Abstract
This article considers how the press announcements about Elinor Glyn’s Three Weeks (1907) and then the reviews of the novel, titillated the reading public. It then considers how sex, pleasure and desire function in the novel, centring on the tiger skin on which the adulterous love affair between Paul Verdayne and the Lady is consummated. I consider how desire and pleasure is located not only within the novel, but also how the tiger-skin is embedded with those desires and pleasures. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) work on how emotions and feelings travel, penetrate and stick to particular bodies, I consider the circulation of affect, of affective value, can fix the objects of emotions. If an object such as a book which has received a great deal of advance press regarding its possible censoring, or a tiger-skin on which an adulterous affair is consummated, is associated with a particular discourse repeatedly, then certain affects will stick to this object. In short, how does a tiger-skin come to function as erotic shorthand for sex, pleasure and desire? The tiger-skin in Three Weeks became a marker of all these emotions and affects, circulating in the cultural afterlife of this text in significant ways. Considering how the tiger-skin functions in the novel complicates our understanding of generic codes and readerly expectations, and how desire is messily articulated.

Keywords
Elinor Glyn; Edwardian popular fiction; Three Weeks; sex, pleasure and desire; Sara Ahmed

1902. A tiger-skin is on display in a shop under the Hotel National in Lucerne, Switzerland. An unhappily married British woman sees the tiger-skin and, bolstered by a royalty cheque for her first novel, enters into negotiations with the shop-owner. She emerges with the tiger-skin, and places it upon the floor of her sitting room in the hotel, where she reclines upon it, seeking to attract her husband’s attention. He laughs at the purchase and dismisses her; she later recounts that his sole reaction to the tiger-skin seemed to be one of irritation as an extra travelling case had to be bought to carry it home.
1930. The Walt Disney Company releases *The Shindig*. The seven-minute black & white film features, as do many of the company’s other films, a group of anthropomorphised animals who engage in a variety of musical activities. Early on in the film, Horace Horsecollar drives up to a farmhouse in order to pick up Clarabelle Cow for a date. He pulls on the doorbell, which is, it emerges, her tail sticking through a glory-hole in the door. The camera cuts to inside where an undressed Clarabelle is laying on her bed, reading a novel, which she quickly hides under the hay of her bed to prevent Horsecollar from seeing it. Her nakedness is emphasised by her quickly dancing around the room, udders swaying, before she moves behind a screen to put on a short spotted skirt to cover her bottom half. The film is subsequently banned in Ohio film theatres in 1932, because of the novel that Clarabelle is reading.¹

These two incidents speak to the affective qualities possessed by objects: separated by nearly thirty years, they are linked by Elinor Glyn’s *Three Weeks*, published in 1907. Glyn was the purchaser of the tiger-skin, while *Three Weeks*, in which an adulterous affair is consummated on a fictional version of a tiger-skin, was Clarabelle’s choice of reading matter. In this article, I consider how the press discussion of *Three Weeks* acted as a form of foreplay, and how the scandalised reviews served to titillate the reading public, before providing a reading of sex, pleasure and desire in

¹ Clarabelle is initially featured in a state of undress, similar to many other unclothed animals in other Walt Disney short films at the time. In *Shindig*, it is the particular act of reading *Three Weeks* renders her unclothed state as nudity, and thus as sexually provocative, particularly in light of the Motion Picture Production Code, which the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America adopted in 1930.
the novel, centring on the tiger skin on which the adulterous love affair between Paul Verdayne and the Lady is consummated. With reference to a different context, Ann Cvetkovich has usefully spoken to the ‘[e]xploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions’ (7). There are affective capacities in considering how desire and pleasure is located not only within *Three Weeks*, but also within the tiger-skin embodying those desires and pleasures. Sara Ahmed explains how emotions and feelings travel, penetrate and stick to particular bodies; emotions do not exist *within* bodies or objects, but are placed therein and thereon, and circulate between them. ‘[I]t is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others,’ Ahmed argues, ‘that surfaces or boundaries are made: the “I” and “we” are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others’ (2004: 10). For Ahmed, feelings and emotions are sticky: that is, stickiness creates, sustains and disrupts selfhood, through ‘effects of circulation and interaction’ (8). Feelings do not come from *outside* the object, but emerge through this circulation and interaction between bodies and signifiers: ‘[a]ffect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs [….] Signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become’ (45). This circulation of affect, of *affective value*, can fix the objects of emotions: if an object (say, a book which has received a great deal of advance press regarding its plot and possible censoring, or even, say, a tiger-skin) is associated with a particular discourse repeatedly, then certain affects will stick to this object.
This is how a particular object is understood as having certain characteristics – this is both because of the way in which individuals have come into contact with that object and its own history of sticky associations. This consideration of objects is particularly pertinent when considering affective histories of desire, in which the desire is one that is not permitted or condoned. The Lady’s adulterous desire for a much-younger man is a desire which would not have been widely condoned in terms of social expectations: as Nickianne Moody notes, romance in the late nineteenth century ‘promoted a passive heterosexuality for women seeking containment through marriage’ and deviation through ‘illicit desire’ was met with punishment by ‘largely unbreakable conventions for narrative resolution’ (2003: 94). The Lady does die at the end of the novel, killed by her jealous husband. However, the text implies that he is an alcoholic, prone to rage, and mentally unwell, all of which textually works to give the Lady some license in finding love (and a child) in the arms of another, as does the fact that the husband – who is, after all, the rightful king and whose kingly body should be understood within late nineteenth-century mores concerning royal right of action – is then killed by the Lady’s devoted groom, who goes unpunished. In other words, the desire of the Lady, as unconventional as it is, is positioned as being of such significance and magnitude that she is not wholly textually eradicated: her son lives, and is the heir to the throne, while Paul’s love for the Lady remains unabated with no happy ending for him.² It is this desire which frames the novel,

