

Let's Not Get Carried Away by *The Sheik*

Laura Vivanco

Published online: December 2020

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* is, unquestionably, a bestseller which left a mark on popular romance. It is debatable, however, whether "*The Sheik* is the ur-romance novel of the twentieth century." Like many bestsellers it seems to have drawn on a variety of genres and its hybrid nature could account for its success while making it less than representative of popular romance novels of the period. In turn, its longevity and popularity have perhaps obscured the rich variety of its contemporaries. Berta Ruck's *A Land-Girl's Love Story*, also published in 1919, serves as a useful counterpoint to *The Sheik* with regards to both style and content. Whereas *The Sheik* is very much escapist in nature, Ruck hews more closely to reality while addressing the same contemporary anxieties around gender which make their presence felt in Hull's novel. Hull's tale of desert love is undeniably dramatic and influential but Ruck's perhaps surprising attitudes towards gender and courtship may serve as an incentive to widen our travels in genre history.

About the Author: Dr. Laura Vivanco is the author of *Faith, Love, Hope and Popular Romance Fiction* (2020), *Pursuing Happiness: Reading American Romance as Political Fiction* (Tirril, Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, 2016), *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Tirril, Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, 2011) and *Death in Fifteenth-Century Castile: Ideologies of the Elites* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2004), and the co-editor of *Love, Language, Place, and Identity in Popular Culture: Romancing the Other* (Lexington Books, 2020). She blogs at both Teach Me Tonight (www.teachmetonight.blogspot.com) and her own website (www.vivanco.me.uk).

Keywords: Berta Ruck, gender, genre, social attitudes, *The Sheik*

E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* is, unquestionably, a bestseller which left its mark on popular romance fiction and "has stubbornly refused to pass into obscurity" (Turner 185). It is debatable, however, whether "*The Sheik* is the ur-romance novel of the twentieth century" (Regis, *Natural* 115). Indeed, it is possible its success was in fact due to its differences from other romances of its time.

In 1925 when J. D. Beresford made “a little list of some of the typical big successes of recent years” (56), they placed *The Sheik* alongside Florence Barclay’s *The Rosary* (1909) and Ethel M. Dell’s *The Way of an Eagle* (1912). In his work on bestsellers, Clive Bloom states that Dell’s “influence on women’s romance is still evident and can be seen clearly in the ‘sexier’ women’s writers of a later age, but also in works like E. M. Hull’s *The Sheik*” (135). He also discusses Charles Garvice, whose long and highly successful career was drawing to a close as Hull’s novel burst on to the scene. As a romance author who “published more than one hundred novels, selling over seven million copies worldwide by 1914” (Sewell Matter 454), Garvice’s contribution to the genre at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century deserves recognition. Other prolific romance authors of the period were Effie Adelaide Rowlands, Ruby Ayres and Berta Ruck, all of whose long and extremely successful careers began before Hull’s and continued well after the publication of *The Sheik*: Rowlands “produced over 200 novels” (Bloom 128); Ayres’s last romance appeared in the 1950s, with reprints appearing “well into the 1960’s and 1970’s” (*Twentieth Century* 40); while Ruck, “a name to be reckoned with in the 1920s, constantly advertised and, as the *Edinburgh Review* noted in 1922, ‘on every bookstall’” (Maunder 35), had her final romance published in 1967.

Martin Hipsky, in his study of modernism and popular romance in the UK between 1885 and 1925, notes the singularity of Hull’s novel, writing:

While Hull’s novel represents an instance of the kind of women’s romance novel that would come to dominate the paperback markets of future decades, we should remember that *The Sheik* was, in its moment, unique – and not only because of its sexual explicitness. (286)

This uniqueness may be due to the way in which Hull combined various pre-existing elements. Scott McCracken has observed that “bestselling titles are often hybrid genres, combining several elements of popular narrative” (40), suggesting that a defining feature of “the bestselling title [...] is its ability to integrate several popular genres” (42). According to Billie Melman, “[f]or contemporaries, the novels of E. M. Hull [...] were [...] written to a recognisable formula, known by the synonymous terms ‘desert passion’ story, ‘desert romance’ and ‘Eastern romance’” (90). The review in *The World’s News*, for example, described *The Sheik* as “a romance of the desert, reminiscent here and there of Robert Hichens in his best style” (29). Hichens,

writing in the early 1900s, [...] first made a romantic speciality out of deserts. His books – *The Garden of Allah* (1904), *The Call of the Blood* (1906), *The Spell of Egypt* (1910), *In the Wilderness* (1917) – though they were called romances, had only a minimal story-line and love interest, usually of a sentimental kind, and the real appeal was his revelation of desert mysteries, and the glimpse he offered of Egypt’s ‘sober eternal beauty’, and of ‘the deep desires and yearning hunger of the heart and the imagination’ of the desert. (Anderson 181-82)

