

Fictionalised History and Fabricated Artefacts: The Amelia Peabody Mystery Series

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Abstract:

The Amelia Peabody mystery novels, written by Barbara Mertz under the name Elizabeth Peters, follow the adventures of an Englishwoman in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They combine elements of the modern romance novel, Victorian sensation fiction, and the colonial romances of H. Rider Haggard. The series uniquely merges fact and fiction, blurring the lines between scholarship and fantasy, particularly in *Amelia Peabody's Egypt: A Compendium* (2003). Although the character Amelia Peabody bucks many of the cultural and gender norms of her time, she is not merely the product of a modern perspective of the past: her forebears include female explorers such as Amelia B. Edwards, Mary Kingsley, and Isabella Bird. Through the oppression Peabody faces as a Victorian woman in Egyptology, Mertz draws a parallel to the sexism she experienced herself as an Egyptologist in academia in the mid-twentieth century.

Keywords: Amelia Peabody, archaeology, Barbara Mertz, detective, Egypt, Elizabeth Peters, H. Rider Haggard, mystery, neo-Victorian, sensation fiction.

Barbara Mertz, who passed away in 2013, was highly regarded for her contributions to the field of Egyptology; her two nonfiction texts about daily life in ancient Egypt, *Temples, Tombs, and Hieroglyphs* (1964) and *Red Land, Black Land* (1966), have never been out of print. However, she achieved her greatest fame as a novelist under her *noms de plume* 'Barbara Michaels' and 'Elizabeth Peters.'¹ She wrote forty mystery novels under the Peters name, half of which featured Amelia Peabody, an adventurous Victorian woman who travels to Egypt and falls in love with the dashing archaeologist Radcliffe Emerson.² The twentieth Peabody novel, *The Painted Queen*, was published posthumously in 2017, with its unfinished manuscript completed by Mertz's friend and fellow mystery writer Joan Hess.

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The Amelia Peabody novels are aimed at a broad audience – the dust jackets proclaim that *Washington Post Book World* once dubbed their author “a writer so popular that the public library has to keep her books under lock and key” – but they are also intelligently written and meticulously researched. At a lecture at a mystery writers’ conference, Mertz once declared, “I may write fluff, but I write damn good fluff” (Mertz qtd. in Hess 2001: 24). Indeed, delving into the “damn good fluff” of the Peabody series reveals its thematic antecedents in nineteenth-century genre fiction, its real-life Victorian female explorer character inspirations, and its unusual use of metafiction and invented artefact to blend fact and fiction.

Although the Amelia Peabody series has received very little scholarly attention to date, there is no reason it should not merit serious consideration as an exemplar of neo-Victorian fiction. While more critical attention is now being paid to popular as well as literary fiction set in the nineteenth century, the definition of ‘neo-Victorian’ itself remains a source of much debate. In a 2014 essay that encourages “prospecting” for hidden “gold” among heretofore unrecognised neo-Victorian fiction, Marie-Luise Kohlke questions why mass market genre fiction set in the Victorian period should be “dismissed *a priori* as not making the grade” (Kohlke 2014: 29). The Amelia Peabody series in particular offers a compelling case for consideration as neo-Victorian fiction in its overt borrowing, rewriting, and repurposing of tropes from popular mid- to late-nineteenth-century fiction.

Although Kohlke notes that the single Amelia Peabody mystery she had read primarily appeared to be “seeking to entertain rather than promote serious historical insight or revision”, she concludes that “the novels do revisit nineteenth-century class and gender issues in ways that readily mesh with existing neo-Victorian criticism on these topics” (Kohlke 2014: 34). Interestingly, in 2003, Barbara Mertz (as Elizabeth Peters) co-edited a nonfiction companion to the series, *Amelia Peabody’s Egypt: A Compendium* (2003), which has the explicit purpose of promoting such “serious historical insight” through essays on the history and culture of nineteenth-century England and Egypt at the same time that it revises this history, integrating the fictional Peabody-Emersons into the historical timeline.

The Peabody novels themselves are usually categorised as mysteries, although as the series progresses, the ‘mystery’ becomes less central to the novels’ plots. The novels could also be considered ‘romances’, in the

modern sense of the word, and, since their settings span the time period from 1884 to 1923, they further qualify as ‘historical fiction’. Historical fiction in particular, as Sarah Waters has pointed out, is often “dismissed as romantic, escapist, or historiographically naïve” – an unfair generalisation that may stem from the fact that it is “a genre dominated by women” (Waters 1996: 176). Waters argues that women’s historical fiction will often “map out an alternative, female historical landscape, or [...] redefine the nature of historical agency itself”, which “constitutes a radical rewriting of traditional, male-centered historical narrative” (Waters 1996: 176). The Peabody novels, for example, rewrite the archetypal H. Rider Haggard hero-adventurer novel with a female hero-adventurer and, in the process, poke fun at the patriarchal, imperialist, and often misogynistic ideals that are taken for granted in Haggard’s plots. In order to do this convincingly, Mertz incorporates elements from the lives of historical female adventurers. In addition, the Peabody series can be seen as an “alternative” autobiography of Mertz herself, who was unable to pursue a traditional career in Egyptology due to the prejudice she faced as a woman in a predominantly masculine field.

In its inclusion of historical and fabricated artefacts alike, the Amelia Peabody series captures the sense of joy and adventure of the genre fiction written by Wilkie Collins and Haggard. By combining elements of autobiography, fiction, and history, the novels and their ‘nonfictional’ *Compendium* ‘excavate’ and reinterpret the past in unique genre-bending ways that invite a reevaluation of the corpus of ‘neo-Victorian’ literature.

1. Origins of the Series

In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Mertz recalled that the Peabody series “started out being a rather giddy, frivolous send-up of various forms of genre fiction: the detective story, the gothic novel, just about everything you could think of. I had a very jolly time with it” (Mertz qtd. in Swanson 2001: 53). Mertz’s enthusiasm for, and extensive knowledge of, nineteenth-century genre fiction is evident throughout the series. The first volume in particular, *Crocodile on the Sandbank* (1975), is written in a more overtly parodic mode than those which follow. Peabody’s headstrong, opinionated nature is often played for laughs, and her Victorian sensibilities are gently mocked, as when her companion Evelyn Barton-Forbes tearfully admits that she was seduced by a cad and is now a ‘fallen woman’. Peabody’s

immediate reaction is to demand to learn more about the sexual experience – “Tell me, Evelyn – what is it like? Is it pleasant?” – because she feels “it is unlikely that [she] shall ever have firsthand experience” as a thirty-two-year-old spinster (Peters 2013: 25). The women’s companionship contains echoes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), although after Peabody and Evelyn meet the brothers Walter and Radcliffe Emerson, the plot more closely resembles that of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): Radcliffe Emerson is initially gruff and off-putting in manner, and while Walter is demonstrably in love with Evelyn, Peabody believes that his brother opposes the match and will not “allow him to throw himself away on a penniless girl” (Peters 2013: 237). Of course, according to the conventions of the modern romance novel, all is resolved by the novel’s end, and – as Peabody puts it in a later volume, in a phrase borrowed from another famous Victorian source – “Reader, I married him” (Peters 1991: 4).