² Laura Horak has explored how Glyn used her age and knowledge, during the
I argue, and its reception in the press. Where this leaves us is with feelings as accumulating or sticking to objects, and thereby concealing precisely how they were constructed; in other words, appearing as natural. How does a tiger-skin come to function as erotic shorthand for sex, pleasure and desire? The tiger-skin in *Three Weeks* became a marker of all these emotions and affects, circulating in the cultural afterlife of this text in significant ways.

**Selling Sex: ‘It’ and a Tiger-Skin**

Glyn’s oeuvre before 1907 consisted largely of high society *romans à clef* and a fashion column in *Scottish Life*, and these had been both mildly well-received by the press and relatively popular with the reading public. Her calling card in these early novels, among them *The Visits of Elizabeth* (1900), *The Reflections of Ambrosine* (1902), and *The Vicissitudes of Evangeline* (1905), was a young, female, first-person narrator whose naïve and often comedic forays into the upper echelons of society are rewarded with marriage. This successful narrative structure shifted with Glyn’s fifth work, which focused on the sexual and emotional adventures of a young man: in *Three Weeks*, Paul Verdayne is sent to the continent by his parents to avoid a possible marriage with the daughter of the local parson. In Lucerne, he is initially irritated by and resists the attentions of a mysterious older woman. His initial disgust with this woman, referred

Hollywood phase of her career, to counter criticisms about her unconventional interest in sexual relations: “Glyn mitigated backlash against her version of female sexual authority by containing her Tiger Queen image within the persona of a middle-aged, upper-class, British woman. Glyn was fifty-six years old and a widow when she arrived in Hollywood. Even atop her tiger skin, she emphasized her British propriety by serving tea at her interviews” (2010: 83).
to as the Lady, is replaced by fascination. In Switzerland, and then Venice, they spend the three weeks of the novel's title in passionate love-making (including episodes on a tiger-skin which he has purchased for her) before she disappears, precipitating a brain fever in Paul. The unhappily married queen of a minor Balkan kingdom, the Lady has a child as a result of this liaison. Paul and the Lady do not meet again and she is killed by husband. After five years of mourning, Paul witnesses the birthday celebrations for his son, the heir to the throne of the fictional Balkan kingdom, and resolves to make something of his life – it is intimated that this will be in British foreign policy and Parliamentary work – as witness to his love for the Lady. In Modernism and Romance (1908), R.A. Scott-James claimed that ‘the great sex-question’ or the ‘relations between men and women before or after marriage’ (93) provided the heart of most modern novels. Scott-James’ argument speaks to the more publically acceptable awareness, at the turn of the century, that sex after marriage was a topic that could and should be discussed in some arenas. David Trotter has identified a loose grouping of novels published between 1895 and 1914, which he terms ‘sex’ novels, and which includes such texts as H.G. Wells’ Ann Veronica (1909), Henry de Vere Stacpoole’s The Blue Lagoon (1908) and Glyn’s Three Weeks. Trotter notes that these novels ‘were not pornographic’ but did ‘speak openly about sexuality and its discontents’ (1989, p. 95), and that there is a sub-grouping of the ‘sex’ novels which are connected by a shared depiction of the relationship between a young man and an older woman, with the sexual awakening (regardless whether intercourse occurs)
represented as pedagogical (1989: 101). In the sub-grouping of the ‘sex’ novels, Trotter locates novels such as Victoria Cross’ *The Greater Love* (1913), Hubert Wales’ *The Yoke* (1907; suppressed after a campaign by the National Vigilance Association) and Glyn’s *Three Weeks*. For Trotter, ‘the sex novel incorporates itself as sex tract, becoming the limit of knowledge’ and he quickly notes that *Three Weeks* ‘most profitably troubled that limit’ (1993: 102), which acknowledges the novel’s titillating subject-matter, as well as its overwhelming success, and also, more obliquely, the consequences of this for Glyn herself.

