

Burge, Amy. *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance*. Pp. XVII, 279. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. US \$74.99 (eBook). ISBN: 9781137593566.

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There has been a considerable volume of work produced on the sheikh romance in recent years, including two other book-length studies (both of which have been reviewed in this journal): Hsu-Ming Teo's *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (2012) and Amira Jarmakani's *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (2015). Jarmakani states that her book "both is and is not about desert romance novels" (xi) because its primary topics are the war on terror and "contemporary U.S. imperialism" (xix). Teo's work, like Burge's, demonstrates that the modern sheikh romance has deep historical roots. However, whereas Teo's work provides a sweeping historical survey of orientalist primary texts and their historical contexts as well as a discussion of modern romance readers' responses, Burge offers in-depth close readings of texts from just one country (the UK) and two time-periods (medieval and twenty-first century), in order to demonstrate that "there is something medieval at the core of these modern romances" (182), including their approaches to difference, the roles played by clothing and the recurrence of the abduction motif.

Burge's book is part of Palgrave's "The New Middle Ages" series, "dedicated to pluridisciplinary studies of medieval cultures" and, as Burge states, "a comparative study such as this confers recognition on the medieval texts underpinning modern ones" (183). She acknowledges that,

On the surface, such a meeting of texts seems paradoxical. Aside from the common generic term "romance," medieval and modern romance diverge in content and readership, as well as in social, cultural, and political contexts [...]. Yet, links can be drawn between the genres, and the parallel examination of medieval and modern texts [...] can be revealing. (15)

In terms of their status in the academy, some parallels may be immediately apparent from Nicola McDonald's observations about the attitude towards Middle English romance in university English departments. In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular*

Romance McDonald, who supervised the PhD thesis from which *Representing Difference* developed, describes the Middle English romance as:

‘Popular’ in its capacity to attract a large and heterogeneous medieval audience, as well as in its ability to provide that audience with enormous enjoyment, romance’s popularity is likewise what excludes it from serious and sustained academic consideration: judged low-class, on account of its non-aristocratic audience, its reliance on stereotypes, formulae and conventional plot structures, and its particular brand of unadulterated good fun, criticism repeatedly dismisses these narratives as unworthy of the kind of close reading, as well as historically and theoretically informed analysis, that we regularly afford so-called elite medieval English art. (McDonald 2)

More significant in the contemporary political climate, though, is the fact that “sheikh romance forges a provocative connection with Middle English romance in its use of neomedievalist rhetoric that identifies the contemporary East as ‘medieval’, meaning primitive and barbaric” (1). As Burge explores the similarities between medieval and modern romance, she also explores and questions the apparent differences between medieval and modern, East and West, Saracen and Christian, masculine and feminine.

Burge discusses her choice of primary texts in Chapter 1. Of the approximately one hundred and twenty surviving Middle English romances, she “identified forty-two [...] that refer to Saracens or the East” (23), all of which are listed in an appendix. Of these, fourteen depict “romantic encounters between Christians and Saracens [...], although the relationship forms a significant part of the plot in only the four romances that are the focus of this book”(24): *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300); *Floris and Blancheflour* (c. 1250); *The King of Tars* (c. 1300); *Octavian* (c. 1350). Burge compares and contrasts these with a selection of Harlequin Mills & Boon romances

published in Britain [...]; first, given my parallel consideration of Middle English texts that were also produced in England (albeit a radically different one), it made sense to draw my modern romance sources from a parallel English or British space. Second, by focusing on romance novels drawn from a nationally specific cultural context, I am able to explore some aspects of British cultural understandings of the Eastern world. (28)

This contrasts with Jarmakani’s focus, which is very much on the USA. An appendix provides “as complete a list as possible of sheikh romances published by Mills & Boon in Britain” (29) between 1909 and 2009. Of these three hundred titles over half date from the period 2000-2009, and the nine texts chosen for closer analysis are drawn from this sub-sample: Lynne Graham’s *The Arabian Mistress* (2001); Jane Porter’s *The Sultan’s Bought Bride* (2004) and *The Sheikh’s Disobedient Bride* (2006); Penny Jordan’s *Possessed by the Sheikh* (2005); Sarah Morgan’s *The Sultan’s Virgin Bride* (2006); Annie West’s *The Sheikh’s Ransomed Bride* (2007); Chantelle Shaw’s *At the Sheikh’s Bidding* (2008); Trish Morey’s *The Sheikh’s Convenient Virgin* (2008); Sabrina Philips’s *The Desert King’s Jewelled Bride* (2009). However, although Burge describes these romances being as published “in Britain”, as part of the Mills & Boon Modern Romance line, they were also all published in North