Part of the popular appeal of the series lies in the romantic relationship between Peabody and Emerson. In fact, in her seminal study *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway notes that Elizabeth Peters was listed as a “favorite author” among readers of romance novels – the only author in the top three who was not primarily known as a romance novelist (Radway 1984: 121). The love scenes between the couple are often comically rendered through the use of exaggerated Victorian language and euphemism. In *The Last Camel Died at Noon* (1991), Peabody describes how “the silvery rays of the goddess of the night cast their spell of magic and romance” as the couple bids “affectionate, though abbreviated good-nights” to their son before making haste to reach their tent (Peters 1991: 101). There follows a break in the narrative, before it resumes with the euphemistic assertion that “[t]here is nothing like strenuous physical exercise to induce healthful slumber” (Peters 1991: 101). The reader is left to fill in the space coyly left blank.

Kohlke notes that many of the ‘canonical’ neo-Victorian novels, such as John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), and Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002), “are romances, not just in the sense of quest narratives but also in the less ‘respectable’ sense of love stories/romantic fiction” (Kohlke 2014: 29). And while this does not mean that Harlequin romance novels set in the nineteenth-century should be given serious consideration as neo-Victorian literature, it does establish a precedent. Similarly, Jeanette King notes that, although the

historical fiction of the 1980s and 1990s has been easy to “dismiss [...] as romantic or escapist” and “certainly has not had the same impact on the academic curriculum as *Wide Sargasso Sea* [1966], or met with the same critical acclaim”, attitudes may be shifting: “women’s writing in general continues to be re-examined and revalued [...] there are signs of change” (King 2005: 2-3).

‘Series fiction’ too carries a certain stigma, but, as Kohlke points out, this can be considered “a counterpart to nineteenth-century serialization” (Kohlke 2014: 34). Mertz had not originally intended for Amelia Peabody to become a series character, and six years passed before she wrote a second in the series, *The Curse of the Pharaohs* (1981). In the newsletter for fans of her novels, Mertz wrote that while in *Crocodile on the Sandbank* she “borrow[ed] a number of devices from nineteenth[-]century sensational fiction”, in the second novel, “I stole, shamelessly and directly” (Mertz 2002-03, issue 41). *Crocodile on the Sandbank* is a combined pastiche of Victorian travel writing, the detective story, and the sensation novel that features an overarching love story in keeping with the patterns of mid-1970s popular romance novels. *The Curse of the Pharaohs* and subsequent books in the series are less bound by the conventions of romance fiction, because Peabody and Emerson remain married and very much in love. The nature of the series changes as it progresses: while *Crocodile on the Sandbank* is closest to a twentieth-century historical romance novel, and *The Curse of the Pharaohs* a mystery in the tradition of Collins and Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Last Camel Died at Noon* is a colonial adventure story in the vein of H. Rider Haggard, and *Seeing a Large Cat* (1997) and the books that follow read more like family sagas with a nominal mystery plot.

The earlier books of the series in particular borrow obvious character types and names from nineteenth-century fiction: Mertz regarded this practice both as “an interesting game, in which well-versed readers can participate” and “my humble tribute to those who preceded me and inspired me” (Mertz 2002-03, issue 41) This is often playfully done, as when Sir Henry Baskerville is introduced in *The Curse of the Pharaohs*, and it is parenthetically noted that he is “of the Norfolk Baskervilles, not the Devonshire branch of the family” (Peters 1981: 19). The same novel also features a character named ‘Alan Armadale’ who meets a bad end, and Peabody wryly notes of the particulars of the case that “indeed, if the story had not appeared in the respectable pages of the *Times*, I would have

thought it one of the ingenious inventions of Herr Ebers or Mr. Rider Haggard – to whose romances, I must confess, I was addicted” (Peters 1981: 19). The influence of *Jane Eyre* (1847) is also felt throughout the series: for instance, in *The Snake, the Crocodile, and the Dog* (1992), ‘Bertha’ is a mixed-race character who hates Peabody and repeatedly attempts to attack her, because she believes her to be a romantic rival. Even characters who make only brief appearances – such as ‘Nemo’ in *Lion in the Valley* (1986), who bears a resemblance to the pseudonymous character in Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853), or ‘Inspector Cuff’ from *Deeds of the Disturber* (1988), who refers to his ‘eminent grandfather’ who presumably previously appeared in Collins’ *The Moonstone* (1868) – have names that give savvy readers clues to help solve the mysteries.

While the average reader may miss the implications of these references, they satisfy what Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn describe as the “critical reader” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 18), though as Kohlke points out, the readership of such novels likely comprises “a *continuum* of naïve/sophisticated reading, with ever shifting gradations of non-recognition and knowledge” (Kohlke 2014: 36). For example, few readers may share Mertz’s breadth of knowledge of thousands of years of Egyptian material culture, and even the savviest Victorianist might miss some of the series’ more oblique allusions to early nineteenth-century genre fiction.³

2. The Influence of H. Rider Haggard

One of the most important antecedents of the Amelia Peabody series is Haggard’s body of work. His colonial romance novels, such as *She* (1887) and *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), describe Englishmen’s incredible adventures in Africa and feature immortal women, extraordinary treasures, and lost civilisations which regard white Englishmen as gods. Although Haggard’s African romances generally deny British women much agency once they have reached the ‘male’ space of Africa, the Peabody books offer a woman-narrated counterpoint to Haggard’s androcentric tales while maintaining the adventurous spirit of their antecedents (see Steere 2010: para. 1-37). Peabody is as dauntless as Haggard’s Allan Quatermain, and modern reviewers often compare her to Indiana Jones, Quatermain’s other famous successor (Anon. 2013: 29).⁴

The Last Camel Died at Noon is the most overt pastiche of Haggard’s novels, repurposing chunks of dialogue and plot from *She* and

King Solomon's Mines as Peabody, Emerson, and their son Ramses discover a 'Lost Oasis' and rescue a beautiful English girl, who serves as high priestess of Isis there. The book contains chapter titles reminiscent of Haggard's, such as 'Assaulted at Midnight!', 'Touch This Mother At Your Peril!', and 'When I Speak the Dead Hear and Obey!'. In the introduction to *The Last Camel Died At Noon*, Mertz explains that "having run out of [Haggard] books to read, I decided to write one myself. It is meant as an affectionate, admiring, and nostalgic tribute" (Peters 1991: ix).