Hull’s text can also be categorised as “a romance novel which incorporates and romanticises pornographic tropes for a female audience” (McAlister 24). In addition, it

quite literally integrates the poetry of Adela Florence Nicolson into its prose. One of Nicolson's most famous poems is the "Kashmiri Song," which seems to describe a "risqué interracial liaison" (Ghuman 185), was set to music by Amy Woodforde-Finden (Mabilat 151) and is sung by Ahmed in *The Sheik*. Nicolson, whose work was published under the pseudonym Laurence Hope, "created for herself a world of admirers, a multitude of initiants – a Public" (Flecker 164) and, like Hull, explored themes of sexual dominance and submission: a "startling characteristic of such women as Laurence Hope loves to describe is the passivity that accompanies their passions and is in love with the most relentless brute force" (Flecker 168). Although the Kashmiri song's lines

I would have rather felt you at my throat...
Crushing out life, than waving me farewell! (qtd. in Mabilat 151)

do not appear in Hull's novel, the popularity of the song makes it likely that at least some contemporary readers would have been aware that it contained a description of "a masochistic impulse that later in the text Diana herself may have felt for Ahmed" (Mabilat 153).[1]

Berta Ruck's *A Land-Girl's Love Story* was published in the same year as *The Sheik* and may serve as a useful counterpoint to it in terms of reception, realism, and approaches to both class and gender. *The Sheik* was "called indecent, immoral and degenerate," as Sidney Haven Putnam, of the publisher G. P. Putnam's Sons, noted in his explanation of why his company had declined to publish it. The *New York Times*'s review of 1 May 1921 includes no such moral judgements but nonetheless criticised the novel's plot for a lack of plausibility:

it is difficult to swallow the facts. In order to do so one must revert to the old caveman ideal, to admit that women may be beaten into spiritual submission by strength. The world has traveled at a mighty pace since such a theme could be calmly accepted. (51)

By contrast, the same newspaper had earlier concluded that *A Land-Girl's Love Story* combined an "accurate, detailed account of what the land army was, how it was raised, what it did for England" with an "interestingly intricate and deliciously funny double romance" (178).[2] Other contemporary reviewers gave Ruck's novel a similarly positive reception: it was a "charming love story" (*The Bookman*) which is "bright and genuinely funny" (*Boston Globe*). Whereas *The Sheik* has a distant, romanticised setting, in Ruck's novel, set in Wales, "we have ploughed fields, the dairy, and even the cow shed as a setting to a rosy cheeked land girl" (*Wanganui Chronicle*). Finally, *The Sheik* has aristocratic protagonists, whereas Ruck's romance "argues Land Girls and farmers alike benefitted from the 'wealth of new ideas' that everyone 'gained from the inter-mingling of class with class'" (White 156).

As the *New York Times* reviewer observed,

The title, 'A Land-Girl's Love Story,' is rather misleading, because this novel consists of a double romance. There are two heroines, both equally important and fascinating. Perhaps the title is derived from the fact that it is

an 'I' story told by one of the heroines. [...] Joan is 22, pretty and [...] Elizabeth is small and boyish, a wonderfully good sort, the type who makes the most loyal of girl chums and who hates men in general. (178)

Despite this antipathy the pair “carry off the two handsomest and most eligible men in the country” (*Indianapolis News*): Joan, the narrator, is paired with Captain Holiday and her friend Elizabeth marries Colonel Fielding. In her boyishness, Elizabeth is not entirely dissimilar to Hull’s Diana Mayo, who “looks like a boy in petticoats, a damned pretty boy” (Hull 2). Elizabeth “had always been used to catch and throw a cricket ball just as a boy does” (Ruck 179) and, even before she adopted the somewhat masculine Land-Girl uniform of smock and breeches, could be found wearing “a boyish shirt, and with thick black locks ‘bobbed’ about her square-chinned little face” (22).

Diana is recuperated for heteronormativity by Ahmed Ben Hassan, and Joan, predicting that a man is similarly “going to tame” (93) Elizabeth, half-jokingly looks forward to the day when

some great huge ultra-masculine man comes along and begins to bully you [...] That sort of huge brute who’d terrify the life out of you, [...] and order you about like Petruchio and Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*! That’s what’ll happen! I shall simply love to watch you being absolutely subjugated (75).[3]

When Elizabeth takes a spouse, however, he is a very different sort of man: far from being either a bully or a rapist, he declares that “It wouldn’t amuse me to try to make – er – love to anybody unless I felt that it would amuse them too, and – er – delight them!” (233). This is, in Joan’s opinion, “a woman’s point of view” (233) but Colonel Fielding, with his “lady-like voice” (286), “slim figure and half-girlish face” (197), believes that in matters of love “the average man [...] could learn plenty from the average woman” (233).