The cultural afterlife of *Three Weeks* is a complex one, with public outcries and campaigns, authorised and unauthorised film adaptations, fan clubs, men claiming to be Verdayne, stage plays, parodies, anonymous and unlicensed sequels and film adaptations, bans, and multiple references in film and fiction, from the satiric mention of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) – Laura Frost notes that, for Huxley, ‘Glyn represented the nadir of both contemporary fiction and popular cinema’ (144) – to D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920). The unlicensed sequels include *One Day* (1909), subtitled ‘A Sequel to *Three Weeks*, and *High Noon* (1910) subtitled ‘A New Sequel to *Three Weeks*. Both novels are anonymous, and published by The Macauley Company in New York (the novels detail two different possibilities of Paul’s life some time after the Lady’s death). In 1907, a few months after the novel was published, a parody, *Too Weak* by Ellova

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3 It is certainly of significance then Glyn retrospectively positioned ‘*Three Weeks* [as] the product’ of her sexual and emotional unhappiness in her marriage (A. Glyn 1936: 129).
Gryn (a pseudonym for Montague Elior), was published. This is all testament to the immediate success of the novel. Its continued success is attested to by a court-case in 1915, brought by the Society of Authors on Glyn’s behalf, against the makers of a film parody, *Pimple’s Three Weeks* (without the option) with apologies to Elinor Glyn (1915). The case was reported in the national press, which speaks to the ongoing interest in the novel, as I have discussed elsewhere (Gillis 2014). The novel’s status as an international bestseller is attested to in a number of ways: Desmond Flower, in his 1934 study of the best-sellers of the previous century, indicated that it was the only book selling more than 100,000 copies in 1907; a decade after initial publication, a million (cheap edition) copies were released in the autumn of 1917 (Glyn 1955: 244) and, in his biography of his grandmother, which drew on family correspondence, Anthony Glyn noted that, in addition to a large number of abusive letters, ‘Kings and Queens sent messages; Australian bushmen, Bishops, Klondike miners, Roman Catholic priests all wrote letters of appreciation’ for *Three Weeks* (126). Glyn moved to Hollywood in the early 1920s, and was involved as scriptwriter and director for a number of films, notably *It* (1927), which was a star vehicle for Clara Bow. She was highly influential during her time in Hollywood: Anne Morey notes that she outlasted many of the British authors brought to Hollywood with her, despite mixed reviews, and that while she was ‘notoriously difficult to work with, Glyn was associated with an average of two pictures a year, and her projects were assigned to directors such as […] King Vidor’ (110). Vincent Barnett has excavated in considerable detail the Hollywood contracts with Glyn, and the sums involved indicate her
powerful position there in the 1920s (2007: 2008). Glyn became an international brand on the back of the international success of *Three Weeks*, and her position is evidenced by the placement of her name – above that of the actors, the director or the studio – in the advertisement for the 1924 adaptation of *Three Weeks*.

The long-lived success of *Three Weeks* was parlayed by Glyn into underpinning her transatlantic public persona as the ‘High Priestess of the God of Love’. As Alexis Weedon and Barnett posit, Glyn was ‘fashioned deliberately as “Madame Glyn”, a popular genre author famous as much for her vies on marriage and beauty, as for her many work of (initially) written and then visualised fiction: “franchisability” could apply to both text and author’ (2014). One of the hallmarks of the Elinor Glyn brand was, as demonstrated by many of the publicity photos from the 1920s onwards, is Glyn surrounded by at least one tiger-skin. Despite her time as a scriptwriter and director in Hollywood, and her having written some thirty-five pieces of fiction and non-fiction, it is portentous that, when she died in 1943, the *New York Times* headed her obituary with two identifying pieces of information: (1) her coining of the term ‘It’ (a charismatic *sprezzatura*-like appeal that is often identified as sexual); (2) her authorship of *Three Weeks*:

**ELINOR GLYN DIES; NOVELIST, AGED 78: Self-Styled ‘High Priestess of God of Love’ Shocked Many Readers of 2 Continents GAVE ‘IT’ NEW MEANING**

**Author of ‘THREE WEEKS’ Had Vogue in the Pre-First**
World War and ‘Flapper-Age’ Days. (Anon. 1943: 23; emphasis in original)

Glyn’s work in Hollywood certainly gave her a wide audience, certainly, but it was her authorship of Three Weeks which precipitated her international celebrity. Indeed, Glyn was associated with a tantalising smuttiness for much of the twentieth century and an undated piece of doggerel about the tiger-skin in Three Weeks — “Would you like to sin/ with Elinor Glyn/ on a tiger-skin?/ Or would you prefer/ to err/ with her/ on some other fur?” (Glyn 1936: 127) — circulated in news items relating to Glyn and, more generally, to the Edwardian period and early Hollywood through until the early twenty-first century. The novel’s immense international popularity is attested to by the multiple and transnational cultural instances of the novel’s cultural afterlife.