Although *The Last Camel Died at Noon* is an atypical Peabody book, since it does not follow the standard mystery-at-an-excavation-site format of most entries in the series, elements of Haggard's writing are present in all of the novels, particularly in their blending of fact and fiction and the inclusion of created 'found artefacts'. For example, in Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, the first-person narrator Quatermain offers an introduction, informative footnotes, and a reproduction of a map to the text of the novel, lending fictional events an air of verisimilitude. And in *She*, the introduction to the novel establishes that an 'editor' – presumably Rider Haggard himself – received the manuscript of the story from Horace Holly, one of the tale's protagonists, along with a scarab, a potsherd, and supplementary parchments, facsimiles of which are included in the book (Haggard 2002: 7). Similarly, 'Elizabeth Peters' claims to be the 'editor' of Amelia Peabody Emerson's journals, sometimes inserting explanatory footnotes or wry remarks about the text. These journals are said to have been discovered in an attic, rendering the documents themselves a kind of archaeological artefact.⁵ The 'editor' premise is not unusual in nineteenth-century fiction;⁶ most significantly, *The Female Detective* (1864) employed the conceit that its author, Andrew Forrester, was merely the editor of the casebook of the titular protagonist Mrs. Gladden (Klein 1995: 18).⁷

In the later Peabody books, additional 'primary documents' are included, including 'Manuscript H', which consists of journal entries written by Ramses, newspaper articles, and letters from Nefret, the Peabody-Emersons' adopted daughter. The practice of telling a tale using multiple voices, fragments, letters, and diaries was often employed by Wilkie Collins, whose books are also acknowledged as significant influences on the series.⁸ However, like most neo-Victorian texts, the Peabody series uses these documents to a slightly different purpose; as Kym Brindle explains:

In their nineteenth-century pre-texts, epistolary formats explain events and restore order, whereas later neo-Victorian adaptations recover either a marginal character [...] or celebrate archival investigation that pieces together history with [the] discovery of hidden documents. (Brindle 2014: 24)

Brindle sees this as part of a larger trend within postmodern fiction, which “tends not to emphasize documents uncovering ‘truths’, but rather deconstructs how investigatory reading and interpretation take place” (Brindle 2014: 24). Since the focus of the Peabody series is archaeology – the uncovering and interpretation of material culture – the reader’s process of sifting through layers of textual ‘artefacts’ is apt.

The Peabody novels sometimes include maps and line drawings, both fictional and historical, without clearly delineating which is which. *The Last Camel Died at Noon*, for example, reproduces authentic illustrations of ancient Egyptian art from E. A. Wallis Budge’s text *The Egyptian Sudan* (1907) alongside contemporary illustrations of scarabs and pyramids by Giorgetta Bell McRee that were commissioned for the novel. Budge’s 1907 line drawing of the Queen of Meroë is included as an illustration accompanying Peabody’s observation that the queen they encounter in the novel bears a physical resemblance to her, thus ‘fictionalising’ the authentic artefact (Peters 1991: 220, 255). In addition, historical maps of Egypt, the Sudan, and Nubia (Peters 1991: 1, 49) are included alongside a fictional map to the ‘Lost Oasis’ described in the novel (Peters 1991: 117).

The series’ inclusion of fabricated and authentic archaeological artefacts is clearly modelled on Haggard’s books. While other nineteenth-century novelists created fictional textual artefacts to lend a sense of veracity to an otherwise outlandish tale, few authors took this practice as far as Haggard did. In one instance of repurposing a legitimate historical artefact as fiction, he incorporated an authentic ancient Egyptian scarab he owned that read ‘Suten se Rā’ into his novels *She* and *Wisdom’s Daughter* (Addy 1998: 88).⁹ Then in order “to impart an aura of authenticity” to the plot (Addy 1998: 88), Haggard included a footnote claiming he had consulted “a renowned and most learned Egyptologist” about the scarab, concluding that

[w]hat the history of this particular scarab may have been we can now, unfortunately, never know, but I have little doubt but that it played some part in the tragic story of the Princess Amenartas and her lover Kallikrates, the forsworn priest of Isis. (Haggard 2002: 158)

The latter characters, of course, are Haggard's own creations.

Haggard's scarab is currently on display at the Norwich Castle Museum, as is the 'Sherd of Amenartas' that features prominently in *She*. The sherd, unlike the scarab, is far from authentic, being Haggard's own creation – he commissioned his sister-in-law to design it based on the Rosetta Stone. The sherd includes an imprint from Haggard's scarab and translations of the tale from *She* in ancient Greek, Latin, and antiquated English. Haggard's (albeit unrealised) hope was to fabricate an artefact that would "fool the antiquarians" (Brantlinger 2011: 162).

3. The *Compendium*

While no physical artefacts were forged to supplement the Amelia Peabody novels, in 2003, *Amelia Peabody's Egypt: A Compendium* was released, edited by Peters and Kristen Whitbread. The book offers informative, scholarly essays on nineteenth-century English and Egyptian culture that are intended to contextualise the series for its fans. Although the *Compendium* is categorised as non-fiction, its factual essays are folded into the fictional world of the Peabody-Emersons. For example, one nonfictional essay about the British in Egypt opens with a catalogue of items on display at the fictional Amarna House, "the Emersons' residence in Kent" (Gohary 2003: 48). The *Compendium* also contains a lengthy 'Reference to the Journals' section that includes legitimate photographs of historical figures, such as T. E. Lawrence and Amelia B. Edwards, alongside photographs purporting to depict fictional characters from the series, such as Inspector Cuff, the Peabody-Emersons' reis, Abdullah, and even their cat Anubis. In *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative*, Louisa Hadley argues that "the immense documentation surrounding the Victorian era" – such as photographs, census data, and birth and death records – "is at least partly responsible for the contemporary fascination with the Victorians since it enables the Victorians to have a physical presence in the present" (Hadley 2010: 20). In the *Compendium*, the photographs, illustrations, and timelines

do serve to bring the Victorians to life, both fictional and historical. To see a real photograph of the fictional Radcliffe Emerson prompts reflection of how we view and interpret the artefacts from the past.

The *Compendium* begins with an “excerpt from the unpublished journal of Professor Radcliffe Emerson January-February 1885” (Peters 2003: 14-16), which offers a rare first-person account of the events of the first Amelia Peabody novel from Emerson’s perspective. A note explains that “[t]he crumpled manuscript was found in a crevice in one of the northern tombs at Amarna in 1997 by a member of the Egypt Exploration Society’s expedition” (Peters 2003: 16). Readers familiar with nineteenth-century history would know that the Egypt Exploration Society was founded in 1882 by Amelia Edwards, from whom the fictional Amelia derives her name. An essay later in the compendium offers a tongue-in-cheek explanation for why the adventures of the Peabody-Emersons bear more resemblance to fiction than fact, noting that

[r]eaders familiar with [*King Solomon’s Mines*] will note certain [...] resemblances to events recorded in Mrs. Emerson’s journal of the Lost Oasis [*The Last Camel Died at Noon*], probably because tribal customs and British reactions to them were much the same throughout the Victorian Period. This phenomenon is well known to social scientists. (Peters 2003: 184)

The explicit reference to the plot similarities here demonstrates how the series itself is, in a sense, a collection of what Brindle calls “acknowledged borrowings” (Brindle 2014: 4).

