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"I will cut myself and smear blood on the sheet"

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Chapter 1 - "I Will Cut Myself and Smear Blood on the Sheet":

Testing Virginitv in Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance

Amy Burge

A bloody sheet, a shaky goblet, an enchanted fountain—the virginitv or chastity test has long been a persistent and imaginative literary motif. Indeed, some of the most fantastic tests are drawn from medieval romance, the most popular secular genre in late medieval Europe.¹ Today the virginitv test is increasingly associated with cultures in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, where vigorous debates about virginitv examinations have attracted national and international attention. Both the literary virginitv test and its current association with Asian and African cultures have found their modern-day expression in the Orientalist sheikh romance novel: a consistently popular subgenre of contemporary romance publishing that details a cross-cultural love story between a Western heroine and a Middle Eastern or North African sheikh or sultan hero.

This chapter explores the representation of the virginitv test in English Orientalist romance literature from two distinct historical moments: the late Middle Ages and the twenty-first century. This cross-period approach takes a long view of the virginitv test, considering how current romance ideologies contrast with those of medieval romance. It antagonizes exactly what is at stake in persistent reference to the virginitv test in romance literature, focusing on articulations of certainty and uncertainty, loss and possession. My focus throughout is on the test

¹ Roberta L. Krueger, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

as it applies to women, echoing the deeply gendered discourses that surround virginity testing: there are no virgin sheikhs. Through close readings of six popular sheikh romances featuring virgin heroines published by the genre's biggest publisher, Harlequin Mills and Boon²—Lynne Graham's *The Arabian Mistress* (2001), Lucy Monroe's *The Sheikh's Bartered Bride* (2004), Penny Jordan's *Possessed by the Sheikh* (2005), Sarah Morgan's *The Sultan's Virgin Bride* (2006), Lynne Graham's *The Desert Sheikh's Captive Wife* (2007), and Chantelle Shaw's *At the Sheikh's Bidding* (2008)—alongside two popular English medieval romances, *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300) and *Floris and Blancheflur* (c. 1250), I consider how the test is positioned in each text and what it reveals about the importance of virginity. To put the testing in context, I offer a brief overview of virginity testing in European culture before examining the role of virginity in these romances. Then I focus on the test itself, indicating how testing for virginity in these romances is inherently unstable. Finally, I explore how testing for virginity ultimately functions to secure male ownership of women as part of the romance genre's heteronormative gender system. Ultimately, I encourage a deeper interrogation of the easy association of virginity and the East in these popular Western texts.

“If She Is Corrupt, She Will Urinate Immediately”: Methods of Testing

As long as women's virginity has been of social, cultural, or political importance, the virginity test has existed. Daniel Pollack defines the virginity test as, simply, “an old custom designed to

² For more on the publishing company, see Jay Dixon, *The Romance Fiction of Mills and Boon, 1909–1990s* (London: UCL Press, 1999), and Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune: The Story of Mills and Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

check if a young girl's hymen is intact,"³ revealing the gendered cultural assumptions made about virginity testing. However, methods of testing for virginity have been more varied than Pollack indicates, perhaps a reflection of the fact that the word *hymen* was not used in its modern meaning until the fifteenth century.⁴ A range of historical texts—the Bible, medical treatises, romances, folk tales, court records—describes the myriad ways in which a woman's chastity can be tested. Kathleen Coyne Kelly helpfully separates such testing into two genealogies: mythical (in folklore and literature) and historical (in treatises and court records).⁵ Laurie Maguire further categorizes virginity tests into four main groups: "textile proof of bleeding; gynaecological examination by a jury of women; proof by magical ability on the part of the virgin; and somatic responses to ingested fluid or inhaled fumes."⁶

All virginity tests ultimately look for the same thing: signs of virginity rather than virginity itself.⁷ Deuteronomy details "tokens of . . . virginity," which Hanne Blank reasons are likely to be bloodied bed sheets.⁸ Tuccia, a Roman vestal virgin, famously proved her virginity

³ Daniel Pollack, "Virginity Testing: International Law and Social Work Perspectives," *International Social Work* 51, 2 (2008): 262.

⁴ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 45.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶ Laurie Maguire, "Virginity Tests," in *The Oxford Companion to the Body*, ed. Colin Blakemore and Sheila Jennett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198524038.001.0001/acref-9780198524038-e-999>.

⁷ Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

by carrying water in a sieve.⁹ In the Middle Ages, tests incorporated varied signs such as bleeding following penetration, tightness or difficulty on penetration, examination of urine, and physical examination by a midwife.¹⁰ Although checking the sheets for blood was not an authentic practice in fourteenth-century England, according to Kelly it is an old custom for communities in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean whose continued usage into modernity she notes.¹¹ The thirteenth-century medical treatise *De secretis mulierum* (Secrets of Women) suggests giving ground lilies to a woman to eat, upon which, “if she is corrupt, she will urinate immediately.”¹² A medieval woman’s virginity could also be discerned by how loudly she urinated, how long it took her to urinate,¹³ and whether, upon fumigation of the vagina with coal, she “perceive[d] the odor through her mouth and nose.”¹⁴ Folk stories and medieval romances present a multitude of magical tests, including a horn from which only virgins can drink without spilling, a mantle that will not fit an unchaste woman, and a harp that plays out of tune when a non-virgin approaches.¹⁵ Equally, as Sarah Salih indicates, “an intact

⁹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 63.

¹⁰ Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007), 7; Blank, *Virgin*, 85; Esther Lastique and Helen Rodnite Lemay, “A Medieval Physician’s Guide to Virginity,” in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce E. Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), 59–61.

¹¹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 128–29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ Blank, *Virgin*, 82.

¹⁴ Lastique and Lemay, “A Medieval Physician’s Guide to Virginity,” 63.