Selling Books: Titillation and the Tiger-Skin

The immense popularity of Three Weeks must be initially traced to before its publication. Glyn contributed to this: she had finished writing it by early 1907 and it was announced as forthcoming in late April (see the advertisement, for example, from the 12th April in the Essex Country Chronicle [4]). Just ten days later, however, the novel was pulled from publication: The Western Times melancholically noted on the 23rd April that the ‘publication of Mrs. Elinor Glyn’s novel, ‘Three Weeks’ is, Messrs Duckworth announce, indefinitely postponed’, which will be a ‘disappointment to society and to other people’ (3). The strip-tease around publication continued and a month later it was announced that the book would be published in June of that year. In her autobiography,
Glyn indicates that she was advised by friends who had read the manuscript that it was too racy, hence the dilly-dallying over whether or not to publish. This pre-publication excitement should be understood as part of the titillation which circulated around the novel: indeed, the ‘will she, won’t she’ was widely reported in the press, from the small-scale Bath Chronicle to the national Daily Mail. Class authority was invoked, however, and having ‘submitted the proofs to a censorship of personages of the highest position’, Glyn had apparently, it was reported, considered their responses as having ‘sanctioned the proceedings’, in an anonymous piece in the Daily Mail (18 May 1907: 4) and there was an aristo-sanctioned probity then connected to the discussions around the decision to publish. This titillation of readers was sustained by the sort of foreplay that the pre-publication discussions about the novel stroked. For example, the piece in the Daily Mail that referred to ‘the [previous] announcements which have appeared so mysterious’ and that it had been ‘hurriedly withdrawn from the Press’, worked to excite potential readers. The Daily Mail claimed that ‘[i]t now appears that Mrs. Glyn, having written her book, was struck, on its appearance in proof with the fear that it was, let us say, too indelicate.’

In addressing the rumours swirling around the novel’s withdrawal, the novel was described in the Daily Mail as ‘deal[ing] [...] with a problem that will be familiar to readers of that masterpiece ‘l’Héritage’ of Maupassant’. It indicated that this subject matter would be ‘a problem’, and that it would be ‘difficult to approach without causing offence.’ (4) Guy de Maupassant’s short story “L’Heritage” (1884) hinges on a will in
which a fortune is left to a woman on the condition that she and her husband have a child within three years of marriage. As the deadline approaches and there is no child, the woman has an affair (largely condoned by her family, although not entirely by her mournfully confused husband) with her husband’s colleague in order to become pregnant. Once assured of a child, and with the fortune secured, she repudiates the attentions of her lover, and the story concludes with a scene in which the child is baptised against the backdrop of a gossipy discussion about another colleague’s wife’s affairs. The Daily Mail’s reference to the Maupassant short story should be understood as invoking a particular kind of reader who is au fait with a world of adulterous desires. This invocation acts like a form of foreplay for those readers reading the review who are not familiar with this supposed Continental laxity towards sexual mores. In any case, while Maupassant’s story is an indictment of the family politics of the petty bourgeoisie in the Third Republic, mentions of it in the literary gossip pages in reference to Three Weeks would have raised the spectre of illicit sexual intercourse for the well-read reader, and contributed to the titillation around the novel’s publication. This allusion to French sexual morals in the English papers is brought into (comedic) relief by its reception in the French papers. Mentioned alongside texts by Vernon Lee and John Ruskin (as part of a review of the latest Tauchnitz publications), Three Weeks was reviewed in the Mercure de France. The reviewer acknowledged its overwhelming popularity through referencing its ‘readers beyond count’ but went on to point out acidly that the novel’s success was proof of excessive sentimentalism on the part of the British readers: ‘the
reading tastes of the English public will not soon be rid of sentimentalism [...] and [this] unbelievably and morbidly sentimental text was met by a disconcerting fascination’ (p. 351).\(^4\) Despite the dismissal of the French reviewers, the novel was wildly popular on the Continent.