It is not unusual for popular historical fiction series to have nonfiction ‘companion’ texts published: for example, in 1999, Diana Gabaldon released *The Outlandish Companion* to her *Outlander* series, which contains a glossary of Gaelic terms and an annotated bibliography of her research sources. And Lindsey Davis’s *Falco: The Official Companion* (2010) offers maps and timelines of the Roman Empire during the period in which her Marcus Didius Falco series is set. What makes the *Compendium* so unusual is that it is not narrated by an authoritative authorial voice, explaining how and why Peters/Mertz crafted her fiction; instead the text presumes that the Peabody-Emersons have always been part of the historical

record, and it is appropriately integrating them now for the first time. In this way, the *Compendium* could be considered a form of “historiographic metafiction”, a term usually reserved for novels that are “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Hutcheon 1998: 5).

There are other texts that could be considered examples of historiographic meta(non)fiction: Sydney Padua’s graphic novel *The Thrilling Adventures of Lovelace and Babbage* (2015), for example, imagines a largely accurate though more fanciful version of Ada Lovelace’s history through comic book-style panel illustrations. The graphics are accompanied by lengthy and informative footnotes and endnotes that offer quotes from primary sources and clarify historical accuracy. There are also novels in the historical fiction genre that incorporate (and sometimes delineate) real historical texts into the fiction, such as Julian Barnes’ *Arthur and George* (2005), which includes an author’s note attesting to the ‘authenticity’ of the letters contained in the book (see Hadley 2010: 145; Barnes 2005: 505). Other neo-Victorian novels, such as A. S. Byatt’s *Possession*, incorporate both ‘real’ and what Hadley terms “pseudo-Victorian” fabricated documents that “aim at a certain level of authenticity” but lack any indication of which is which (Hadley 2010: 159). However, the *Compendium* offers the inverse of this – an ostensibly nonfictional text that incorporates “pseudo-Victorian” fictions – and so remains an oddity. Still, its function is in keeping with a trend that Heilmann and Llewellyn observe in “some neo-Victorian fictions [that] deliberately confound the distinction between reality and imagination, lives lived and lives created” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 20). The function of the *Compendium* goes beyond simply instructing the reader about the past, but instead invites the reader to revisit it in a new and meaningful way. This is in keeping with how Kate Mitchell describes many modern neo-Victorian novels. She argues that

these fictions are less concerned with *making sense* of the Victorian past, than with offering it as a cultural memory, to be re-membered, and imaginatively re-created, not revised or understood. They remember the period not only in the usual sense, of recollecting it, but also in the sense that they re-embodiment, that is, re-member, or reconstruct it [...]. [T]he dis(re)membered pieces of the past are reconstituted in and

by the text, and also in the reader's imagination. (Mitchell 2010: 7)

Perhaps because the series itself allows its readers to feel an intimacy with its fictional characters, when the *Compendium* incorporates those characters into the historical record, we may feel a more personal connection to this reconstructed history, even if it is not absolutely historically accurate.

Many of the essays contained in the *Compendium* are written by scholars in the field; for example, an Egyptologist from Liverpool University contributes an essay about the British in Egypt at the turn of the century and a professor of Egyptology from the American University in Cairo offers an essay about Islam in Egypt during the period. However, it is interesting to note that while the collection itself is edited by 'Elizabeth Peters', Barbara Mertz is listed as the author of an essay on Victorians' interactions with other cultures, and 'Barbara Michaels', the pseudonym Mertz employs for her Gothic romance novels, is named as the author of the essay on Victorian popular fiction. Mertz/Peters/Michaels (or MPM, as she is referred to in the official newsletter about her novels) often played with her authorial alter egos in this manner. 'Barbara Michaels' even wrote a tongue-in-cheek blurb on the dust jacket of the Peters book *Night Train to Memphis* (1994) that reads:

This time Elizabeth Peters has gone too far. The woman has been annoying me for years. She's a fairly good writer, actually, and this is probably her best book. Per usual it's funny and exciting, but this time she has gone overboard on the romantic stuff in flagrant imitation of me. This is actionable! I shall demand a share of the royalties!

Savvy readers could enjoy the joke.

The introduction to *The Painted Queen*, the posthumously published Peabody novel, maintains the premise that 'Elizabeth Peters' is the editor of the historical journals of Amelia Peabody, although it also identifies Barbara Mertz as Peters' 'alter ego' (Peters 2017: xvi). A foreword by Salima Ikram describes Amelia Peabody, Elizabeth Peters, and Barbara Mertz as "Egyptologists together" and claims that when Mertz "writes of [Amelia Peabody] crawling through bat guano, handling ancient bones, inspecting

mummies, trudging through sand, or enjoying the cool north breeze on the Nile, it is because Barbara had experienced all of this firsthand” (Ikram 2017: xii), suggesting a clear autobiographical element to the events of the series. To further complicate the relationship between author, alter ego, and fictional character, in the Peters novel *The Laughter of Dead Kings* (2008), which is not part of the Amelia Peabody series, it is suggested that ‘Elizabeth Peters’ herself is the granddaughter of Amelia Peabody.

Although the Peabody novels and the *Compendium* seamlessly blend fact and fiction, the goal was never to “fool the antiquarians” as Haggard claimed he would do (Brantlinger 2011: 162). Still, there is an interesting entry in the appendix to Jon E. Lewis’ *The Mammoth Book of Eyewitness Ancient Egypt* (2003), a collection of primary documents from ancient Egypt. Situated between ‘Tefnut’ and ‘Thoth’ is an entry for ‘Tetisheri’ that explains how Tetisheri’s “hidden tomb at Dra Abu el Naga on the west bank at Luxor was found by Radcliffe Emerson in 1900” (Lewis 2003: 510). It is unclear whether Lewis was deliberately including a sly joke in his text or whether he was misinformed, but the true location of Tetisheri’s tomb remains unknown to archaeologists, despite the fictional Emerson having ‘discovered’ it in the novel *The Hippopotamus Pool* (1996).¹⁰ Mertz addressed the error in her 2004-2005 newsletter, feigning surprise only that the entry failed to acknowledge Peabody’s role in the ‘discovery’ as well (Mertz 2004-2005, issue 45). The editor of her newsletter agreed, adding: “Trust a male editor to overlook the woman behind the success” (Whitbread 2004-2005, issue 45).