Fielding himself is not an “average man” but neither is Elizabeth “the average woman”. The novel states quite explicitly that Fielding is “a puzzling exception” (234) and Elizabeth an “exception in girls” (194). This is, in fact, why they are compatible despite Joan’s belief that Fielding is “not the sort of person [...] that any girl would fall in *love* with!” (105, emphasis in original) and Elizabeth being a “genuine Loather of Men” (140). Her loathing is partly based on their performance of gendered behaviours such as telling “smoking-room stories” (192) – the equivalent, perhaps, of modern “locker room talk” – but is also due to her finding them physically repellent: “Are they attractive? Not to me. I don’t like their nubby knuckles and their huge feet [...] I can’t bear those great wrists they have. I hate their horrid skins where they shave” (193). Fielding, however, neither looks, thinks nor behaves like “a usual young man” (247): he can, and on one occasion does, “dress up and look exactly like a girl” (195). He is, therefore, “the one and only exception to Elizabeth’s rule of hating men” (229) but otherwise she “still can’t like ‘men.’ It is still true enough about *that*. I still hate *them*!” (192, emphasis in original). Therefore, although Elizabeth marries “a man all right, even if he did say and think things which we imagine are exclusively feminine” (234), her sexual desires have not been forcibly altered by either her hero or her author. Moreover, the fact that it is she who proposes to Fielding and not he to her indicates that submission will never be required of her. The novel thus accepts and

affirms the ways in which the pair unsettle sexual and gender binaries and, by “portraying the relationship between Elizabeth and Fielding as an acceptable variation on the norm, Ruck seems to be making a genuine attempt to validate shifting perceptions not only of what might constitute masculinity and femininity, but of the nature of marriage itself” (Kanerick 699).

It seems highly likely that Ruck was aware of the implications of Elizabeth and Fielding’s physiques, behaviours and attitudes:

Ruck was not naive. She had gone to art schools (the Slade in London and Colarossi’s in Paris) and was familiar with bohemian studio life, fancy-dress dances, as well as art, medical, and theatrical students’ antics before she encountered any Bloomsbury variants. (Gillespie 122)[4]

When Elizabeth rejects the possibility that she could be “tamed” by a “great hulking brute,” she states that such an idea is “all wrong psychology” (247); Ruck presumably felt her own depiction of Elizabeth’s romance was psychologically correct.

Pamela Regis, in an address to the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, stated that “[i]n writing our criticism, we are creating not only the critical context for the study of the romance novel, we are also creating the romance novel’s canon.” This special issue of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* confirms *The Sheik*’s place in that canon. Nonetheless, as Regis also stated, “We owe it to the romance novel to recognize that our study texts are probably not representative of ‘the romance’” (“What”). Ruck’s *The Land-Girl’s Love Story* is perhaps no more representative than *The Sheik*. The juxtaposition of the two novels, however, allows us to appreciate the extent of the variations which existed in “the romance” of 1919 with respect to settings, protagonists, realism and social attitudes.

[1] The association would have been strengthened by the fact that Adela Nicolson killed herself in 1904 following the death of her husband: “Thomas Hardy’s obituary for her [...] described her suicide as ‘the impassioned closing notes of her impassioned effusions’” (Orlando Project).

[2] Ruck diligently “went about Merionethshire and Montgomeryshire” (*A Story-Teller* 107) in 1918 so that she could write accurately about the Land Army.

[3] This prediction is realised, but only in relation to Joan herself and in an extremely attenuated form: she declares Captain Holiday to be “rather a domineerer” (72) and falls in love with him despite wondering “What in the world had he ever done to make me in love with him? [...] he had been hideously rude to me [...] Then he’d laid down the law to me” (176).

[4] As an art student she and her companions “went through our Swinburne – Aubrey Beardsley – Ernest Dowson – Yellow-Book-and-Oscar-Wilde phase together. The young thought it interesting to be *decadent*” (*A Story-Teller* 59, emphasis in original). With regards to Bloomsbury, Ruck was distantly related to Vita Sackville-West (*A Story-Teller* 162) and, almost a decade after the publication of *A Land-Girl’s Love Story*, wrote to Virginia Woolf to express her appreciation of Woolf’s *Orlando* (Gillespie 119-20). Ruck clearly took an interest in developments in psychology and sexology. In her autobiography she recalls

having been “bitten, as most people have been, by the Freud-bug, and read his *Interpretation of Dreams*” (*A Story-Teller* 257) and her wide social circle included the family planning pioneer Marie Stopes and, some time after the publication of *A Land-Girl’s Love Story*, the famous sexologist and gynaecologist Norman Haire. Also in later years, Marda Vanne was “a friend. I have ‘summered and wintered’ with her, [...] I have been the confidante of many of her affairs of the heart” (188) and another “marvellous friend” (166) was Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies. The two actresses lived together and one can therefore assume that Ruck would have known about their relationship, which “Marda marked [...] as having begun on 18th November 1926” (Rose 57) and which