The novel was finally published on the 11\(^{th}\) June 1907, with the scandalised reviews first appearing four days later. The titillation (and aristo-sanctioned probity regarding the decision to publish) was referred to by its publishers, Duckworth, which, in a post-publication advert in the *Daily Mail* in July 1907, described it as ‘causing something like a sensation’ (3). ‘Sensation’ has several meanings that are pertinent here. One is a state of excitement that is created by an occurrence, here the publication of *Three Weeks*. Another is a term commonly used in advertisements around publishing and theatre to indicate a certain kind of risqué popularity. But another meaning relates to the state of awareness or consciousness linked with an impression that is received by one of the organs of sense. As sentimental is a contemporaneous term used to described knowledge or awareness through the senses – as gestured towards by the anonymous reviewer in the *Mercure de France* review – it is helpful to consider how sensation functions in relation to *Three Weeks*. One of the ways that this novel became a cultural phenomenon was through this version of sensation: an accrual of titillation built excitement about the novel, even before publication. There was both excitement and a concern, on the part of the

\(^4\) All translations my own. The original reads: ‘le goût du public anglais ne sera pas de sitôt débarrassé de sentimentalisme, et [...] [un] récit invraisemblable et morbidelement sentimental sera accueilli avec un engouement déconcertant’.
establishment, that the words on the page would (im)press themselves onto the readers. The concern about the novel’s capacity to inflame sexual desire in (primarily female) readers, and the subsequent impact on sexual morals (public and private) is not a particularly new concern, but where *Three Weeks* is of concern is because of its account of active female sexual desire, pleasure and agency, and because of its overwhelming international popularity. In the ‘Introduction to My American Readers’, with which Glyn prefaced the first American edition of the novel, she addressed obliquely the press responses to the representation of desire in *Three Weeks*. She was adamant that the novel was about love, rather than sex, and refers to the ‘misunderstanding and misrepresentation [the novel] received from nearly the entire press and a section of the public in England’ (5). Glyn noted that some (including a headmaster of Eton) condemned the novel without having read it. In her autobiography, she refers to a number of examples of individuals who revised their opinion when they read it, and the list is expanded in her grandson’s biography, which includes a reference to an unknown male scholar who ‘sobb[ed] that he had grossly misjudged her’ (Glyn, 1955: 127). But these nay-sayers were far out-numbered by those who were titillated by the novel’s reputation: this titillation is captured by Nancy Cunard who, in her memoirs, refers to the excitement, when a teenager, of being present at a discussion in which the plot of *Three Weeks* was summarised, and being excited by the prospect of even just reading the Ellova Gryn parody *Too Weak* (1907), which she kept under her pillow.
For many, like Cunard, it was the uncompromising pursuit of Verdayne by the Lady for sexual means that was so titillating, rather than the actual descriptions of sexual congress. Well-placed asterisks and well-recognised metaphors work simultaneously titillate the reader and to forestall any voyeuristic gratification on the part of the same: logs tumble together ‘causing a cloud of golden sparks’ and flames leap ‘up again’ when the pair on the tiger-skin (40). Through these metaphors for sex, the novel produces an imaginative space for the reader to inhabit in terms of pleasure and desire: while the actual specifics of the coupling in *Three Weeks* are not given (a single line of asterisks marks the point of first connection), the body(ness) of desire is rendered both possible and stickily deposited in the signifier of the tiger-skin. In the Preface to the American edition, Glyn in her defence of the Lady, does not, in fact, refer to the scene on the tiger-skin. She does, however, implicitly draw attention to it, describing her account of the Lady as ‘the study of a Tiger’ (5). In the novel, the Lady does refer to the tiger-skin as possibly her lover in a previous life and she is described as tigerish at various points. Here is how, for Glyn, the body(ness) of female sexual desire can be discussed. The Lady does die for her desires, which is not surprising considering the novel’s genealogy in nineteenth-century popular fictions, but her death is not what circulates beyond the novel. Nor is it the grief of Paul on her death, nor the birth of the child, from an adulterous relationship, that would take up a throne in the unnamed Balkan kingdom. Rather the tiger-skin, with its layered and stickily-imbued complexities of sex, pleasure and desire, is what moves beyond the literal confines of the text.
Selling Desire: Sin and a Tiger-Skin

The purchase of the tiger-skin by Paul in *Three Weeks* is marked by two linked events. Paul has had his first sexual encounter (a kiss) with the Lady and has written to Isabella (the parson’s daughter whose attentions precipitated the trip to Switzerland) to indicate that he had been mistaken about the nature of their relationship. Their physical relationship consisted of one kiss, a kiss which is then erased by the same from the Lady. Paul had already noted that the Lady has animal skins in her suite, although these are not described in detail and act largely as markers of the Lady’s foreign-ness. In the shop, Paul muses that the beast must have been a ‘magnificent creature […] [and the] deepest, most perfectly marked, largest one he had ever seen’ (36). This perfection is again underscored when he remarks that it is an ‘infinitely better specimen that his lady had over her couch’ (35). Paul cuts away ‘the pinked-out black cloth which came with the skin’ because he thinks it looks ‘banal and he knew she would not like that’ (36). This is then sent over to the Lady’s suite and he next sees it under the Lady: ‘loveliest sight of all, in front of the fire, stretched at full length, was his tiger – and on him – also at full length – reclined the lady’ (37). Dressed in purple and gold, between her lips a rose (Paul ‘had never seen one as red before’ [37]), she caresses the skin and tells Paul that ‘I now have all your feelings and your passions and now I have got your skin – for the joy of my skin’ (37-8). Watching her undulations, and hearing her claim that the tiger was her lover in a previous life, Paul gasps that he wants to be her lover, and then quivers, cannot speak, and experiences ‘exquisite
pleasure’ (39). His sentences become shorter and more disjointed until he exclaims of the tiger-skin: ‘your own was not worthy of you. I found this by chance. And oh! good God!’ (28). Who has whose skin is left ambiguous by the Lady (and her variable grasp of English), but the sexual pleasure she derives from touching the tiger-skin arouses Paul’s desires to the point of orgasm, and the stickiness of desire is bound up both literally and metaphorically in the tiger-skin.