¹⁵ Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, vol. 3 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 411–15.

body is inferred from outward signs.”¹⁶ Virginity (or its lack) is also externally visible; breasts have been indicators of virginity since the second century,¹⁷ and *De secretis mulierum* catalogues behavioural indicators of virginity, such as avoiding eye contact with men and speaking and acting modestly.¹⁸

More recently, the virginity test has been the focus of negative scrutiny in certain Middle Eastern and African countries.¹⁹ In Jordan and Palestine, imposed virginity testing in cases of reported sexual assault has been criticized as a tool of female oppression.²⁰ In Turkey, despite national and international pressure to outlaw the practice, virginity testing was performed up to the late 1990s,²¹ fuelled by widespread notions of female sexual honour, shame, community, and tradition.²² Indeed, well into the twenty-first century, it is still relatively common in parts of Turkey to display blood-stained sheets to prove the bride’s virginity following the wedding

¹⁶ Sarah Salih, *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 21.

¹⁷ Blank, *Virgin*, 80.

¹⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 30. For further descriptions of the variety of testing, see Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 63–64, and Blank, *Virgin*, 74–95.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Ebtihal Mahadeen for generously sharing her expertise in this area.

²⁰ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Imposition of Virginity Testing: A Life-Saver or a License to Kill?,” *Social Science and Medicine* 60, 6 (2005): 1195.

²¹ Martina W. Frank et al., “Virginity Examinations in Turkey: Role of Forensic Physicians in Controlling Female Sexuality,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 281, 5 (1999): 485.

²² Ayse Parla, “The ‘Honor’ of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey,” *Feminist Studies* 27, 1 (2001): 84.

night.²³ In South Africa, virginity testing has become conflated with contemporary debates on the HIV/AIDS epidemic; in KwaZulu-Natal province, virginity testing has enjoyed a revival since the mid-1990s.²⁴ Initially intended to protect family status,²⁵ the practice has been firmly connected, in recent years, with the discourse of HIV/AIDS via claims that virginity testing offers a “culturally appropriate solution” to problems caused by the epidemic,²⁶ effectively functioning as a mechanism of abstinence.²⁷

Yet, despite this diversity, there are some aspects common to all virginity tests. For a start, they are unreliable. For as long as there have been virginity tests, there have been ways to cheat them. *De secretis mulierum* cautions that a non-virginal woman can simulate modesty and that there are multiple methods to conceal a lack of virginity; bleeding can be faked by inserting a dove’s intestine filled with blood into the vagina or by carefully applying a leech to the labia.²⁸

²³ Altan Eşsizoglu et al., “Double Standard for Traditional Value of Virginity and Premarital Sexuality in Turkey: A University Students Case,” *Women and Health* 51 (2011): 138.

²⁴ Louise Vincent, “Virginity Testing in South Africa: Re-Traditioning the Postcolony,” *Culture, Health, and Sexuality* 8, 1 (2006): 17.

²⁵ Charles Sylvester Rankhotha, “Do Traditional Values Entrench Male Supremacy?,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 59 (2004): 85.

²⁶ Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala, “Virginity Testing: Managing Sexuality in a Maturing HIV/AIDS Epidemic,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 15, 4 (2001): 535.

²⁷ Erika R. George, “Virginity Testing and South Africa’s HIV/AIDS Crisis: Beyond Rights Universalism and Cultural Relativism toward Health Capabilities,” *California Law Review* 96 (2008): 1449–50.

²⁸ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 35, 32; Blank, *Virgin*, 85–87, 91.

Ultimately, as Blank points out, “the simple fact is that short of catching someone in the act of sex, virginity can be neither proven nor disproven.”²⁹

What’s more, virginity testing is an almost exclusively female discourse. Long-standing and persistent patriarchal structures that require reproductive exclusivity to secure primogeniture support the idea that women, rather than men, should be tested to provide “proof” of virginity. Kelly admits that almost all medieval virginity tests are aimed at women, and this gendered prejudice is echoed in the romances examined in this chapter, all of which focus on female virginity.³⁰ Historical and contemporary discourses of virginity testing are drawn across the boundaries of fiction and fact; the “reality” of such testing draws on and feeds into the fantasy of testing. It is precisely this collocation of myth and reality that perpetuates inclusion of the test in romance, a genre similarly positioned at the juncture of fact and fantasy. Popular romance is thus perfectly placed to explore representations of the virginity test.

Virginity in Medieval and Modern Romance

Virgins are fundamental to contemporary romance. The “sexually unawakened heroine”³¹ remains a persistent trope of many romances. Yet a large-scale analysis of Mills and Boon

²⁹ Blank, *Virgin*, 76.

³⁰ Some attention has been paid to male virginity in romance; Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 91–118, has explored male virginity in relation to female virginity in some medieval literature, and Jonathan A. Allan has considered male virginity in modern popular romance in “Theorising Male Virginity in Popular Romance Novels,” *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2, 1 (2013), <http://jprstudies.org/2011/10/theorising-male-virginity>.

³¹ Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, quoted in Allan, “Theorising Male Virginity in Popular Romance Novels.”

Modern Romance³² novels reveals that female virginity is particularly pronounced in romance novels with “foreign heroes”: the ubiquitous Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Brazilians, Argentines, and, of course, sheikhs.³³ Of the 931 Modern Romance novels published in the United Kingdom from 2000 to 2009, 458 feature virgin heroines, and 281 of them (approximately 61 percent) have foreign heroes. This simultaneously reveals Western preoccupation with virginity and its situating of it “elsewhere.” Sheikh romances do not contain significantly more virgin heroines than other foreign hero romances; proportionally, there are at least as many virgin heroines in novels with Greek heroes, and there are proportionally more virgin heroines in novels with Spanish heroes.³⁴ However, when considering the titles of Modern Romance novels, an interesting distinction emerges in sheikh romance novels.

