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Pagan or Muslim? “Structures of Feeling” and Religious Ambiguity in al-Khansā’¹

Abstract

The seventh-century poet al-Khansā’ is perhaps the most renowned elegist in the Arabic poetic tradition. As a woman who has secured a place for herself at the heart of the canon, she stands as a feminist icon. But her poetry and life story have yielded divergent interpretations: many literary scholars have characterized her verse as “wholly pagan,” whilst others have pointed to anecdotes about her later life in order to paint a picture of the ideal Muslim woman, selflessly sacrificing her sons for the cause of Islam. It is this latter image which has been embraced and promoted by Islamist, and even extremist, actors in recent years. Here, in this essay, I tease out these contradictory strands of her literary and cultural identities and consider religious themes and imagery in her poetry, asking whether or not her verses reflect an emergent Islamic ethos. Drawing on Raymond Williams’ notion of “structures of feeling,” I demonstrate that her verses are informed by competing ideologies of fatalism, on the one hand, and monotheism, on the other. I also investigate feminist postures in her poetry and their interaction with religious motifs. These overlapping, seemingly contradictory ideologies and discourses create space for multiple readings. The act of interpretation thus takes on added complexity, when the original or intended meanings are in flux and unfixed.

Keywords

Al-Khansā’, elegy, lamentation, Jāhiliyya, structures of feeling, Raymond Williams

Introduction

The seventh-century poet Tumāḍir bt. ‘Amr, otherwise known as the “snub-nosed” or al-Khansā’, is perhaps the most renowned elegist in the whole of the Arabic poetic tradition. That she is an important poet, celebrated across the centuries, is confirmed by the fact that no less than thirteen commentaries on her *dīwān* (collected poems) circulated in the pre-modern era.² She is recognized primarily for her *marāthī*—or poems commemorating the dead—

devoted to her brothers, Ṣakhr and Mu‘āwiya, who were both warriors struck down in battle. Her presence indeed looms large, particularly for women authors who find historical validation in her grief-stricken voice.³ She is, famously, a *mukhadrama* whose life spanned the pre- and early Islamic eras. In modern times, she has had a conflicted legacy. On the one hand, she stands as a feminist icon, as proof of the timelessness of Arab women’s poetic agency. Her representative stature is reflected in the title of Anissa Boumediène’s French translation of her collected poems: *Moi, poète et femme d’Arabie*.⁴ Yet, on the other hand, her persona has been co-opted by sexist and retrograde forces. For evidence of this we need to look no further than the so-called “al-Khansā’ Brigade,” the unit of armed women set up by the group calling itself Islamic State to police women’s dress and behaviour in territories under their control.⁵ The contrast encapsulates the kind of tension that characterizes *and has always characterized* her legacy, a tension which has informed traditional constructions of her persona as well as modern scholarly receptions of her corpus. May one claim al-Khansā’ as a figure who is both organically feminist and demonstrably Muslim? Or must we see her as either one or the other, as having two stages to her life: the pre-Islamic outspoken, womanly, and grieving stage and the early Islamic stoically Muslim one?

Contributing to the ambiguity surrounding the poet is the fact that her biography is very sketchy. She had at least two husbands and a number of children,⁶ and she reportedly converted to Islam. That, in addition to the fact that she was from the tribe of Sulaym, is more or less all we know about her life story. The dearth of biographical information about al-Khansā’ has meant that people have used their interpretative faculties and, indeed, their imaginations to fill in the gaps. In an article about al-Khansā’’s reception in English-language sources such as world literature anthologies, Michelle Hartman observes that because al-Khansā’ is “an enigmatic figure [...] it is easy to project a range of meanings onto her.”⁷

This “range of meanings,” whilst clearly evident in the modern era when competing images of her have become, in a sense, polarized, has its roots in the classical and folkloric traditions. Pre-modern sources, both literary and popular, display her personality from divergent and at times incompatible angles. In the sections of the introduction that follow, I attempt to map out how al-Khansā’ has been received over the centuries: first, I look at the way her persona is narrated in “medieval” literature, be it “classical” or “post-classical,” and then I consider her reception in modern scholarship and popular culture. This leads into a discussion of Raymond William’s concept of “structures of feeling,” thereby laying the groundwork in the main body of the article for an exploration of religious themes and imagery in her poetry and their interrelationship with what we may think of as a feminist stance, or a stance that claims discursive space and agency for women.

