WOMEN STORIES IN THE MAMLÜK AGE:
LOVES AND STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE

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Images of women different from the classical poetry stereotypes are scattered here and there in the encyclopedic collections, in the adab hazl (the muğun or the subsf), or in the books on heroes ("ilm al-bah"). These last ones are mainly concerned with the woman's body whether the author praises her beauty or he mocks her ugliness. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889 A. D.) in his 'Uyun al-ahbar wrote that topics dealing with women's body in scientific terms were neither vulgar nor illicit. The same was true for Qudâma (9th–10th c.) and al-'Aqârî (10th–11th c.) who added that obscene words could not alter the good quality of poetry (Corrao 1997; Gelder 1988: 63, 79). Legal sexual relations were legitimate subject of conversation. Law and pharmacology books used to deal with the same subjects. Other authors of the Middle Ages confirm that the description of the woman's body is positive as far as the aim of the book is to prevent adultery, fornication or homosexuality. These books were written to entertain men, to relax their mind from daily distress, therefore the subject represented a fictitious image of reality. This is particularly true when they referred to women's stories because either the poetical or the grotesque stereotypes prevailed. Anyhow, throughout the centuries and the geographical areas of the Arabo-Islamic empire, we single out different approaches towards women's behaviours. In most philosophical, mystical or theological books, women and, of course, their bodies, were considered to be dangerous, a devilish temptation, an obstacle in the most noble and serious path that leads to the knowledge of God. The only escape from the fitna provoked by the woman is legal marriage or, very rarely, abstinence 2. Most of the images we have are either abstract beauties or greedy tricky monsters, but it is still possible to have different information on women in the Mamlük age. Intriguing news come from an uncommon work of adab, the Tayf al-hayâl by Ibn Dânîyâl (13th c.); written to be staged as a shadow play, it belongs to the adab muğun (Ibn Dânîyâl, Shadow plays); it presents many women stereotypes, like prostitutes, cheaters, a

1 Kilpatrick 1995; Häggi Halîfa, Kefî II, 7–8. Among the most famous books of heros there are those by an-Nafzâwî (m. 996), at-Tijâni (m. 1306), Tufâsa; at-Tîfâsi (m. 1253), Nuzha, quoted by De Slane 1883–95: 460; as-Suyûtî (m. 1489), Gulasâ; Idâh (De Slane 1883–95: 16–17 ff; al-Munağqid 1958. A more complete bibliography is given by Declich 1995: 249–264; Corrao 1997.

pregnant nun, a magician, and so on. A typical device of comic literature is to compare contrasting figures, therefore Ibn Dāniyāl, in order to amuse his audience, put together both the classical image of the abstract pure beauty, and a normal ugly woman full of physical defects like old age, white hair, fatness and pains. Like in the greek comedy by Aristophanes, the heroines are ridiculous. Ibn Dāniyāl’s protagonists are not well educated as Šahrazād, whose words saved many women from an unfair destiny. In the Shadow plays, women are poor and ignorant, but still they are aware of the regenerative power of their bodies.

The Three shadow plays are structured like a Maqāma3, the protagonists of each bāba are men. In the first bāba, the hero is the Amīr Wiṣāl (the prince of union), who wishes to marry in order to put an end to his immoral existence. He calls for a procurress, Umm Raṣūl, to find him a perfect wife; but she deceives him and procures him a horrible old woman whose physical description corresponds to the woman who smokes ḥaṣṣ in Ibn al-Harrāt’s poetry. The second bāba presents a group of entertainers, market dealers and vagabonds of the Bānū Sāsān (Rosenthal 1971; Bosworth 1976). The third bāba refers to a love contest between two men, with a final part celebrating a false pregnancy. The first two bābā end with the repentance of the protagonist and his vow to expiate his sins with a pilgrimage to Mekka. In the last bāba, the corrupted sinner, at the sight of death, repents and becomes reconciliated with his God and dies.

The first woman evoked in the Shadow plays is a prostitute, friend of Amīr Wiṣāl; the description of her intense passion was so much appreciated that the famous Imām as-Suyūṭī (15th c.) quoted it in his Kitāb al-wiṣāḥ fi jawā’id an-nikāḥ (as-Suyūṭī, Wiṣāḥ: I, 388).