In romance titles, the words *virgin*, *innocent*, and *innocence* are used to signal that the heroine of the romance is a virgin. The majority of romances with titles featuring one or more of these words contain foreign heroes: of a total of eighty-four romances with titles containing these words, sixty have foreign heroes. But when we look at those romances more carefully, the

³² The Modern Romance series is Harlequin Mills and Boon’s flagship series in the United Kingdom, equivalent to North America’s Harlequin Presents . . . and Australia’s Sexy series. The first Modern Romance titles were published in July 2000, and in 2010 the series accounted for 28 percent of current sales in Britain. Jenny Hutton, “Re: Query about Sheikh Modern Romance,” email message to the author, January 5, 2010.

³³ I follow the romances themselves here in defining a “foreign” hero as one who hails from a country other than Britain, the United States, Canada, or Australia.

³⁴ Of the 115 Modern Romance novels published with Greek heroes, at least sixty-five have virgin heroines, and from a total of sixty-nine novels with Spanish heroes a minimum of forty-five feature heroines who are virgins.

number of sheikh romances that contain these words in the titles is proportionately higher per romance published than any other type of foreign hero romance (see the table below), suggesting a fundamental link between signifiers of the East—sheikh, sultan, desert—and signifiers of virginity. Thus, though sheikh romance novels might not contain more virgin heroines than romances with Spanish and Greek heroes, in terms of their marketing and appeal via their titles virginity can be considered a prominent trope associated with the sheikh genre. The created Eastern world of the sheikh romance—what I term the “romance East”—is thus explicitly connected with virginity.

Table: The Words *Virgin* and *Innocent/Innocence* in Modern Romance Titles of Novels with Foreign Heroes

Type of Hero ³⁵	Number of Titles Containing <i>Virgin</i>	Number of Titles Containing <i>Innocent/Innocence</i>	Total Number of Novels	Proportion of <i>Virgin, Innocent/Innocence</i> Titles (%)
Sheikh	9	3	57	21
Greek	12	2 ³⁶	115	15
South American	2	2	29	14

³⁵ In addition to the heroes mentioned here, and included in my count of romances with foreign heroes, are four romances with Russian heroes and Penny Jordan’s *Virgin for the Billionaire’s Taking* (2008), which has an Indian hero (apparently the first Indian hero in Harlequin Mills and Boon romance).

³⁶ Two romances with Greek heroes feature the words *innocent* and *virgin* in the title, which I have counted only once under *virgin*.

Spanish	7	2	69	13
Italian	15	3	189	9.5
French	1	0	22	4.5

Source: Amy Burge, *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist*

Romance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 91.

Note: Information is drawn from my own research using web and library resources. Some titles did not make it clear whether the heroine was a virgin or not. I have included them in the count, assuming that their heroines are non-virgins, meaning that the number of virgin heroines might be slightly higher than noted here. The novels in which it is unclear whether the heroine is a virgin are as follows: sheikh (1); Spanish (3); Italian (16); Greek (12); French (1); South American (1).

In the romance East, female virginity is of great cultural importance. Sheikh romances repeatedly highlight the importance placed on virginity in Eastern culture; in *The Arabian Mistress*, the sheikh hero tells the heroine “you do not appear to understand how high is the regard for a woman’s virtue in my culture.”³⁷ In this instance, it is clear that “virtue” is used as a synonym for “virginity,” yet indicators of virtue elsewhere in the sheikh genre— downcast eyes, modest dress, and meek behaviour—map directly onto signs of virginity, indicating the privileging of virginity within this discourse. Such a cultural valuing is connected to ideas of

³⁷ Lynne Graham, *The Arabian Mistress* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2001), 92.

tradition often glossed as “medieval.” One heroine demurs that, “had she not been a virgin, she had the awful feeling even a pity date would not have occurred. It was medieval and felt like the worst kind of betrayal.”³⁸ In *Possessed by the Sheikh*, the hero says that “it is my duty to do as my brother commands me and, besides, since I took your virginity, . . .” to which the heroine responds “you’re marrying me because of that! But that’s . . . that’s archaic . . . medieval. . . .”³⁹ By suggesting that the romance East, where virginity is prized, is somehow premodern in its views on female virginity, these romances engage with the conflict between tradition and modernity that characterizes contemporary debates over virginity and virginity testing in various cultures.

Contrarily, the West is assumed to be a place where virginity is no longer either valued or present. In most sheikh romances, the sheikh hero initially considers the Western heroine to exemplify a promiscuous femininity, leading him to conclude that she cannot possibly be a virgin.⁴⁰ This misunderstanding usually persists until the moment the couple have sex for the first time. In *At the Sheikh’s Bidding*, the hero Zahir tells the heroine Erin that “you can drop the act of maidenly virtue now. . . . Qubbah may be rooted in tradition, but I’m a modern guy and I’m happy to accept that you may have had lovers.”⁴¹ The hero of *The Arabian Mistress* similarly acknowledges that “every other western woman I had been with was only interested in fun, sex

³⁸ Lucy Monroe, *The Sheikh’s Bartered Bride* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2004), 94.

³⁹ Penny Jordan, *Possessed by the Sheikh* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2005), 153.

⁴⁰ This draws on contemporary Middle Eastern attitudes that consider the West as “both the home and exporter of vice”; Derek Hopwood, *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East* (Reading UK: Ithaca Press, 1999), 277.

⁴¹ Chantelle Shaw, *At the Sheikh’s Bidding* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2008), 116.

and what I could buy,”⁴² connecting Western femininity with promiscuity and lack of virginity. The more advanced age of the heroine can also contribute to an assumption of sexual experience; the heroines of the six sheikh novels are all in their early to mid-twenties (twenty-two to twenty-four), several years beyond the age of consent in Europe, North America, and Australia (roughly fifteen to eighteen, though it is lower in several European countries). This is in contrast to the Middle East, where the age of consent ranges from eighteen to twenty-one, and in some countries sex outside marriage is not permitted. Although it is not uncommon for the hero of a romance novel to wrongly assume that the heroine is more sexually experienced than she is, in sheikh romance sexual experience is explicitly associated with the West, thus firmly aligning virginity and its cultural value with the East.