The archival evidence [...] clearly indicates [was] a passionate and sexual relationship. [...] Vanne often expresses a desire to protect and comfort Ffrangcon-Davies, describing her as ‘my wife’. In contrast to Ffrangcon-Davies’s highly feminized self-presentation, Marda Vanne’s identification as ‘an old fashioned dyke’ who preferred tweed and leather over lace and silk suggests what would be identified in the later twentieth century as the butch/femme relationship. (Grime 53-55)

Works Cited

- Anderson, Rachel. *The Purple Heart Throbs: The Sub-literature of Love*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1974.
- Beresford, J. D. "Tracking a Best Seller." *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, vol. 75, no. 384, 1925, pp. 56-57.
- Bloom, Clive. *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Boston Globe*. "Fiction." 3 May 1919, p. 10.
- Flecker, James. "Laurence Hope." *The Monthly Review*, vol. 27, 1907, pp. 164-68.
- Ghuman, Nalini. *Resonances of the Raj: India in the English Musical Imagination, 1897-1947*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Gillespie, Diane F. "Virginia Woolf and the Curious Case of Berta Ruck." *Woolf Studies Annual*, vol. 10, 2004, pp. 109-38.
- Grime, Helen. *Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, Twentieth-Century Actress*. Routledge, 2016.
- Hipsky, Martin. *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925*. Ohio University Press, 2011.
- Hull, E. M. *The Sheik*. 1919. Virago, 2002.
- Indianapolis News*. "Romance of English Farmerettes." 5 June 1919, p. 23.
- Kanerick, Caroline. "'A Jazzed and Patchwork Modern': 'Future' Girls and Modern Masculinities in the Early Popular Romances of Berta Ruck." *Women's History Review*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2010, pp. 685-702.
- Mabilat, Claire. *Orientalism and Representations of Music in the Nineteenth-Century British Popular Arts*. Routledge, 2016.
- Maunder, Andrew. "Berta Ruck." *British Literature of World War I: The Short Story and the Novella*, edited by Andrew Maunder, Routledge, 2016, pp. 35-39.
- McAlister, Jodi. "Breaking the Hard Limits: Romance, Pornography, and the Question of Genre in the Fifty Shades Trilogy." *Analyses/Rereadings/Theories* vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 23-33.
- McCracken, Scott. *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction*. Manchester University Press, 1998.
- Melman, Billie. *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs*. Macmillan Press, 1988.
- New York Times*. "Latest Works of Fiction." 1 May 1921, p. 51.
- New York Times*. "An English Farmerette." 6 April 1919, pp. 178, 181.
- Orlando Project. "Laurence Hope." *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*, edited by Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, & Isobel Grundy, Cambridge University Press Online, 2006, <http://orlando.cambridge.org/>. Accessed 13 November 2018.
- Putnam, Sidney Haven. "Ben Hecht and E. M. Hull, 'Erick Dorn' and 'The Sheik': Peculiar Merits of Two Best Sellers Weighed in the Balance of Critical Readers." *New York Tribune*, 15 Jan. 1922, pg. D9.
- Regis, Pamela. *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- Regis, Pamela. "What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance." *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2011, <http://jprstudies.org/>

2011/10/%E2%80%9Cwhat-do-critics-owe-the-romance-keynote-address-at-the-second-annual-conference-of-the-international-association-for-the-study-of-popular-romance%E2%80%9D-by-pamela-regis/. Accessed 14 Jan. 2019.

Rose, Martial. *Forever Juliet: The Life and Letters of Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies, 1891-1992*. Larks Press, 2003.

Ruck, Berta. *A Land-Girl's Love Story*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1919.

Ruck, Berta. *A Story-Teller Tells the Truth: Reminiscences and Notes*. Hutchinson, n.d.

Sewell Matter, Laura. "Pursuing the Great Bad Novelist." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 61, no. 3, 2007, pp. 444-59.

The Bookman. "The Land Girl's Love Story." Spring 1919, p. 48.

The World's News. "The Sheik (E. M. Hull)." 14 Aug. 1920, p. 29.

Turner, Ellen. "The Sheik Returns: Imitations and Parodies of the Desert Romance." *Hype: Bestsellers and Literary Cultures*, edited by Jon Helgason, Sara Kärrholm, & Ann Steiner, Nordic Academic Press, 2014, pp. 185-202.

Twentieth-Century Romance and Gothic Writers. Edited by James Vinson, Gale, 1982.

Wanganui Chronicle. "Book Notices." 14 July 1919, p. 3.

White, Bonnie. *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.