The second woman is the procurress (Shadow plays: 23; Riso: 146):

“(...) She knows all beauties in Cairo, both the free-women and the prostitutes, for they come out from the public bath hiding in the servant’s shawls; she lends for free the mantel, the dresses and the jewels; she warrants the prostitutes in jail. She is more able than a procurer, she puts together better than a seamstress (...). Most of the time she goes around visiting the houses with the silk to sell the raw and the well-cut materials, different kinds of incense and perfumes, she anticipates (the money to pay) the debts, she fixes the appointments from Thursday to Monday (...). She never forgets to put in her pocket the incense, the bottle, the wine, the ash of lead, the maghrebian narghilé, the signs of the geomancer, the

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3 Ibn Dāniyāl declares that the work has been commissioned by Muḥammad b. Mawlāhum al-Ḫayāli, who is the author of the al-Maqāma al-muḥasara fi hamnī mar’a (Abridged Assembly about fifty women) which consists of the debates between exponents of different crafts, and the author uses technical terms for punning; cfr. Moreh 1992: 109-110. Prof. Moreh told me that he is preparing together with prof. J. Sadan a joint edition of the manuscript of Ibn Mawlāhum, Ms. British Library, Ad. 19411, fols 89a – 104a.
pomegranate’s flower, the chalk to draw the armpit, the good wool, the fresh unguents (...)"

The woman described here has the same characteristics as the woman introduced in the second bāba, the šāniqa, and the fortune teller. The woman tells us the freedom she enjoys in her work; the existence of these professions is witnessed from the official historical sources, from the documents of the Genizah (where it is written that they were mostly Jews and Christians), and also from travellers’ memories. The above-mentioned atmosphere is not far from what Ibn al-Faqih wrote on the Egyptian morality.

“(...) (refers that) Umar b. ʿAbdalʿaziz told Zuhra b. Maʿbad al-Quraši: «Where do you live in Egypt ?» — «In al-Fustāṭ.» — «You live in the debauched city and leave the good one (ie. Alexandria)» (...) God’s envoy said: Go to Egypt and look for what is good, but live somewhere else; because Egypt is a mine for magic and adultery, the residence of the debauched (...)”

The immoral image given by pious Muslims is close to the one given by the Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. The Italian pilgrim Andrea Della Valle wrote in his travel book (Della Valle 1843: I, 174) that both women and men used to walk in the streets half naked, and Stefano Mantegazza told (Mantegazza 1616: 90, 111): “(...) the women rode the donkeys showing their coloured boots and their pierced ears. (...) The women in this country live in laziness, they willingly amuse themselves and let their husbands take care of the cooking and the spinning, I saw it with my own eyes; and the wives frequent the squares they like best to take good air. When the caravan stopped, I saw that men were taking care of the kitchen (...)”

Few female professions, as that of the dancer and the singer, existed since the Pharaohs’ times. Among the more recent professions, there were that of the ballāna, the masseuse of the public bath, the murdiqa, the woman who suckles the babies, prostitutes, bāṭiba, dallāla. Women were able to prepare amulets and tell fortunes.

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4 The Šāniqa (the artisan of beauty products) was able to make tattoos, she used to sell beauty products, materials and jewels; she was also a fortune teller; this passage is a rare one, according to later sources it seems that only the gypsies were specialised in this profession. Cfr. ar–Rāziq 1973; Saʿdawī 1966: 75–6; Lane 1846: 42; Kahle 1950: 11–15, 100; Corraro. 1990: 163–6. Corraro 1996.

5 Ibn al-Faqih, Muhadāa 69, 75. The above-mentioned images of moral corruption are found both in Arabic and Western sources of travellers, see Źyqūt, Miṣḥam V, 141; al-Muqaddasī, Aḥsan at-taqāsīm 200. Cfr. Lane 1883. See also: Ibn Ḥaḍār, Durar III, 244; Ibn al–Ḥāṣib, Madhīl I, 61; II, 17–8, 46, 52, 57, 297; Ibn Ḥawqal, Sūrat al–ṣurā 2, 96; as–Subki, Muʿīd an-nīṣām 199–200; al–Maqrīzī, Description de l’Egypte; Lengererend 1861: 182; Regnault 1855: 323; Castela 1974: 447; Savary 1807: 260; Wild 1973: 235, 278, 281–2; Leone Africano 1550.
Ibn Dāniyāl quotes the story of a queen of the Pharaohs, known as an expert magician and an alchemist. Another woman in the last bāba has magic powers, she is the mother of one of the two lovers, who declares that she has used her magic power to increase the fortune of her son (Ibn Dāniyāl, *Shadow plays* 157).

Life conditions were very hard in that age of transitions, when the Caliphate had been defeated by the Mongols. Thousands of immigrants had escaped from Baghdad and sought refuge in Cairo. Ibn Dāniyāl was among, those, and when he first arrived in Cairo he earned his living as an optician, before becoming a renowned poet. We know that most of the immigrants were soon enrolled in the military campaign against the Mongols. Historical sources tell us very little about women; the only women mentioned are the widows of the Mamlūk emirs, the famous singers, or the prostitutes if a lot of them are imprisoned. This last profession was tolerated in Mamlūk times, there was also an official revenue from their business. When Baybars decided to become the champion of the Islamic caliphate, he tried to put an end to the corruption by imprisoning prostitutes, hāṣīs and wine dealers. Ibn Dāniyāl in the first bāba humorously comments the events, saying that the best thing these women could do was to get married. Also the widows of a Mamlūk emir could have difficulties if the new emir confiscated their wealth. In that age, even a rich woman had to fear for the precariously of her fortune, her destiny could lead her and her servants, into a private prison, or to a special hostel, where they could end their life in prayer. The case of Ibn Dāniyāl’s procurress is that of a working woman who has had a hard time in her life:

“I use to suck babies like a cow; I was assisting the pregnant until they get would get rid of the placenta at the kid’s first painful cry; and all the night long I used to rock the cradle. I missed a good sleep and torpor (...) and my husband used to beat me with the mortar (...)” (Ibn Dāniyāl, *Shadow plays* 153–4).