4. Autobiographical Elements in the Series

The Peabody novels integrate historical information about Egyptian culture in both Victorian and ancient times without detracting from the suspense and entertainment of the story itself. The novels even incorporate translated primary texts from ancient Egypt such as poems, stories, and songs. In fact, the title of each novel makes a reference to a primary text that will be included in the book and that offers some clue to the plot of the mystery. The two exceptions to this rule are *The Curse of the Pharaohs* (which was originally intended to be titled *Heart in the Cedar Tree* as a reference to an Egyptian fable) and *The Mummy Case* (1985), which were retitled by Mertz’s publisher in order to be more “popularly accessible” (L. G. 1990: 23). In fact, Michelle Tepper once described the series as “a painless primer

on Egyptology's history" (Tepper qtd. in Johnsen 2006: 3), a surprising description for a fictional mystery series. Mertz, however, saw her two careers as complementary: "There are lots of connections [...] between Egyptologist and mystery writer – it takes a certain kind of mind. You have to love puzzles, love a treasure hunt" (Mertz qtd. in Arana 2001: T03).

Mertz chose to set her series in the late nineteenth century in part because of her love for Victorian colonial romances and sensation novels, but also because it was a time when agitation for women's rights was beginning to revolutionise the Western world. This held personal significance for Mertz: Egyptology was not considered a practical field for women in the early 1950s when Mertz was completing her doctoral work, and she faced sexual discrimination. In one article, she recalled:

I was walking behind two of my professors and they were talking about me [...]. I think they were a trifle bemused by me, because they didn't have that many women in the department, and I overheard one of them say: "We don't have to worry about finding a job for her – she'll get married." That was one classy statement. I get mad when I start thinking about it. (Mertz qtd. in Rose 2005: 48)

Mertz did marry and have two children, which, she said, "pretty well finished any chance I might have had of working in the field at that point in time" (Mertz qtd. in Rose 2005: 48). In fact, while she remained married, the only work that Mertz was able to find was as a secretary – and in order to secure that position, she had to conceal the fact that she had a Ph.D. (Ripley 2013: 48).¹¹

In a 2001 interview, Mertz admitted that in some ways, she was "living vicariously" through Amelia Peabody (Rehm 2001). Thus, the Peabody series can be viewed as a form of biofiction, a form that "commemorates not just the marginalized subjects, but the injustice of their historical disregard and silencing" (Kohlke 2013: 10) – though here not that of a marginalised and disregarded real-life Victorian woman but the twentieth-century female author and Egyptologist herself. Biofiction, according to Kohlke, "has a clear re-visionary and political purpose, underpinned with feminist and postcolonial tendencies of realigning the centre and margins of discourse, redefining who is accorded power of

speech” (Kohlke 2013: 10). The fact that Peabody narrates her own story is also significant – in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders sees the narrative form shared by the Amelia Peabody series and other neo-Victorian novels as inherently reflective of the authorial self:

In the rewriting of the omniscient narrator of nineteenth-century fiction, often substituting for him/her the unreliable narrator we have recognized as common to appropriative fiction, postmodern authors find a useful metafictional method for reflecting on their own creative authorial impulses. (Sanders 2006: 129)

Through Peabody, Mertz is literally able to rewrite history as well as rewrite her own personal life story.

Significantly, in the Peabody series, though Peabody gives birth to a son and accrues more adopted children and even grandchildren as the series progresses, she never allows her roles as a wife and mother to impact her career. Her marriage to Emerson proves advantageous to both parties: she is able to participate in excavations in Egypt (despite her lack of previous credentials or experience) and travel to places where few Englishwomen would be allowed to go, and her inherited wealth funds Emerson’s archaeological pursuits. Peabody believes in the equality of the sexes, wondering, “When, oh when will justice and reason prevail, and Woman descend from the pedestal on which Man has placed her (in order to prevent her from doing anything except standing perfectly still) and take her rightful place beside him?” (Peters 1988: 1). In *The Ape Who Guards the Balance* (1998), Peabody is grateful for a lull in her “professional commitments” that allows her to demonstrate her support for Emmeline Pankhurst and her fellow “lady suffragists” by chaining herself to the railings at Number 10 Downing Street (Peters 1998: 1).

Although she has already had her son by the beginning of the second novel in the series, Peabody refuses to let maternal instincts interfere with her archaeological fervour. She leaves their infant with Emerson’s brother in England while the couple excavates in Egypt, but by the third (and all subsequent novels) in the series, they simply bring their child along for the adventure. Peabody generally demonstrates an exaggerated attitude of Victorian emotional restraint toward her son, though in *The Mummy Case*

she flies into a berserker rage when her offspring is threatened and beats the perpetrators bloody with her parasol. Indeed, Peabody's parasol is perhaps the symbol that best defines her: it is a quintessential token of Victorian femininity, but rather than using it to shade herself from the sun, Peabody has hers specially equipped with a steel tip for defence purposes. In *He Shall Thunder in the Sky* (2000), Emerson even buys her a parasol with a sword in its shaft for Christmas, and she attempts to learn to fence with it.¹²

5. **Amelia B. Edwards and Other Female Explorers**

One essay in the *Compendium* suggests that Peabody's unconventional choice of defensive weaponry was inspired by an incident in which the Victorian travel writer Mary Kingsley hit a crocodile over the head with her parasol (Foxwell 2003: 138). Kingsley's memoir suggests that this claim is not entirely accurate, however: Kingsley writes that when an "eight foot" crocodile attempted to board her canoe, she promptly administered "a clip on the snout with a paddle" (Kingsley qtd. in McKenzie 2012: 70). Nonetheless, Kingsley did use her umbrella as a tool on other occasions. She recalls, with a blend of humour and rationalism that Peabody would appreciate:

Once a hippopotamus and I were on an island alone together, and I wanted one of us to leave. I preferred it should be myself, but the hippo was close to my canoe, and looked like staying, so I made cautious and timorous advances to him and finally scratched him behind the ear with my umbrella and we parted on good terms. (Kingsley qtd. in Reynolds 2011: 83)

According to Emerson, the villagers consider Peabody's parasol "a weapon of great magical power" that "can bring strong men to their knees begging for mercy" (Peters 1996: 174). This is because, as demonstrated by her incident of berserker rage and in many other instances, Peabody uses her parasol effectively as a weapon. Kingsley too was known to employ her umbrella for this purpose; once, she was attempting to remark on some pretty ferns but the native men misinterpreted her gesture and began to dig them up for her. She says that then "I had a brisk little engagement with the

men, driving them from their prey with the point of my umbrella, ejaculating Kor Kor, like an agitated crow” (Kingsley 1897: 148).