America, where the line is known as “Harlequin Presents”. Although Burge notes in Chapter 2 that more than half of the sheikh novels published in Mills & Boon’s Modern Romance line in the 2000s were written by British authors, it should be noted that the authors of novels selected for closer study do not all identify as British: Lynne Graham describes herself as “Irish”; Jane Porter was born and raised in California until she was thirteen, and although she “spent much of my high school and college years abroad” it was in a range of different countries; Annie West and Trish Morey are Australian. While the line is edited in the UK and it can perhaps be assumed that the editors of the novels were, therefore, all British, it is not clear why, with such a large sample to choose from, and with a desire to focus on British texts, Burge did not ensure that all the Mills & Boon romances she selected for more detailed analysis were written by British authors. Perhaps it was due to a belief that even when written by non-British authors, the “romance East [...] remains rooted in a real British history in the Gulf, reflected in the dominance of British authors and characters” (61)

Certainly in Chapter 2 Burge argues that the fictional settings of sheikh romances are “modeled on the specific geography of Western-friendly nations in the Middle East, specifically the UAE” (57), which indicates “a lingering British political and diplomatic influence in these globally consumed and produced popular romance novels” (59) given the UAE’s many ties to the UK. While medieval Christendom and the modern West “do not [...] map directly onto each other” (14), Burge suggests that both medieval and modern romances engage in the “construction of a fictional *romance* East” (14) which is “an imaginative blend of fantasy and observed reality” (14). In relation to the medieval romance *Bevis*, therefore, Burge argues that although “the geography of medieval romance has been assumed to function as little more than a fantasy backdrop” (34), *Bevis*’s “focus on routes, specific historical places, and journey details [...] create authenticity: the impression that this could be a description of an actual journey” (39).

Although all of the sheikh romances Burge examines in detail have fictional settings this has not always been the case:

When Mills & Boon first started publishing sheikh romances, in the first half of the twentieth century, they were almost exclusively set in real locations, such as Algiers, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia. Indeed, accuracy, or at least a sense of “authenticity,” was central to the sheikh romances of the early twentieth century, and in Britain in particular, geopolitical realities continued to feature in sheikh romances of the 1970s and 1980s [...] – it was only in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of the sheikh (rather than the desert or pseudo-sheikh) romance that the settings of sheikh romances became routinely fictionalized. (56)

The “pseudo-sheikh” was a “notable feature of early sheikh romances” and involved the hero being “a Western man posing as a sheikh” (31). Burge defines “desert” romances as ones “set in the East but with two Western protagonists, neither of whom pose as Eastern” (31). It may seem ironic that the desire to write ‘real’ sheikh heroes should lead to the creation of unreal locations but romance scholars may wish to note that this is not a feature unique to sheikh romances: although aristocratic protagonists up to the rank of duke are often given fictional titles within a real kingdom, it is common for heroes who are members

of royal families to hail from imaginary states. The one counter-example I have encountered, Rebecca Winters's *Matrimony With His Majesty* (2007), in which the hero is "king of the Romanche-speaking Valleder Canton in Switzerland" (7), may serve as a ghastly warning of the pitfalls facing an author who hopes to combine an imaginary dynasty with a real geographic location which has a pre-existing political history: given that Switzerland is a federal republic, the constitutional arrangements of this fantasy Swiss canton are deeply incongruous.

In Chapter 3 Burge examines the ways in which "medieval and modern romances uphold what they construct as normative, binary gender identities while revealing how the performance of a nonnormative gender identity can temporarily subvert the romance's framework of gender difference" (9). In the medieval *Floris* it is not the hero who embodies "typical romance masculinity" (72): it is, rather, the Emir of Babylon who "wields a sword as a symbol of violent masculinity" (72) and houses a harem in a "phallic tower" (73). Floris, the hero, "has been widely recognized as displaying a gender identity much closer to the Orientalist stereotype of feminized, or hypomascularity" (73). While his "weeping, swooning, and being compared with a flower do not, in medieval literature, connote femininity in themselves" (73) Burge suggests that there are "similarities between Floris's gender performance and that of eunuchs" (75) and argues that "Floris's performance of eunuch masculinity is transgressive because it severs the links between sex, gender, and desire that maintain compulsory heterosexuality" (78) but,

Paradoxically, [...] restores normative, Christian gender relations. As a consequence of Floris's transgression with Blanche flour [...] at the end of the romance [...] both Floris and the Emir are drawn into the role of husband: a masculine identity in accordance with a heterosexual gender framework. (79)

Hints of a similar paradox can be found in sheikh romances: "the harem and the Orientalist labeling of Eastern men as animalistic [...] are used to uphold the sheikh's alpha masculinity" (81) but there is often a suggestion, albeit one which is quickly rejected, that "Eastern robes can conceal or obscure heteronormative masculinity" (83).