The Lady’s authoritative position in their relationship is marked from the outset by her referring to him as a baby – she tells him that his mother, whom she has met and whose age Paul thinks the Lady is when he first sees her, ‘must have loved [him] as a baby’ (22) and she calls him a ‘great, big, beautiful baby’ (26). On their first day-trip, across the lake and into the woods, he sits at her feet, and buries his face in her lap ‘like a child, and kept it there, kissing her gloved hands’ (30). Paul is already physically moved by her presence – his caresses are ‘impassioned’ – but, from the outset, she marks her participation in their physical relationship as both sexual and maternal. When his head is buried in her lap, she touches his ‘curl[s] with her fingertips’ and smiles ‘with the tenderness a mother might have done’ (30). After they consummate their relationship, she proposes that they spend time away from the hotel on the Bürgenstock, where they can occupy a suite of rooms with him as her purported secretary. Between bouts of lovemaking, they visit a local farm and see a woman with a newborn; holding the infant, the Lady decides to have a child by Paul and that night they conceive their son. The text is clear that their pleasures that evening were extraordinary as well as procreative:
‘this night was the most divine of any they had spent on the
Burgenstock. But there was in it an essence about which only the angels
could write’ (62). This account of desire and sexual arousal is nuanced
through thinking about sleep in Marie Stopes’ *Married Love* (1918), which
was very much embedded in early twentieth-century representational as
well as discursive accounts of the sex, pleasure and desire. Its account of
orgasm and sleep provides a crucial framework through which to read
desire and pleasure in *Three Weeks*. Stopes notes that what is not well
known is the ‘relation between sleep and coitus’ (61) and, for her, there is
both an ‘intimate’ and a ‘profound’ relationship between the ‘power to
sleep, naturally and refreshingly, and the harmonious relief of the whole
system in the perfected sex-act’ (61). While Stopes’ point is to do with
the male nervous system being disrupted if sex does not occur, she is
also aware of the impact of not having an orgasm for women: the
‘majority of wives are left wakeful or nerve-wrecked’ if men, through
‘ignorance and carelessness’ have not ensured that their wives have had
‘the necessary resolution of nervous tension’ (62). In *Three Weeks*, this
state of nervous tension is differentiated according to whether it occurs
in the female or male body. While the sleeplessness is also alluded to in
relation to women, as noted above, another dimension is added to their
lack of sexual fulfilment: their husbands sleep, post-coitus, while the
(sexually unsatisfied) women watch either with ‘bitter and jealous envy’
or, crucially, with ‘tender motherly brooding’ (62). That lack of sexual
fulfilment here becomes entwined with maternal desire, and the sexually
desiring female body is interchangeable with the potentially fecund
female body.
The act of sleeping and the use of slumber as a figure of speech complicate the idea of desire in the novel. The Lady repeatedly uses the notion of slumber to describe Paul’s mental and emotional state before she meets him. Sleep is metaphor in the novel for the soul’s slumber: Paul’s inability to appreciate Paris, Versailles and then (initially) Lucerne is ascribed, by the narrative voice, to him being ‘sound asleep, you see, to nuances as yet; he was just a splendid English young animal of the best class’ (10; emphasis in original) and the Lady says that he seemed ‘so young, and so beautiful, and so – asleep’ (23). In a role reversal of the fairy tale, Paul is repeatedly described as supine by the Lady: ‘you English are naturally asleep, and you yourself are the Sleeping Beauty’ (29). Paul says he cannot remember the story aside from two facts: that the protagonist is a girl and that she is awakened by a kiss. The Lady tells him that it was ‘just [Sleeping Beauty’s] faculties which were asleep, not her soul’, and asks Paul, who is feminised by his position in the fairy tale, whether ‘a kiss [could] wake a soul?’ (29). Paul quivers once more, the world throbs (29), and she then responds by telling him the story of Undine (1811), by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, rather than the story of Sleeping Beauty. In this narrative (very popular in the nineteenth century and widely adapted in poetry, ballet, opera, and the visual arts), desire ends in death, rather than a death-like sleep ending in desire, as in Sleeping Beauty. The foreshadowing of the Lady’s death is evident, but also of significance here are the shape-shifting qualities of the water-sprite Undine, and thus the transformative nature of desire.
In the novel, dream-like states are invoked to speak to this transformative nature of desire. The Lady’s sexuality has a dream-like transformative effect on the space she inhabits and the features of her rooms (notably in Lucerne and in Venice) are laden with sexual implications. This is particularly significant in a text which imbues the tiger-skin with such affective meaning: the Lady has the capacity to transform her physical environment through the objects with which she surrounds herself and this capacity for exceptional transformation is underscored by the narrative, which refers to the rooms as a ‘scene’, and a ‘picture’ and ‘some’ painter’s dream of the Favorite in a harem’ (38; 37). In this highly staged seduction, the motifs of European rationality – a chair of Venetian workmanship and rarely bound books (she later reads to him in Latin from Apuleius as part of their verbal foreplay) – are juxtaposed with fabric, cushions and flowers, arranged in such a way which the text terms ‘barbaric’ (37). Paul’s inability to ever discover her real age, nationality, intentions or even the colour of her eyes also adds to the fantastical inscrutability of the Lady. Indeed, her suite of rooms in the hotel are not entered via the hotel corridors, but rather from the terrace as through the rooms are physically and metaphorically disconnected from the hotel, a heterotopic dream-space. In order to enter the rooms, he must pass through curtains, so that he is contained within her space. The curtains are redolent of sleep, but also of sexual intercourse. Once past the curtain, Paul finds himself ‘in a room as unlike a hotel as he could imagine’ (21) and certainly ‘not what one would expect to find in a sedate Swiss hotel’ (37). The Lady positions herself on the tiger-skin, in a hacceitic and fantastical appropriation, and
surrounds herself with items that become stickily imbued with desire. Space is then transfigured by the Lady’s sexuality, I argue, and the incongruity of the items in her rooms, and her appearance within this environment, are suggestive of the almost supernaturally transformative power of her sexual agency.