Virginity is also valued in medieval romance, though the distinction between its value in the East and West is not as pronounced.⁴³ The two romances discussed here, *Floris and Blancheflur* (hereafter referred to as *Floris*) and *Bevis of Hampton* (hereafter referred to as *Bevis*), were among the most popular late medieval romances in England and are extant in the comprehensive and important Auchinleck manuscript (c. 1330).⁴⁴ *Floris*, thought to have been

⁴² Graham, *The Arabian Mistress*, 179.

⁴³ A significant difference between medieval and modern romance is the emphasis on religion. In Middle English romance, the difference between East and West is centred on religion (the West is Christian, the East is Muslim). Contemporary romance novels, however, elide any overt reference to religion, preferring to indicate difference through references to ethnicity or culture. For an extended discussion, see Amy Burge, *Representing Difference in the Medieval and Modern Orientalist Romance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁴⁴ *Floris* is extant in four manuscripts, none of which is complete, that date from the late thirteenth century and the early fourteenth century Erik Kooper, ed., *Sentimental and Humorous*

composed around 1250, tells the story of Floris, the pagan son of the king of Spain, who travels to Babylon to rescue his beloved, Blancheflur, the Christian daughter of a slave woman, who has been sold to the emir of Babylon and is being kept in his harem. *Bevis*, written around 1300, is an expansive tale concerning the adventures of Bevis, a knight exiled from his Southampton home and raised by a Saracen king in fictional Ermony. Bevis eventually marries the king's daughter, Josian.

In *Floris*, virginity is valued monetarily. The monetary and social worth of virginity in the Middle Ages has been documented. Kim M. Phillips, in her analysis of court records from the late thirteenth century to the mid-fifteenth century writes that “evidence . . . indicates that premarital virginity was commonly believed to have a value which could be matched in money.”⁴⁵ This is reflected in *Floris*, in which women are referred to as “merchandise.”⁴⁶

Romances: Floris and Blancheflour, Sir Degrevant, *the Squire of Low Degree*, *the Tournament of Tottenham*, and *the Feast of Tottenham* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), 13. *Bevis* is extant in an extraordinary eight manuscripts; for a comprehensive list of extant manuscript and print versions of *Bevis* to 1711, see Jennifer Fellows, “*Bevis*: A Textual Survey,” in *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Fellows and Ivana Djordjevic (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 80–113. A full facsimile of Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript), which was produced in London in the 1330s and contains an unusual number of romances in Middle English, is available on the website of the National Library of Scotland, <http://auchinleck.nls.uk/>.

⁴⁵ Kim M. Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law,” in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 86.

⁴⁶ Kooper, *Sentimental and Humorous Romances*, 484, 584. All references to *Floris* are from the Auchinleck version (with 366 early lines supplemented from London, British Library, Egerton 2862) in Kooper, and all translations are my own. Casting women as goods and men as

Blancheflur's value is expressed monetarily; the parents of Floris expect "much property and goods"⁴⁷ in return for selling her, and they receive a valuable and ornate cup in return. Even Floris alludes to a monetary valuing of Blancheflur since, on his quest to find her, he tells people that he is seeking his "merchandise." The emir similarly regards Blancheflur financially, paying for her "seven times her weight in gold / For he intended, without doubt / To take that fair maiden as his queen."⁴⁸ Although his purchase does not explicitly refer to Blancheflur's virginity, the emphasis on female virginity throughout the romance might suggest that her worth is tied to her status as a "clean maiden [virgin]."⁴⁹ By assessing Blancheflur's body in monetary terms, literally measuring the worth of her body's weight, the emir can be said to be simultaneously valuing the virginity of that body.

In *Bevis*, on the other hand, virginity is presented as a Christian ideal and as vital for issues of heritage; Bevis needs a wife and heirs in order to regain his lands and rejoin the system of primogeniture. Kelly points out that "both virginity and paternity are essential to the workings of a feudal society that held the bulk of its wealth in private, aristocratic hands and passed on such wealth from father to son."⁵⁰ Following a spell of imprisonment and separation from Josian,

merchants is a trope that has been analyzed by Kathleen Coyne Kelly in "The Bartering of Blancheflur in the Middle English *Floris and Blancheflur*," *Studies in Philology* 91 (1994): 101–10.

⁴⁷ "much catell and goode" (Koop., 150).

⁴⁸ "sevyn sythes of gold her wyght, / For he thought, without weene, / That faire mayde have to queene" (ibid., 196–98).

⁴⁹ "mayde clene" (ibid., 59).

⁵⁰ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 8.

Bevis visits the patriarch⁵¹ in Jerusalem, who “forbid[s] him upon his life, / That he should take a wife, / Unless she were a virgin.”⁵² Bevis later repeats these words to Josian, underscoring the link between Christianity and virginity. The main threat to Josian throughout *Bevis* is sexual; a previous suitor, Brademond, threatens to “lay her by my side at night,” after which he will give her “to a carter, who is worn out!” and Miles, a suitor to whom Josian is briefly married, intends to have Josian “under the covers” and tries to “get her drunk [to get her] into bed” in order to “have his will.”⁵³

Even Bevis is initially figured as a sexual threat to Josian; when her father is told that Bevis has allegedly “deflowered his daughter,” he considers this a crime so serious that he sends Bevis, whom he “loved” and raised in his household, to be punished by Brademond, a “Saracen king.”⁵⁴ Sexual threat is taken seriously in *Bevis*. Up to the point of her marriage to Bevis,

⁵¹ *The Middle English Dictionary* explains that a patriarch was “the bishop of one of the chief sees of Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome, or Jerusalem.” See “Patriarke,” in *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED32636>.