Kingsley differed from Peabody in one significant respect, however: the former always remained attired like a lady, convinced that dresses were actually more practical for adventurous pursuits. In one vivid recorded incident, Kingsley falls into a game pit replete with ebony spikes, and considers how

at these times you realise the blessing of a good thick skirt. Had I paid heed to the advice of many people in England, who ought to have known better, and adopted masculine garments, I should have been spiked to the bone, and done for. Whereas, save for a good many bruises, here I was with the fullness of my skirt tucked under me, sitting on nine ebony spikes some twelve inches long, in comparative comfort, howling lustily to be hauled out. (Kingsley qtd. in McKenzie 2012: 74-75)

In the first book of the series, Peabody packs a dress for her first trip to Egypt that features a divided skirt designed in the style of the Rational Dress League, but she initially does not have “quite the courage to wear it” (Peters 2013: 117). By the novel’s end, Peabody has embraced the style, and as the series progresses, she modifies her attire in even more unconventional ways:

My first experiences in Egypt, pursuing mummies and climbing up and down cliffs, had convinced me that trailing skirts and tight corsets were a confounded nuisance in that ambience. For many years my working costume had consisted of pith helmet and shirtwaist, boots, and Turkish trousers, or bloomers [...]. [But the new] costume my dressmaker had produced, under my direction, was almost identical with the shooting suits gentlemen had been wearing for some years. (Peters 1992: 55)

Peabody also devises a unique alternative accessory to complement her working costume. She considers a simple chatelaine “old fashioned” (Peters 1988: 25-26), and instead wears a sturdy belt with useful implements

attached to it, such as a “pistol and knife, canteen, bottle of brandy, candle and matches in a waterproof box, notebook and pencil, needle and thread, compass, scissors, first-aid kit and a coil of stout cord (useful for tying up captured enemies)” (Peters 2000: 66).

In her choice of unconventional attire, Peabody perhaps most resembles the nineteenth-century English explorer Isabella Bird (or Isabella Bird Bishop upon marriage), who wrote about her adventures in Australia, Hawaii, the Rocky Mountains, and Asia. While in Hawaii in 1875, Bird chose to ride astride her horse rather than side-saddle, because she wanted to see the Kilauea volcano and claimed that it was a safer to travel that way (McKenzie 2012: 26). Afterward, Bird rode astride frequently and had a Macgregor flannel riding costume made for her, and the native Hawaiians dubbed her “paniola” or “cowboy” (McKenzie 2012: 28). Despite her unusual adventures and wardrobe, Bird was cognisant of maintaining “respectable status” (McKenzie 2012: 31). Like Peabody, Bird also demonstrated a knack for describing masculine beauty in purple-tinted prose. In a passage that Precious McKenzie says could have “passed as a piece of Victorian erotica” (McKenzie 2012: 15), Bird recounted her first impressions of mountain man Jim Nugent:

The marvel was how his clothes hung together, and on him [...]. His face was remarkable. He is a man about forty-five, and must have been strikingly handsome. He has large grey-blue eyes, deeply set, with well-marked eyebrows, a handsome aquiline nose, and a very handsome mouth. His face was smooth-shaven except for a dense moustache and imperial. Tawny hair, in thin uncared-for curls, fell from under his hunter’s cap and over his collar. One eye was entirely gone, and the loss made one side of his face repulsive, while the other might have been modelled in marble. ‘Desperado’ was written in large letters all over him. (Bird 91)

The description of Peabody’s initial encounter with Emerson is no less impressive; she first notices his “sinewy, sun-bronzed hand” and then elaborates:

He was a tall man with shoulders like a bull's and a black beard cut square like those of the statues of ancient Assyrian kings. From a face tanned almost to the shade of an Egyptian, vivid blue eyes blazed at me. His voice [...] was a deep, reverberating bass. (Peters 2013: 44)

Bird, however, did not wed her desperado: she famously wrote in a letter that he was “a man any woman might love but no sane woman would marry” – not that he had ever asked her, anyway (Bird qtd. in Barr ii).

Many descriptions of the Amelia Peabody series mention that the protagonist is based on the writer and Egyptophile Amelia B. Edwards, but Mertz claimed that in truth there were actually very few similarities. Mertz maintained that she “drew a few contemporary historical details from” Edwards’ famous travel book, *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* (1877), but that otherwise, “[t]he relationship between the two Amelias consists solely of their first names and the names of their dahabeeyahs [the Philae]” (Mertz 2007, issue 50).¹³ Undoubtedly Mertz wanted to be recognised for her creation of an original character, who was not merely a slightly altered version of a historical figure, but Amelia Peabody and Amelia B. Edwards do share more traits in common than Mertz’s assertion would suggest. Today, Edwards is primarily remembered for her travel writing and her co-founding of the Egypt Exploration Society, but she was also a successful sensation novelist; the Amelia Peabody books use the same sensational tropes found in Edwards’ novels, such as bigamy, blackmail, and mistaken identities. It is largely true that, as Mertz noted, Edwards “was a conventional Victorian lady who never strayed off the beaten paths – unlike such adventurers as Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley and Amelia Peabody” (Mertz 2007, issue 50), but Edwards’ opinionated voice in her writing certainly recalls that of Peabody.

In his introduction to Edwards’ travel memoir *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile*, Quentin Crewe writes:

Amelia [Edwards] was one of those intrepid Victorian spinsters who is a delight to read about but who, one fears, might have been a considerable trial to know. That, at least, is the first impression created by this book; but in time, as one reads and re-reads her, she becomes a real, if mildly

formidable, friend. Her great concern for people, her understanding of strange cultures, her wry detachment from her own countrymen gradually make her more and more sympathetic. (Crewe 1982: xxiii)

This description is also perfectly apt for Peabody, who is often described by family and acquaintances as ‘formidable’ and, although she holds English worldviews and values, she tempers these with a sense of cultural relativism. Both Amelias share a sense of amusement about the universal nature of men in any culture. Edwards observed:

There are, of course, good and bad Mohammedans as there are good and bad churchmen of any denomination [...]. Some would not touch wine – had never tasted it in their lives, and would have suffered any extremity rather than break the law of the Prophet. Others had a nice taste in clarets, and a delicate appreciation of the respective merits of rum and whiskey punch. (Edwards 1982: 43)

Peabody is also known to frequently hold forth on the topic of men. She is convinced that women are by far the more rational and logical sex, while men are more often swayed by their emotions (see Hauser 2001: 136; Peters 1996: 273). Peabody claims that the stereotype of the time suggests the reverse, simply because “men [...] define views” (Peters 1996: 273), ergo the dominant common worldview. Of course, by incorporating elements of these women’s lives who are far less well known in modern times, the series becomes part of what Jeanette King perceives as “the wider project, pioneered by second-wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded and marginalised” (King 2005: 3-4). Although Mertz downplayed Edwards’ influence as the direct progenitor of Peabody, she frequently mentioned Bird and Kingsley by name as inspirations.

