," she both loses some of her Englishness tied to her masculinity (as colonial racism in the plot dictates that she will no longer belong to English society) and retains it as she becomes an English "ruler" alongside Ahmed. Mirroring her own attitude, Ahmed also does not let go of Diana's ambiguity, describing her as a *garçon manqué*.

While the novel ultimately attempts to stabilize both race and gender, it does not. One interpretation is that it points to what Butler has made clear, that the

disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain. The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to flow from gender. (172-73)

The novel stabilizes womanhood in the interests of heterosexual romance and in the interests of the regulation of sexuality (and its racialized regulation, if we stand with the plot). Yet, as I've discussed earlier, I want to turn away from this critique of the construction of gender to end with an embrace of the deeply-felt personal attachments of gender. Diana begins the novel as a joyful boy. This is the pleasure and the difficulty of rereading *The Sheik* queerly. Hull opens up the possibility of gender that is not restricted to the assignment of sex at birth. Diana is "a girl who was a girl by accident of birth only" (21). And yet, Hull pulls away from this possibility, as she does with Ahmed's race and the possibility of marriage across the race line.

But if I linger at the beginning, and this time read against the grain, I can imagine a different progression. In the middle of the novel, in the midst of her captivity, after she has fallen in love with Ahmed, Diana reads one of Raoul de Saint Hubert's novels and asks him, "Do you think there really exists such a man as you have drawn—a man who could be as tender, as unselfish, as faithful as your hero?" (184). In context, this is a bitter conversation, as Diana tells Raoul that "the men who have most intimately touched my life have not known the meaning of the word tenderness" (184). The conversation ends with her asking Raoul to be her friend, as he is Ahmed's friend, while Raoul realizes that he is in love with her but does not reveal it. The implicit man addressed here is Ahmed—can he be tender, unselfish, faithful? But another way of reading this question is that Diana is talking about herself. Could she be a man who loves? This is where I end, with a vision of Diana as a man who loves, not necessarily sexually or even romantically, but one who could learn to love a fox she's chased and become a tender man herself.

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[1] Loosely translated from the French, almost a boy, or someone who has just missed being a boy, or who has tried and failed to be a boy.

[2] While there is overlap between queer and trans studies, the two are not synonymous. See Stryker; Heaney; and Benavente & Gill-Peterson for discussions of the relationships between them. See also, for instance, Cameron Awkward-Rich on the relationships between transmasculinity and feminism. At times there is slippage in my usage of "queer reading," as I read as a queer woman the character of Diana within a trans frame.

[3] I have been unable to locate a copy of this review, but it is cited as appearing in *The Literary Review*, 5 March 1921. Reviews at the time, however, were not uniformly negative. For instance, a 1 May 1921 review in the *New York Times* criticizes the premise of the novel but writes that "as E. M. Hull tells it the story undoubtedly does grip the reader." An 8 May 1921 review in the *New York Tribune* describes it as "easily one of the best adventure novels of the season."

[4] The other use occurs on page 101 describing the voice of Ahmed's white French manservant while Ahmed is breaking a dangerous horse: "Gaston looked at her quickly. 'Try, Madame?' he repeated in a queer voice. 'Yes, he will try.'"

[5] A full discussion of Aubrey's queerness is beyond this article's scope, but like Diana's it is a specifically white aristocratic asexual one. Unlike Diana, he is less interpretable within a trans framework.

[6] That anyone a man desires is, naturally, a woman is a requirement of the heterosexual matrix. There is more to be said about the queer possibilities of this relationship, especially given the Orientalist association of gay masculinity with the East. In the context of the 1921 film adaptation, see Garber's discussion of gay subtext (640-41) and Potter's discussion of Valentino's "specific queer appeal for his female audiences"

(272). Doan has argued that “some Modern Girls did pass (in some sense of the word) as boys by becoming, perhaps inadvertently, the object of male homoerotic desire” (675).

[7] See footnote 6 on the queer possibilities of this dynamic.

[8] This association of emotion and affection with womanhood is ironic as at the beginning of the novel men express all the emotion.

[9] This acceptance was shaped by race and racialization, as is evident in Oram’s discussion of how the coverage of Paul Downing, a trans black American in London, drew on racial stereotypes and the racist tropes of minstrelsy (19, 23, 103-04). Skidmore, too, discusses how race shaped the coverage of trans men in turn of the twentieth century United States.

[10] The film adaption *The Sheik* (1921), in contrast, has Diana dress as an Arab woman in order to gain access to the casino in Biskra. In the film, then, Ahmed first sees her in a feminine guise, while in the book he sees her in her usual boyish style.

[11] A suggestive coincidence in choice of terms.

[12] See Amy Burge for an examination of Orientalism and gender as frameworks of difference in Orientalist romance in both the Middle Ages and contemporary sheik romances, if not specifically *The Sheik*.

[13] Hull returned to this theme in her sequel, *Sons of the Sheik* (1925), where the twin sons of Diana and Ahmed are separated and one raised in England and the other in the Algerian desert.

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