This account of powerful female sexuality which so tantalised Glyn’s readers was not only a desire that could transform spaces, but also a desire that could transform itself. The Lady is initially desirous of Paul because of his youth and beauty, but this emotion then becomes a desire for Paul’s child. Stopes’ account of the woman who has not achieved orgasm and who watches with ‘tender motherly brooding’ her husband sleeping can illuminate this transformation of desire. In the tiger-skin seduction scene, the Lady’s desires have, as shown, transformed the space of her rooms. The performative placement of her body and the objects in the room – the curtains around the entrance, the red rose in her mouth, the velvet cushions scattered around her – embed Paul’s gift to her on which she reclines, the tiger-skin, with sex, pleasure and coercion as she works to seduce him. The Lady conveys her pleasures to Paul verbally: her speech becomes cluttered with shorter clauses, reflecting the heightening of her pleasure. But despite his attempts to match her expressions of desire, he reaches climax alone, as previously noted. This is a complex moment in the narrative – her capacity to control her environment is paramount, but she cannot control his orgasm. There is no textual parallel to his climax for the Lady, despite her heightened desires at this point. After he orgasms, she changes
position but her body is described as a ‘serpent’s tail’ (38). The phallic implications of this erect and still-desiring entity both masculinise the Lady’s sexual aggressions, but also contain them, by referencing the Fall from Eden. She then crucially has resort to a ‘tender motherly brooding’ and infantilises him by calling him ‘[m]y baby Paul’ (38) and says they will read fairy-tales. It is only when she mesmerises him by singing that he is able to perform again – he is ‘completely enthralled and under her dominion’ (39). Her coercive sexual capacity is rendered implicitly – via a line of asterisks – in the final lines of the chapter when they have sex on the tiger-skin.