⁵² “forbed him upon his lif, / That he never toke wif, / Boute she were clene maide”; Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelock the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 1967–69). All references to *Bevis* are from the Auchinleck version edited by Herzman et al., and all translations are my own.

⁵³ “lay hire a night be me side” (ibid., 924); “to a weine-pain, that is fordrive!” (ibid., 926); “under covertour” (ibid., 3184); “make hire dronke a bedde” (ibid., 3190); “have is wille” (ibid., 3161).

⁵⁴ “[his] doughter . . . forlain” (ibid., 1209); “lovede” (ibid., 569); “king of Sarasine” (ibid., 1071).

Josian's romantic adventures centre on maintaining her virginity for the knight whom Josian chooses to give it to: Bevis.⁵⁵ So it is perhaps unsurprising that, in romances in which virginity is emphasized and valued to this extent, virginity testing should feature so prominently.

“Through Cunning and Enchantment”: Testing and Ambiguity

When it comes to testing, it is generally agreed that virginity is intrinsically difficult to test. Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau, and Ruth Evans argue that “virginity is a paradoxical condition . . . defined by both absence and presence.”⁵⁶ Kelly concurs, writing that virginity is “something that counts only when it is thought lost.”⁵⁷ It is difficult to test for something that you cannot see. However, this does not prevent virginity tests from being deployed in romance. Indeed, extrapolating from Kelly's argument about virginity in twentieth-century film, neither modern sheikh romance nor medieval romance contests that virginity can be tested or verified.⁵⁸ As outlined above, a virginity test might typically involve an examination of a woman by a medical practitioner to establish the unbroken state of her hymen or otherwise ascertain her virginal or

⁵⁵ We could apply here the idea of “temporary virginity” that Felicity Riddy reads in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*—neither romance is about the heroine preserving her virginity forever but about protecting it long enough to lose it to the correct person. Felicity Riddy, “Temporary Virginity and the Everyday Body: *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and Bourgeois Self-Making,” in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 197–216.

⁵⁶ Sarah Salih, Anke Bernau, and Ruth Evans, “Introduction: Virginites and Virginity Studies,” in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 2.

⁵⁷ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 133.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

non-virginal status. In romance literature, on the other hand, virginity testing is more “romantic,” with little or no reference to the hymen or medical procedures and, in Middle English romance, the use of magic.

Floris contains a detailed description of a two-part virginity test. Every year the emir of Babylon selects a new wife from among his harem in a ritual with a virginity test at its core. The maidens are brought down from the harem into the emir’s fabulous garden, “the fairest on earth.”⁵⁹ In the garden is a fountain “of such awesome quality”⁶⁰ that,

If any woman approaches [the fountain] who has slept with a man

And she kneels on the ground

To wash her hands,

The water will scream as though it were mad,

And turn as red as blood.

Whichever maiden causes the water to act thus

Shall soon be put to death.

And those that are clean maidens [virgins],

They may wash themselves in the stream.

The water will run silent and clear

It will not cause them any harm.⁶¹

⁵⁹ “the fairest of al middelhard”; Kooper, *Sentimental and Humorous Romance*, 649.

⁶⁰ “of so mochel eye” (ibid., 664).

⁶¹ “Yif ther cometh ani maiden that is forleie, / And hi bowe to the grounde / For to waschen here honde, / The water wille yelle als hit ware wod, / And bicome on hire so red so blod. / Wich maiden the water fareth on so, / Hi schal sone be fordo. / And thilke that beth maidenes clene, /

The test is uncompromising and dramatic. Kelly has noted the parallel between the fountain that runs with blood and screams and the moment that a virgin is penetrated, arguing that the fountain is “capable, apparently, of impersonating the young woman at the precise moment of penetration . . . : that is, what caused her to shed the blood of virginity.”⁶² The test also indicates that, though the emir appears to be unconcerned about ensuring virginity for the purposes of lineage, as evidenced by the complete lack of children in Babylon, he is careful to test his prospective wives to ensure that they are “clean” and punishes those women who are not with death.⁶³

In *Bevis*, Josian is repeatedly put into situations that threaten her virginity, and the tricks and bargains that she uses either to protect her virginity or to prove that she is still a virgin feature prominently in the romance. When forced into an unwanted marriage with Yvor, a suitor chosen by her father, Josian wears an enchanted ring “of such virtue” claiming that, “while I am wearing that ring, / No man shall sexually desire me.”⁶⁴ After reuniting with Josian after his escape from imprisonment, Bevis discovers that she has been married to Yvor for seven years

Thai mai hem wassche of the rene. / The water wille erne stille and cler, / Nelle hit hem make no daunger” (ibid., 665–75).

⁶² Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 9.

⁶³ There are several examples of wells or fountains being used to measure virginity. They include two wells (one muddy, one clear) being used as a chastity index; a well that, if an unchaste woman were to dip her arms into it, would boil her skin away; and a spring that wells up if the woman is not a virgin; Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 412. The association of wells with virginity is also present in *Bevis*, in which the hero is healed in well water in which a virgin had bathed.

⁶⁴ “of swiche vertu”; “while ichave on that ilche ring, / To me schel no man have welling”; Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England*, 1470–72. Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 66–67, notes that magic rings were commonly used in literature for the preservation of virginity.

and asks her “for seven years you have been a queen / And every night a king [lay] next to you / How might you then be a virgin?”⁶⁵ Although the narrative has made it clear that Josian is a virgin through use of the ring, Bevis does not know about it (and apparently she does not tell him). Her virginity is not evident, so a test is proposed.