Peabody uniquely differs from the female travellers discussed above, because she actually participates in archaeological excavations rather than merely observing. There are a few known female excavators from the time; in *The Snake, the Crocodile, and the Dog*, Peabody mentions “two ladies who had excavated the temple of Mut at Karnak” (Peters 1992: 148), most

likely meaning Margaret Benson and Janet A. Gourlay, who coauthored *The Temple of Mut at Asher* (1899) (Foxwell 2003: 140). Kate Griffith, the wife of Egyptologist F. L. Griffith, also excavated with William Flinders Petrie (Foxwell 2003: 140).

The closest analogue to Amelia Peabody is probably the wife of Sir Flinders Petrie, Lady Hilda Petrie, who often participated in archaeological digs with her husband. She was known on one occasion to have taken “off her skirt before being lowered into the interior of a pyramid; further items of clothing were removed as she and her husband explored the inner chambers” (L. G. 1990: 21). Lady Petrie’s digging costume of choice was “a knee-length tunic over a pair of knee-length knickers, plus a broad-brimmed hat” (L. G. 1990: 23-24).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Emerson bears a physical resemblance to Flinders Petrie and employs similarly meticulous excavation techniques (L. G. 1990: 21). The ‘Author’s Note’ to *Crocodile on the Sandbank* explains that the technique Emerson uses (and that Peabody improves upon) of preserving a painted pavement at Tell el Amarna was actually Petrie’s innovation (Peters 2013: i). Emerson also espouses Petrie’s views on preserving and learning from all types of artefacts: the former says,

The goal of proper excavation [...] is not treasure but knowledge. Any scrap of material, no matter how insignificant, may supply an essential clue to our understanding of the past. Our primary purpose here is to establish the original plan and, if possible, the relative chronology. (Peters 1991: 94)

And while Petrie was dubbed the ‘Father of Pots’ for his focus on the less glamorous artefacts, Emerson’s fits of temper earn him the nickname among Egyptians as the ‘Father of Curses’.

Flinders Petrie himself is featured as a recurring character in the series as Emerson’s archaeological rival for whom he has a grudging respect. Other historical figures appear regularly, such as Jacques de Morgan, James Quibell, Gaston Maspero, and E. A. Wallis Budge, but they usually remain peripheral to the plot. One exception is *The Tomb of the Golden Bird* (2006), which is set during the 1922-23 fieldwork season and includes the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. The novel does not

revise history too much; Emerson strongly suspects that there is an undiscovered tomb in the area and appeals to Lord Carnarvon for digging rights, but it is instead Howard Carter who discovers the tomb. This entry in the series in particular is a clear example of “appropriated biofiction”, which Kohlke defines as attributing “elements of real lives to someone else entirely or us[ing] these lives as springboards to launch into blatantly counterfactual fabrications” (Kohlke 2013: 11) – in this case employing the conceit that Carter merely discovers the tomb by default. However, the ‘real’ history appropriated in *The Tomb of the Golden Bird* is so well known that it “circulate[s] as common cultural currency”, as Brindle puts it (Brindle 2014: 9), so the readerly pleasure lies in anticipating how the inevitable discovery by Carter will be made. The fabrication here is far easier to recognise and untangle than the strands of truth and fiction that are woven together within the *Compendium*.

6. Modernising the Victorian

All neo-Victorian fictions display a tension about how to represent the past from a modern point of view. As Hadley describes,

[n]eo-Victorian fictions [...] are not merely part of the contemporary fascination with the Victorian past; they are aware of the purposes the Victorians are made to serve and in returning to the Victorians self-consciously comment on the political and cultural uses of the Victorians in the present. (Hadley 2010: 14).

As discussed earlier, the Peabody series reflects its author’s resentment of the sexism she experienced in her field in the mid-twentieth century. Amelia is, in some ways, a fantasy figure who is able to enjoy travel, adventure, personal fulfilment and professional success in spite of the injustices of her times, but she is also grounded in a plausible alternate reality.

By rewriting Haggard in particular, Mertz offers a more palatable version of the Victorian adventure tale for modern tastes; while still producing thrilling yarns, these are no longer built on a foundation of overt sexist, racist and imperialist beliefs. For example, in *The Last Camel Died at Noon*, when the Nubian Tarek says he can never be with an English girl because – borrowing part of a quote from H. Rider Haggard’s *King*

Solomon's Mines – “the sun cannot mate with the darkness, nor the white with the black”, rather than accepting the sentiment as truth in silence as Haggard's characters do, the more enlightened Peabody curtly cuts him off by snapping, “Don't talk nonsense” (Haggard 1907: 263; Peters 1991: 334).

Peabody is also very progressive in her beliefs about the equality of the sexes, and she agitates for women's rights. A proud Englishwoman, Peabody is not blind to the fact that although the oppression of Egyptian women may appear more obvious to her, her own homeland too denies women their rights:

I would have felt myself a traitor to my sex if I had missed any opportunity to lecture the poor oppressed creatures of the harim on their rights and privileges – though heaven knows, we Englishwomen were far from having attained the rights due us. (Peters 1991: 53)

In an analysis of Tasha Alexander's novel *Tears of Pearl* (2010), which also features a Victorian female detective in the Middle East, Nadine Muller notes how the native female characters deliberately “[turn] the Orientalist gaze back on the West” by pointing out the hypocrisy of British women assuming cultural superiority (Muller 2012: 105), a technique also used in the Peabody books. In *The Hippopotamus Pool*, for example, Peabody is surprised to learn that the ‘master criminal’ who controls the stolen antiquities trade is a woman, Bertha, who has avoided suspicion due to her sex. Bertha mocks her: “Careers for women! That is a favourite theme of yours, I believe? Why, then you should commend my efforts” (Peters 1996: 292). Although Peabody does not condone her actions, she is nonetheless impressed that Bertha has created a criminal organization run entirely by women, a feat she admits may have proven impossible to accomplish in England.

Peabody's liberal views regarding gender equality are not uncommon to neo-Victorian fiction, and her outspoken feminist views may read as somewhat anachronistic and even amusing to a twenty-first-century audience. In the first novel, Peabody posits that she will never marry because “my nature does not lend itself to the meekness required of a wife in our society. I could not endure a man who would let himself be ruled by me, and I would not endure a man who tried to rule me” (Peters 2013: 25).

Initially, Peabody believes that “[i]t is most unfortunate that [she] was not born a man”, because then, as she tells her friend Evelyn, she could pursue archaeology and “Emerson would accept me as a colleague; my money would support his work; what a splendid time we would have, working and quarrelling together” (Peters 2013: 196). Eventually, however, Peabody does agree to wed, although she opines that ideally, marriage “should be a balanced stalemate between equal adversaries” (Peters 1985: 3).