Unlike in *Floris*, in the sheikh romance it is the heroine who undergoes a transformation in her gender performance. Burge argues that, at least initially, Western romance heroines often resist the hyperfemininity embodied by the women who "represent two discrete models of Eastern femininity: the virginal, submissive servant/guide, and the sexualized rival" (85). Nonetheless, these models are drawn on by the Western heroine as she undergoes a "process of feminization that occurs uniquely in the romance East" (85). Burge argues that the Western heroine remains special, however, because "it is not Eastern femininity itself that the sheikh desires, but the performance of an Eastern-inflected hyperfemininity by a Western heroine" (88). This not infrequently involves the heroine being a virgin (as she is in at least 32 of the 57 sheikh romances Burge identified in the *Modern* line of Harlequin Mills & Boons); "virginity is the only aspect of sexuality that is specifically labeled as medieval in any way" (92), which is perhaps not wholly unjustified given that in the medieval romances "a similar prominence is given to virginity" (93).

Chapter 4, on “representing difference, fabricating sameness” (103), places fabric at the centre of the discussion by demonstrating the role played by clothing in expressing ethnicity, femininity, masculinity, and religious identity. Burge finds that in sheikh romances fabric is often “at the very heart of traditional Eastern culture, working as a signifier for it and for the sheikh hero” (115) while the “Western heroine’s ethnicity is also revealed and [...] transformed by the clothing she wears” (116). The importance of fabric in these texts explains why it appears

in the form of carpets, cushions, clothing, or bed sheets in almost every cover image since 2005 [...] as a signifier of the East in modern sheikh romance, following the long tradition of European Orientalist art. (113)

Clothing also expressed ethnicity, religious identity and social status in medieval romance, because the “use of clothing to mark religious identity was an established practice in the Middle Ages encoded in [...] legal regulation of Saracens and Jews” (122) and “sumptuary laws were introduced [...] and permitted certain clothing, such as silk and furs to be worn only by those of a particular rank to alleviate the fear of people dressing above their social station” (123). Thus although “no Middle English romance overtly refers to such regulations, the association of certain types of clothing with particular qualities is evident” (123). In both medieval and modern romance, then, it should definitely not be assumed that detailed descriptions of clothing and fabric are the “filler” (249) which Ann Bar Snitow dubbed them.

Burge observes that the sheikh is different, but not too different from the Western heroine, thanks to one or more of an

education at a Western institution, often Oxbridge or Harvard; a Western ancestry, usually via a mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother; atheism, or a distinctly relaxed attitude toward or nonadherence to Islam; a progressive outlook regarding the social and political values of his desert nation; a jet-setting lifestyle, either residing in or frequently visiting the West; an almost accentless fluency in English; and an ease in both Western clothing and traditional Middle Eastern garb. (105)

One of the “few occasions in sheikh romance where there is an explicit desire for ethnic difference” (106) is in the “eroticizing [of] the contrast between the sheikh’s dark skin and the heroine’s paler complexion” (105), and even this is made much less apparent in the cover art, which seems to “whiten the hero, reducing the visible contrast between the couple” (106). Burge asks if this is “perhaps an example of a disjunction between what can be expressed in writing and what is acceptable to display visually” (107) and suggests that the disjunction could be due to the perception that “Marketing a romance novel with a Middle Eastern hero at a time of political instability and Western military engagement in the region could be seen as provocative” (107). Another explanation may emerge via a reading of Stephanie Burley’s work on “the racial politics of category romance” (324), in which she observes that, in the category romance’s “standard description of the ‘tall, dark, and handsome’ hero, in distinction to the seemingly paler heroine, [...] darkness symbolizes the hero’s danger, mystery, sensuality, and otherness. This formula is relatively common”

(328). In other words, a color contrast between a dark hero and a whiter heroine is not exclusive to either sheikh romances or situations involving ethnic or racial difference between the protagonists and therefore for a frequent reader of category romances words highlighting a color contrast between the protagonists will perhaps primarily evoke ideas relating to the erotic potential of differences between the sexes whereas visual images highlighting that same color contrast might be more likely to be interpreted non-metaphorically as a indication of racial/ethnic difference. Furthermore, Burley argues that “the [white] contemporary romance heroes, who are imagined in terms of literary blackness and who are desirable for their limited associations with otherness, are able to cast off the mantle of darkness when they fall in love with white, innocent heroines” (332). Limiting the sheikh’s “darkness” to the verbal sphere perhaps makes it easier for a similar transformation to occur for him. It is striking that the Saracen Sultan in the medieval romance *The King of Tars* literally casts off darkness when he adopts the religion of his heroine: upon baptism his skin miraculously changes color from black to white, reinforcing “the association of whiteness with Christianity” (112).