Bevis, with the patriarch’s advice to marry a “clean maiden” fresh in his mind, has been told that Josian is married “to be at table and in bed,” suggesting that she has been a wife in every sense of the word.⁶⁶ She proposes a solution to “prove” her virginity to Bevis, saying “and if you do not find me to be a virgin, / According to what any man can say, / Send me back to my enemies / All naked in only my smock!”⁶⁷ Unlike the emir’s virginity test, the one proposed by Josian relies not on physical signs of virginity but on verbal testimony; if she can prove beyond any slander or gossip that she is a virgin, then Bevis will accept it. The romance provides further evidence of Josian’s virginity in her taming of two lions that attack her and Bevis: a lion not harming virgins is a common trope. Both *Bevis* and *Floris* then, in their insistence on testing virginity, promote the assumption that women *need* to be tested since their virginal status cannot be taken for granted.

The virginity test persists into the modern sheikh romance. A particular test that occurs in at least three sheikh romances is that of visibly proving virginity on a blood-stained sheet following intercourse, a practice referred to in historical and contemporary accounts of virginity

⁶⁵ “thow havest seve year ben a queene, / And everi night a king be thee: / How mightow thanne maide be?”; Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England*, 2198–2200.

⁶⁶ “bothe to bord and to bedde” (ibid., 2012).

⁶⁷ “boute thee finde me maide wimman, / Be that eni man saie can, / Send me aghen to me fon / Al naked in me smok alon!” (ibid., 2203–06).

testing. The hero of *The Desert Sheikh's Captive Wife* “went very still when he saw the evidence of her lost innocence on the white sheet,”⁶⁸ and “the bloodstain on the sheet where he had lain with her”⁶⁹ informs the hero of *The Arabian Mistress* that the heroine was a virgin. In *Possessed by the Sheikh*, a bloody sheet is an archaic and traditional aspect of Eastern life; the hero informs the heroine that “it is a tribal custom amongst the nomad population that a blood-stained sheet is produced on the morning after a young woman is married as proof of her virginity.”⁷⁰ The ultimate virginity test for heroines in sheikh romance, paradoxically, is sex with the hero. In *At the Sheikh's Bidding*, as Erin “was forced to accept the awesome length of his erection,” “[Zahir] felt the unmistakable barrier of her virginity.”⁷¹ What the sheikh feels is presumably (and gynecologically suspiciously) her hymen.⁷² In *The Sultan's Virgin Bride*, the sign of virginity is more uncertain but still apparent: Tariq apparently realizes that the heroine, Farrah, is a virgin through her body's “instinctive” tightening.⁷³ This virginity test is paradoxical because the moment that the sheikh realizes that the heroine is a virgin is precisely the moment that she ceases to be a virgin. As Kelly states, “in any given narrative, at the very moment virginity can

⁶⁸ Lynne Graham, *The Desert Sheikh's Captive Wife* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2007), 151.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷⁰ Jordan, *Possessed by the Sheikh*, 101.

⁷¹ Shaw, *At the Sheikh's Bidding*, 125.

⁷² For a critique of the representation of the hymen in romance, see Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Fireside, 2009), 27, 37–40.

⁷³ Sarah Morgan, *The Sultan's Virgin Bride* (Richmond: Harlequin Mills and Boon, 2006), 126.

be asserted, it can also be denied.”⁷⁴ Any proof of virginity identified by penetration during a sex act can only be retrospective, for at the moment that virginity is identified it can simultaneously be disavowed. Encoded in the basis of the penetrative sex act as virginity test, then, is a fundamental ambiguity, since virginity is something that exists only as it is lost.

Virginity tests in medieval romance can be similarly ambiguous and open to interpretation. Kelly suggests that the virginity test in *Floris*, as with many methods of testing virginity, is perhaps not as reliable as it might appear. She draws attention to the second part of the emir’s selection process, immediately following identification of virginity in the fountain, in which a flower from the “Tree of Love” falls onto the woman whom the emir will select as his wife.⁷⁵ The narrative reveals that this part of the test can and will be manipulated by the emir:

if there is any maiden [there]

Whom the Emir holds in greater value

The flower shall be made to fall onto her

Through cunning and through enchantment.

Thus he [the emir] chooses via the flower

And ever we expect to hear that it shall be Blancheflur [whom he chooses].⁷⁶

Kelly argues that “the two signifiers, fountain and tree, participate in a destabilizing exchange by virtue of their narrative juxtaposition. That a signifier can be so patently false as the tree casts

⁷⁴ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 1.

⁷⁵ “Tre of Love”; Kooper, 678.

⁷⁶ “And yif ther ani maiden is / That th’ Amerail halt of mest pris, / The flour schal on here be went / Thourh art and thourgh enchantement. / Thous he cheseth thourgh the flour, / And evere we herkneth when hit be Blauncheflur” (ibid., 684–89).

doubt on the signifier immediately preceding it—namely, the fountain.”⁷⁷ In other words, if the emir can manipulate the second part of the selection process, then the first part might also be manipulated and the maidens’ virginity faked.

The virginity test proposed by Josian in *Bevis* seems to be similarly abstruse. Her virginity test hinges not on physical evidence but on a lack of verbal testimony: she is reliant on people *not* saying that she is *not* a virgin. The test is thus something of a reversal; Josian does not propose to prove her virginity actively but asserts that others should try to prove that she is not a virgin. Presumably, even if she had sex with Yvor, she would pass the test if no one spoke up to proclaim that her marriage to him was consummated. This is a test that invites silence. This is not the first time in *Bevis* that verbal testimony has been associated with the proving or disproving of sexual relations. The terms of the proposed test—that Josian should be proven a non-virgin “*according to what any man can say*”—echo the accusation of illicit sex for which Bevis is punished following their first sexual encounter. Although accused of having had “illicit sexual relations” with Josian, “he did nothing but kiss her once,” the text declares: “/ *There was nothing else about them that anyone knew.*”⁷⁸ This rather odd line highlights what is at stake in her virginity test: the sexual state of a body can be verbally discerned. In this romance, sexual encounters seem to be provable (or not) according to the accounts of others, emphasizing the performative nature of sexuality; the state of the sexual body is constructed and hidden or exposed according to verbal testimony.