It is very rare to find a page of dense realism as this one; in fact, the procurress elsewhere, as in Ibn Hazm or in the Thousand and One Nights is more like a fictitious stereotype. The above-mentioned passage is longer and contains more realistic

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6 Her name is Dallūkā, the woman is also mentioned in al-Maṣūdī *Muraqqa* (II, 96–7); her name literally means lesbian, and with this meaning is quoted in the Maqāmāt, here Ibn Dāniyāl hints both at al-Maṣūdī’s queen and the one in the Maqāmāt.

7 Ibn Īyās, *Journal*: on singers and dancers: I, 6; on taxes or financial helps to widows: I, 19, 60; on men and women drinking alcohol on the roads at Ramaḍān: I, 59; on the confiscation of women’s properties: I, 61; on the assault against the house of prostitutes and their imprisonment: I, 145; a few Mamlūks assault a group of women, later they will be refunded: I, 181. See also the romance of Baybars in Bochas & Guillaume 1985; 1986; 1986a; 1987; 1989; 1990; 1992; ‘Abdarrāziq 1973; Sa’dawi 1966: 112.

and obscene details concerning the care of the child and the violent relation with the husband. What is considered to be “obscene” nowadays, at that time was felt only as a physiological need. What really worried the pious and orthodox was the dangerous influence of pre-Islamic beliefs, like magic or supernatural powers, legends and festivals like Nawrūz (the Iranian celebration of the old year’s death) (Corrao 1996). As Ibn Taymiyya argued, women were dangerous because of their ignorance which led to the blind acceptance of wrong beliefs. Ibn Dāniyāl’s work witnesses what Ibn Taymiyya feared; but it shows also that to stick fast to the natural values of the popular culture helped to overcome the crisis produced by the uncertainty of a transitional age. That was particularly evident in Egypt for its historical and geographical bonds, even if those clashed with the need for the revival of a pure Islamic faith.

The woman in folklore is the regenerating element par excellence, and this message is clear in Ibn Dāniyāl’s bāba. In the first bāba, the procuress denies the old corrupted prince the chance to redeem himself and regenerate his life by having a child. The woman, in fact, will marry him to an old lady, her daughter, already mother of a horrible monster. As the prince Wišāl will say, the only chance to redeem is to go in Pilgrimage to Mecca. Later the man wants to take his revenge on her, but this desire is also frustrated, because the woman dies. Then the prince calls upon his husband, and here the poet, to reinforce the concept, recurs to redundancy, introducing another old corrupted man who claims to be a perfect lover, but he ends up being cheated by a young girl. The tricks of the two women, the old and the young one, here confirm the values of popular culture, where the female regenerating power deceives old pretentious men.

In the last bāba, a group of girls laugh at the false pregnancy of one of the two lovers; here they denounce the false “men’s pretence” of a world where it is possible to conceive a child without a woman⁹. The man will generate an excrement, which metaphorically stands for the product of an illusory pretence that has to be buried... The party of the false pregnancy celebrates the burial of man’s foolish ambition to regenerate. The symbolical function of the party parallels that of the festival of Nawrūz on a less celebrative level; in the course of the festival, the burial of the old year, which does not want to die, symbolizes the burial of man’s foolish aspiration to immortality in this existence.

In the Shadow plays we observe that the death of the corrupted characters¹⁰ (the

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⁹ I do not think that such misogynist thinking characterized the culture of the time, to me the very fact that Ibn Dāniyāl depicts in a realistic way the procuress proves the existence of different points of view. Here Ibn Dāniyāl is mocking at a misogynist way of thinking, certainly existing and well explained in the first two chapters of Malti-Douglas 1991.

¹⁰ As in al-Hamādānī’s Maqāmāt, the main subject is the intrigue and cheating. The woman, the symbol of the regenerative strength, is introduced as an old prostitute cheating the hero, a boaster, as it happens also in the maqāmat "ar-Ruṣaifa"; there also the hero ends up revealing his misery and his impo-
procress, her husband and later the homosexual) confirms the Islamic values; with their death all the sins are cancelled; pilgrimage and legal marriage are indicated to be the only means to purify and regenerate life. It is also possible to read another message: in a time of corruption and decay, nothing can be reborn if one keeps complaining about what is lost forever; here the author praises the new hero, Baybars, and the revival of the Islamic faith under his reign.

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