In the modern sheikh romance “religion is subsumed into culture and ethnicity stands as the main difference between East and West” (103) whereas “in the Middle Ages, religion was the operative category of difference, with the binary opposition between Christianity and Islam (and Judaism) structuring identity” (2). Nonetheless, in a move which is perhaps not entirely dissimilar to the religious and color transformation at the end of *The King of Tars*, the sheikh’s Western heroine often has a “scheme of modernization” (67) with a “focus on women’s rights” (67) and it seems to me that this, too, is often set in motion in earnest towards the end of the sheikh romance. Moreover, such a “scheme of modernization” cannot be considered entirely without a religious element given that the West connects “medieval repression with Islam” (62) and “it is specifically the religious aspects of the region, represented in practices of veiling [...] and the treatment of women, which are seen as medieval” (63). Therefore, as Burge later concludes, “The religious roots underpinning these popular texts and, by extension, our popular views of the Middle East are thus exposed: religion remains firmly part of the story” (181).

Burge states that her “book argues that romance manipulates its hybrid representations of religious and ethnic difference in order to create successful romantic unions” (7). In her final chapter she seeks to demonstrate this via an examination of abductions which, she argues, are evidence of the “difference imagined between East and West, Saracen and Christian, which has to be transformed into something acceptable: sameness” (175). Abductions are frequently to be found in both the medieval and modern romances:

Of the fifty-seven sheikh titles in the *Modern Romance* series, forty contain abduction or captivity motifs, with thirteen of these featuring the physical abduction of the heroine or the heroine’s child by the hero. Themes of abduction are similarly not unusual in Middle English romance. (138)

Clearly, “abduction is a real-life concern” (139) in the modern context of “high-profile kidnappings of Western men and women, particularly since the commencement of military conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan” (140) while “the second half of the fourteenth century, the period in which *Octavian* was composed, was the period in which the highest number of

cases of kidnap were brought in the Middle Ages” (141). However, Burge suggests that the “female-focused” (142) abductions to be found in medieval and modern romances are “deliberately distanced from the reality of kidnap and might more accurately be termed ‘romance abduction.’ Romance abduction is differentiated from modern-day political kidnap and medieval kidnap for pecuniary gain” (142-43). Romance abduction

is carried out by the hero, aims to secure sexual interaction or to facilitate a marriage between hero and heroine, is presented as distinctly nonpolitical [...] and is not carried out in order to gain wealth [...]. Furthermore, the Orientalized space of the romance East is used to define romance abduction and to present it as something quite different from kidnap [...]. Romance abduction is reworked as (atemporal) cultural practice or conversion; it is figured as protection or rescue; and it is eroticized, presented as sexual fantasy. (143)

Burge’s examination of “the paradoxical connection between restriction and freedom inherent to the motif in romance” (139) may perhaps fruitfully be read alongside Catherine Roach’s “Love as the Practice of Bondage: Popular Romance Narratives and the Conundrum of Erotic Love” and other papers in the essay collection which resulted from the 2009 conference held in Princeton on the topic of “Love as the Practice of Freedom?”. In the context of the sheikh romance, Burge argues, the loss of freedom for the heroine which results from a romance abduction “serves to normalize or to conceal the patriarchal gender dynamics at its heart” (143).

In the romances Burge studies there is, it would seem, a similarly paradoxical connection between difference and sameness: some differences are considered erotic but, Burge concludes,

the rules of medieval and modern romance require a flattening of difference – an elision of strangeness – rather than an embracing of otherness. The audiences of both Middle English and modern sheikh romance might enjoy the way these texts play with motifs of difference, but the possibility of breaking cross-cultural, interracial, or interreligious boundaries is never really considered. (179-80)

Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance will be of interest to both medievalists and popular romance scholars. The meticulous nature of Burge’s research is especially evident in a number of tables and appendices which will be particularly valuable to those carrying out further research into medieval and modern “saracen”/“sheikh” romances. The placement of medieval romances alongside modern ones yields valuable insights into continuities and discontinuities in British popular culture and Burge’s innovative approach opens up intriguing possibilities for further such juxtapositions.

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