⁷⁷ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 9.

⁷⁸ “forlain”; Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England*, 1209; “he dede nothing, bouthe ones hire kiste, / *Nought elles bi hem men ne wiste*” (ibid., 1213–14; emphasis added).

The test is referred to twice more at significant moments in the romance. In the first moment, Bevis accepts Josian's proposed virginity test: "I willingly concede to that agreement!"⁷⁹ Later in the romance, he wins a tournament at Aumberforce, and the maiden there proposes that he live chastely with her as her "lord" for seven years.⁸⁰ Bevis replies using the same words that he used earlier to agree to Josian's virginity test. This uncommon reference to male chastity thus collocates directly with female virginity, supporting Kelly's point that male virginity is "made intelligible only by reference to an elaborate feminized and feminizing signifying system."⁸¹ That we should be so forcefully reminded of Josian's strange virginity test at a moment when Bevis's own chastity is under threat cannot be coincidental. Perhaps the repetition serves to remind us of her promise at a moment when Bevis himself makes a similar vow. However, I suggest that, because Josian's test relies on the unstable testimony of others, which has already been shown to be unreliable in the false accusation of her "deflowering," the repetition of Bevis' words imbues this new chastity agreement with the same instability to which Josian's was subjected, casting doubt on his own promise of chastity.

The second moment when Josian's virginity test is alluded to occurs after Josian has killed Miles, her unwanted third husband, and is condemned to be burned to death. As Bevis rides up to rescue her, she is described on the pyre, where "she stood naked in her smock," an almost direct reference to her earlier proposed punishment for *not* being a virgin.⁸² Aside from the original virginity agreement, this is the only time that the word *smock* is used in the entire

⁷⁹ "in that forward I graunte wel!" (ibid., 2208).

⁸⁰ "lord" (ibid., 3836).

⁸¹ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 93.

⁸² "in hire smok she stod naked"; Herzman et al., *Four Romances of England*, 3289.

romance. I am not arguing that the text suggests here that Josian is not a virgin. But by drawing our attention back to her original virginity test at a moment when her virginity can be perceived by Bevis to have been at risk once again (from her marriage to Miles), *Bevis* underscores the importance of virginity while revealing that the terms of the agreement, like many virginity tests, elude clear interpretation. In modern sheikh romance, too, virginity tests can be cheated. On some occasions, believing that the heroine is not a virgin, the hero will attempt to fake the proof by bleeding onto a sheet himself. In *Possessed by the Sheikh*, the hero cuts his arm and holds the sheet “against the cut,”⁸³ and the hero of *The Arabian Mistress* murmurs “I will cut myself and smear blood on the sheet.”⁸⁴ The sheikh’s falsifying of the virginity test is ironic since the heroine in each case is a virgin yet; as Kelly points out, just as the loss of virginity can be faked, so too can a sexually experienced woman simulate virginity.⁸⁵ This is precisely what the sheikh hero believes the heroine is doing; as I pointed out earlier, he does not believe that she is a virgin because she is Western.

Furthermore, if virginity is performative, enacted through visible signs on the body, then it is possible for false virginity to be displayed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald highlights the precariousness of having sexual experience or inexperience legible on the female body, for once virginity is legible it can be counterfeited.⁸⁶ According to the sheikh, the heroine is performing

⁸³ Jordan, *Possessed by the Sheikh*, 101.

⁸⁴ Graham, *The Desert Sheikh’s Captive Wife*, 93.

⁸⁵ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 128.

⁸⁶ Tamar Jeffers McDonald, “Introduction,” in *Virgin Territory: Representing Sexual Inexperience in Film*, ed. Tamar Jeffers McDonald (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 6.

promiscuous, Western sexuality and therefore *cannot* be a virgin. Although he is pleasantly surprised to discover that she actually *is* a virgin, the fact that he misinterprets her earlier sexual performance suggests that it can equally be possible to misread the performance of virginity: in other words, for someone who is *not* a virgin to believably perform virginity. Kelly argues that, “in the end, all tests for verifying virginity are inherently flawed.”⁸⁷ Certainly, the tests in *Bevis*, *Floris*, and these six modern sheikh romances seem to be rooted more in uncertainty than in certainty.

Virginity as Loss and Possession

If virginity tests are fundamentally unreliable—if their primary function of identifying the presence or absence of virginity cannot be relied on—then they must have another function in these romances. I suggest that, though these retrospective, liminal tests might not be reliable as clear indicators of virginity, they do indicate what is at stake in a discourse that positions women as the possessions of men to whom they have “lost” their virginity. Virginity testing in these romances is part of a system whereby men control female sexuality. In *Floris* and *Bevis*, it is men who threaten and demand virginity and, in the case of the emir’s manipulation of the test, men who control it. Equally, in modern romance, it is the sheikh’s responsibility to confirm or deny virginity; it is the sheikh who proposes faking the test by bleeding onto a sheet, and it is the penetrative intercourse that he proposes that ultimately reveals the heroine’s virginity.

Loss is integral to virginity in sheikh romance; deploying penetrative intercourse as a test indicates how the test for virginity and the loss of virginity are one and the same. Doreen Owens

⁸⁷ Kelly, *Performing Virginity*, 18.