Luckily, Emerson does not subscribe to the gender prejudices of the average Victorian male, which makes him the perfect partner for Peabody. As an example, when his brother proposes to Evelyn, who is generally acknowledged as ‘ruined’ after having been seduced by her tutor, Emerson “cheerfully” remarks, “why ‘ruined,’ I cannot make out; she seems to be quite undamaged in all meaningful respects” (Peters 2013: 291). Mertz said that she used Flinders Petrie as the model for the respect that the Emerson shows toward his Egyptian workers: Petrie paid his workmen a fair wage and trained them in archaeological methods, so that they were in high demand throughout the country, and, though not immune to stereotyping the native Egyptians, was known to treat his workers well, describing himself as “simply disgusted with the brutal tones [he had] seen adopted toward them by travellers” (Petrie qtd. in Mertz 2003: 126).

At the same time, Mertz claimed that she did not wish to whitewash all of the prejudices of the time, not least as doing so would have impacted on historical verisimilitude. In an interview, she said:

I think you’ve got to show it as it was. And you know what colonial viewpoints were, even among the Brits, and they considered themselves among the more sophisticated. They weren’t. The “coloured races” were inferior, and so forth and so on. So I’m not going to change the facts as I know them in order to conform to what I call retroactive political correctness. (Mertz qtd. in Rose 2005: 49)

Mertz noted that in one book her English editor objected to Peabody referring to another character as a “pure-bred Egyptian” and explained to Mertz that “[p]eople don’t like hearing that expression in England” (Mertz qtd. in Rose 2005: 49). Mertz replied that “[p]eople don’t like hearing that in America either, and I don’t either. But this is what they said, and this is

how they used it, and that's what I'm going to do" (Mertz qtd. in Rose 2005: 49). Mertz was clearly cognisant of the neo-Victorian risks of recycling pejorative stereotypes and ideologies under the exonerating guise of historical 'fact' but expected her readers to be self-conscious enough to adopt a critical stance to some of her protagonist's less acceptable attitudes. In an essay written under her own name in the *Compendium*, Mertz describes how Amelia, while progressive in many respects, does reflect the prejudices and mores of her time. Mertz notes that "[i]n the earlier volumes of the journals, we find many of the stereotypes: the hot-blooded Latin, the sinister Russian, [and] the dirty, ignorant Egyptians, who didn't wash their children or their donkeys" (Mertz 2003: 126). The criticism of the types of flat characters found in her early novels from the 1970s and 80s is perhaps most appropriately read as the author's self-critique.¹⁴ However, Peabody as a character also progresses and changes as the novels themselves do: for example, despite considering the Egyptian David as almost a member of her own family, she struggles against her own racial prejudice when he wishes to marry her English niece Lia (see Mertz 2003: 128).

Since the series may be, as Mertz herself claimed, "fluff" (Mertz qtd. in Hess 2001: 24), it is perhaps easy to dismiss Peabody as a neo-Victorian heroine who is gifted with an anachronistic boldness, intelligence, and wit that appeals to the modern reader, and whose more 'Victorian' characteristics – her self-censorship of sex scenes, her overwrought prose, her reliance on a parasol – often render her comical. The books themselves, often packaged as paperbacks with raised gold lettering, sometimes resemble the cheap historical romance novels endemic to grocery store shelves. However, a closer look at the texts reveals that, much like Haggard's 'Sherd of Amenartas', they are complex artefacts that fictionalise fact and historicise fiction. The 'game' Mertz plays of incorporating tropes from Victorian genre fiction, primary texts of ancient Egypt, and biofictional voices and attributes of historical figures into her invented world invites her readers to become archaeologists themselves and enjoy the pleasures of 'digging into' the text.

Notes

1. I will refer to her as Mertz throughout the article except in specific contexts that require the use of the pseudonym.
2. In keeping with the practice of the series, I will refer to Amelia as ‘Peabody’ (her husband addresses her by her maiden name as a sign of respect and affection), and Radcliffe as ‘Emerson’ (because he claims to despise his first name).
3. In the chapter in the *Compendium* on Victorian popular fiction, attributed to ‘Barbara Michaels,’ Mertz details how the Peabody series deliberately borrowed character names, plot points, and quotations from sources as varied as Wilkie Collins’ *No Name* (1862), ‘Barbara Fritchie’ by John Greenleaf Whittier (1862), Anthony Hope’s *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), and H. Rider Haggard’s *The Brethren* (1904). She even includes a quiz to see how well readers were able to identify these references (Michaels 2003: 178-188).
4. Of course, Peabody predates *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) by six years.
5. This is revealed in Peters’ *The Laughter of Dead Kings* (2008).
6. Note that the editor convention has also been employed by other neo-Victorian popular writers, perhaps most prominently by George MacDonald Fraser’s Flashman series.
7. ‘Mrs. Gladden’ was said to be a pseudonym for the ‘real’ female detective, just as ‘Amelia Peabody’ is claimed to be an alias used to conceal the identity of the true author of the journals. Interestingly, both authors used pseudonyms themselves as well.
8. In *The Last Camel Died at Noon*, printed copies of both Collins’ *The Moonstone* and Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* are key to the plot, and in *The Curse of the Pharaohs*, Collins’ reliance on laudanum as a plot device (particularly in *The Moonstone*) is lampooned.
9. The scarab was also featured on the cover of the first edition of *She* published in 1887.
10. This may simply be a case of not checking sources, since the phrasing in Lewis’ book is identical to that of the entry in the *Compendium*.
11. Even after Mertz had published her second successful history of ancient Egypt, her knowledge and qualifications were still treated dismissively due to her sex. A 1967 review of *Red Land, Black Land* claims that ‘Mrs. Mertz’s’ book “is written from a distinctly feminine point of view,” which the reviewer sees as a rarity in, but not an asset to, the Egyptological canon (Trigger 1967: 775).

12. The parasol has become a recurring symbol of women's empowerment in neo-Victorian and steampunk literature, perhaps most famously in the case of Alexia Tarabotti, the heroine of Gail Carriger's Parasol Protectorate series (2009-2012). For more information on this trope, see 2011: 100-118.
13. Further evidence of influence includes both women employing a reis with the same name, Hassan, and Peabody becoming known as the 'Sitt Hakim' (or 'Lady Doctor'), while Edwards' traveling companion was called 'Hakim Sitt'.
14. Mertz also does not explicitly mention the character Kevin O'Connell, who is depicted as a stereotypical Irishman – hot-blooded, red-haired, uttering hackneyed expressions such as 'sure an' begorra' – throughout the series, even after it entered the twenty-first-century.

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