There are multiple facets to the Lady’s desire and the tiger-skin that, through the implicit and explicit renderings of sex and pleasure in the novel, becomes imbued with this desire. But the tiger-skin, so crucial in the initial stages of their relationship, is lost towards the end of the relationship. When they move to Venice, the Lady takes the skin with her, but its foreignness is lost amongst the markers of being further East. As Weedon and Barnett have argued, Glyn was influenced by the Decadents of the 1880s and 1890s, and this can be read in the juxtaposition between the Swiss and the Venetian environments. The ‘simplicity’ of the Bürgenstock is gone, and the flowers are in ‘the greatest profusion’, alongside ‘[p]riceless pieces of brocade’ and ‘jeweled boxes of cigarettes and bonbons’ (73). The tiger-skin is there but only mentioned in passing and when she leaves Paul at the end of their three weeks together the tiger-skin is not mentioned again in the novel. Rather than the tiger-skin, within the text itself the child becomes the signifier
of their desires. This positioning of the child is problematic: the Lady’s writhing performance on the tiger-skin brings Paul to premature ejaculation and she immediately infantilises him. But Paul demonstrates to the Lady that he is very keen to learn and she acts as his intellectual and sexual mentor throughout their three weeks. This results in that ‘divine’ night on which the child is conceived, a child whose extraordinary qualities are attested to by his physical perfection and who, crucially, is a combination of his father and mother: her manservant writes to Paul to say that it ‘was as if the Imperatorskoye [the term used by the Lady’s staff to refer to her] breathed again in [the child’s] spirit, while he was the portrait of his illustrious father, proving how deeply and well the Imperatorskoye must have loved that father’ (126). While this maternalising of female desire has a long history in English letters, what renders the Lady’s desire so intriguing is that her sexual and maternal desires are simultaneously made explicit and mutually rendering. The child in Three Weeks is representative of the desires of the Lady-as-mother, but remains largely forgotten outside of the text, and largely a footnote within the text. The tiger-skin is representative of the Lady-as-lover. It is significant that it is the tiger-skin, and its stickily affective meanings of sex, pleasure, and desire – all focused on, as I have argued here, on female sexual desire and agency – which moves outside of the novel.

**The Stickiness of a Tiger-Skin**

This tiger-skin has been a significant cultural presence for the past century: it has circulated in the Anglo-American cultural imaginary as
shorthand for desire, overweening pleasure and female sexual agency. The tiger-skin on which Paul and The Lady consummate their relationship is a marker of these emotions and effects. As previously noted, the tiger-skin became a hallmark of Glyn’s public persona as the ‘High Priestess of the God of Love’. It featured in press photos, in parodies, and in also real life: in his biography, her grandson indicates that in addition to the ‘large quantity of fan-mail from all parts of the globe’ which arrived after the novel was published, a ‘more substantial form of fan-mail arrived over the year in the form of tiger-skins, presented by various admirers, known and unknown’ (126). These tiger-skins moving through international postage systems as transnational signifiers of readerly desire and pleasure speak to the sticky movement of the tiger-skin outside of the novel. The tiger-skin, that Glyn later positioned as being part of her own erotic history (the lover whispering in her ear; the uncaring husband which resulted in her later affairs), is placed in a central place in the Lady’s seduction of Paul, and then moves outside of the novel to circulate, with sticky and titillating meaning, in the popular imaginary. As part of thinking about the cultural afterlife of literary and cultural texts, we should consider how affective qualities and capacities are first (im)pressed into an object, and then how these objects continue to accrue meaning. This has a wider significance in terms of thinking about how tropes in genre fiction are produced, consumed and managed. In critical discussions of popular, generic and formulaic fiction, there is a slippery critical tendency to speak about the reader as “knowing the codes” (Gillis, 2015). In other words, there is a critical expectation that readers know what to expect in reading a particular kind
of popular genre because the only way of reading the text is tightly managed by the generic codes or cues located within the text. This is an argument that is *circulus in probando*: the reader knows what to expect, because the text contains what the reader expects.

This discussion of *Three Weeks* has demonstrated, however, that there are complexities in the reading of popular fictions, and in the reading of the reader of popular fictions, which need to be considered in order to provide a fuller discussion of the relationships, for example, between desire, pleasure and female sexual agency. In his discussion of ‘It’, Nicholas Daly wryly notes that it ‘would be fair to say that number of the twentieth century’s sexual clichés derive from *Three Weeks*’ (80). Indeed, the blazing fire, the rose-petals, and the moonlight have appeared manifold in romance fictions for the past century, but they do have a longer genealogy than originating in Glyn’s novel. These tropes were coded centuries before in terms of their affective qualities, although they have been nuanced and modified through their place in different genres. Similarly, the tiger-skin had sexual connections before *Three Weeks*. For example, in Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s “Cherries” (1873), a young woman lays on a tiger-skin, holding a handful of cherries out to the viewer, while in his “Welcome Footsteps” (1883), a woman sitting on a tiger-skin listens happily to the sound of her lover’s approaching footsteps (and he is carrying a bouquet of flowers, possibly roses). Both paintings contain some romantic tension, but these tensions pale by comparison with the Lady rolling seductively around her tiger-skin, and bringing Paul to ejaculation before they fuck for the first time on the
tiger-skin. The tiger-skin as a featured trope of romance did not originate with Glyn (nor the roses, the moonlight, or the blazing fire) but their usage in the novel attests to her expertise as a reader (both specifically – of the tropes contained therein – and generally – of how to respond to the field) of popular fictions. What can be traced to Three Weeks is how the tiger-skin builds expectations, through titillation, in terms of generic codes and readerly expectations. It is through Three Weeks that the tiger-skin became Glyn’s haecceitic calling-card, stickily imbued with sex, pleasure and desire.

**Works Cited**