Malek suggests that virgins are so persistent in romance because their transition into womanhood, in other words their loss of virginity, is what is fascinating and appealing about the romance.⁸⁸ The revelation of virginity goes hand in hand with an assumption of male possession of the heroine. Some romance heroes express a desire for virginity that connects the loss of virginity at the moment of testing with male possession. Although they do not expect heroines to be virgins, sheikhs are “very pleased” when they are.⁸⁹ For Tariq, “the knowledge that he’d been the first and only man to experience the seductive passion of Farrah Tyndall brought a soft smile of masculine satisfaction to his face.”⁹⁰ Similarly, Zahir feels “primitive possessiveness” following his discovery of Erin’s virginal status.⁹¹

Losing her virginity means that the heroine is now positioned within the romance as a potential wife, mother, or lover; in other words, the virginity test is the means of her transition both into womanhood and into a subordinate position within the heteronormative matrix of the romance, within which the hero maintains hegemonic power. As Susan Gubar indicates in her analysis of “the blank page,” bloodstains, representative of the loss of virginity, are a “testimony to the woman . . . as a silent token of exchange”⁹² in a discourse in which a bride is property passed from father to husband. For Anke Bernau, the loss of virginity is the mechanism by which

⁸⁸ Doreen Owens Malek, “Loved I Not Honor More: The Virginal Heroine in Romance,” in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 118.

⁸⁹ Graham, *The Arabian Mistress*, 104.

⁹⁰ Morgan, *The Sultan’s Virgin Bride*, 127.

⁹¹ Shaw, *At the Sheikh’s Bidding*, 127.

⁹² Susan Gubar, “‘The Blank Page’ and the Issues of Female Creativity,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, 2 (1981): 254.

a man imprints onto a woman: it is through this imprinting that ownership is transferred from father to husband.⁹³ This is explicit in *Bevis* and *Floris*; the emir's monetary valuing of Blancheflur's virginal body echoes the wealth in property and lineage that Bevis will gain via Josian's virginity, indicating the value of female virginity in a world of male primogeniture. Although heterosexuality might not have been an organizing principle for gender in the same way that it is considered to be for modern sexuality, medieval gender roles of masculine and feminine were still defined by a social structure in which they were considered oppositional and wielded different levels of power: a structure that resembles the modern institution of heterosexuality. At root, then, virginity matters more to the men in these romances than to the women.

Romance narratives "are crucial sites for the operation of patriarchal ideology"; "the hero, as representative of the phallus and patriarchal power, instigates and controls the heroine's desire, forcing her to recognise and take her place in opposition to his subjectivity—in the place of not-male of the female other."⁹⁴ Although Jan Cohn claims that romance novels go some way toward redistributing power between hero and heroine, she simultaneously admits that romances retain "the essential structure of sexual ideology"⁹⁵ within which the heroine's virginity and its loss to male virility function as mutually reinforcing signifiers. This reveals that what makes one a woman in romance is the loss of virginity, and it is precisely this loss, I argue, that allows the

⁹³ Bernau, *Virgins*, 78–79.

⁹⁴ Teresa L. Ebert, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," *Cultural Critique* 10 (1998): 21, 40.

⁹⁵ Jan Cohn, *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 36.

hero to possess the heroine: she is possessed not because she *is* a virgin but because she is an *ex*-virgin. It is the virginity test's revelation of loss that fundamentally confirms masculine power over female sexuality and, ultimately, over the heroine herself. Thus, the virginity test, in its retrospective inscribing of gender identity in Middle English and modern popular sheikh romance, functions according to a heterosexual model of difference, emphasizing differentiated gender behaviour and upholding a hegemonic system of gender dominance and submission.

Conclusion

Romance values virginity. Both medieval romance and modern romance place cultural and, in some cases, monetary worth on female virginity and make a strong case for testing it. Yet both public tests—magical fountains, tame lions, blossom trees, and bloody sheets—and more private tests—penetrative sexual intercourse—are liminal, unstable, or retrospective; some tests indicate virginity only after it is lost, and others can be manipulated, casting doubt on their ability to function as reliable indicators of virginity. Ultimately, testing for virginity functions, in both medieval romance and modern romance, to secure male ownership of women as part of the romance genre's heteronormative gender system; the importance of family and lineage in romance values virginity as part of a system of patriarchal family relations in which the loss of female virginity positions women as brides, wives, and mothers: submissive roles within patriarchal gender relations. This is finally what the discourse of possession in virginity is all about: ensuring ownership of women's bodies and their potential progeny.

Moreover, the connections made in these sheikh romances among virginity, the medieval, and the East is revealing of popular attitudes toward each. Virginity is medieval, both in the parallels between testing in medieval romance and modern romance and in the emphasis on

virginity in the romance East as anti-modern and retrograde. In this way, these romances are engaging with precisely the traditional/modern dichotomy that frames contemporary debates over virginity testing in parts of Asia and Africa; as Ayse Parla notes in the case of Turkey, virginity exams “are either tolerated, or even championed, for protecting the traditional values of honor, chastity, and virtue; or alternatively, they are condemned as proof of our failure in attaining the desirable degree of modernity.”⁹⁶ For a series called *Modern Romance* to dwell so persistently on virginity while, paradoxically, emphasizing the *lack* of modernity in valuing virginity suggests a deeply conflicted attitude toward virginity and virginity testing in contemporary Western romantic fiction.

For contemporary popular romance fiction to construct the “romance East” as a space in which “medieval” virginity can be celebrated echoes the similar practice of situating practices or attitudes inappropriate today—such as sexual violence—in a distant space, such as the historical past or, indeed, the East.⁹⁷ Relegating the valuing and testing of virginity to the East might be in line with current popular ideas about the East, but it also reveals some of the romance genre’s motivations for situating this valuing in the fictional romance East. In other words, for the romance genre to celebrate the unequal traditions of heteronormativity, the virginity testing that upholds these traditions must be situated “elsewhere.” As much as many Western readers, indicated through countless news and comment pieces, might condemn “foreign” cultures for continuing to conduct virginity tests, the gender hegemony that these tests uphold is clearly

⁹⁶ Parla, “The ‘Honor’ of the State,” 66.

⁹⁷ See Amy Burge, “Do Knights Still Rescue Damsels in Distress? Reimagining the Medieval in the Mills and Boon Historical Romance,” in *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, ed. Katherine Cooper and Emma Short (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 95–114.

evident and even celebrated in our own romantic cultural imagination, as revealed in the pages of some of the most popular contemporary Western fiction.

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