Constructions of al-Khansā’

1. Medieval Constructions

a) *The Feminist*

There are a couple of anecdotes that portray al-Khansā’ as a feisty spirit who challenges the authority of men. Most famously, it is related that once, when the poet al-Nābigha al-Dhubyanī told her, “I have never seen one with a womb more poetic than you,” she quipped, “nor one with testicles.”⁸ Another anecdote that portrays al-Khansā’ as undermining masculine dominance is much more elaborate in its construction. This account, which dates from the fourth/tenth century, involves her rejection of the elderly poet Durayd b. al-Ṣimma (d. 8/630) after he has expressed interest in marrying her. Due to its entertainment value, its exemplification of al-Khansā’’s mischievous personality, and its unfolding against a monotheistic backdrop, I relate the anecdote as it appears in the *Kitāb al-aghānī* in full:

Abū ‘Ubayda⁹ and Muḥammad b. Salām¹⁰ said: When Durayd asked for her hand in marriage, she sent a servant of hers and told her, “Look at him when he urinates. If his urine penetrates the ground and makes a furrow in it, then he still has something left in him (ففيه بقية). And if his urine flows on its surface, then he has nothing left in him (فلا بقية فيه). So [the servant] came back to [al-Khansā’] and reported to her, “There’s nothing left in that one.” (لا بقية في هذا). Then [al-Khansā’] sent [Durayd] a message, saying: “I would not forgo my cousins, who are like spearheads, to marry an old man!” So Durayd said:

وقاك الله يا ابنة آل عمر	من الفتیان أشباهي ونفسي
وقالت إنني شيخ كبير	وما نباتها آتي ابن أمس
فلا تلدي ولا ينكحك مثلي	إذا ما ليلة طرقت بنحس
تريد شرنبث القدمين شثناً	يباشر بالعشبية كل كرس

May God keep you, O daughter of the family of ‘Amr,

From young men such as myself

She said that I am an old man

But I did not tell her that I am a son of yesterday

Do not give birth—let no one like me marry you

Whenever a night comes knocking, inauspiciously,

She desires a coarse-footed ruffian

who lies in the evening with urine-soaked dung

Then al-Khansā' replied:

معاذ الله ينكحني حبركى يقال أبوه من جشم بن بكر
ولو أصبحت في جشم هدياً إذا أصبحت في دنس وفقر

God forbid that I marry one who's long-backed and short-legged

Whose father is said to come from the Jusham, son of Bakr

Were I bestowed as a gift to the Jusham

Then I would find myself in filth and poverty¹¹

This incident supposedly occurred during her youth, which would presumably place the poem's composition in the pre-Islamic era. Notice how both Durayd in his invective and al-Khansā' in her response invoke the name of God. It is curious that both of these reports that portray al-Khansā' as challenging a male authority figure and questioning his virility make use of scatological humour and border on the obscene. Nothing could be further from the personae she otherwise projects.

b) The Weeping Woman

The image of al-Khansā' as incessantly mourning may be related to a combination of three factors: first, she is a woman poet, and women poets of this early era are inextricably associated with the genre of *rithā'*; second, almost all of the poems in her corpus are laments; and third, within those laments she makes repeated references to herself crying. On the first point, Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), cites the renowned transmitter 'Umar b. Shabba (d. 262/878) stating:

They used to say that the best of women's verses are the verses of the aggrieved [whose kinsmen have been murdered], inciting for vengeance and invasion and

shaming through belittlement, as well as those who are bereft, enumerating the fine qualities of the deceased. The most poetic of women of both the pre-Islamic and Islamic eras is [al-] Khansā' [...].¹²

Women, therefore, are most eloquent when they are mourning. On the second point—the overwhelmingly elegiac character of her corpus—Alan Jones writes: “Her obsession with lament was all-engulfing—unhinged does not seem too strong a description of her personality.”¹³ Finally, on the third point, it is worth mentioning that roughly half the poems appearing in Abū Suwaylim’s edition of her *dīwān* open with lines in which the poetic persona expresses a wish, determination or compulsion to cry.

The image of al-Khansā' as perpetually mourning comes through clearly in an anecdote found in *Kitāb al-shi'r wa-l-shu'arā'* (The Book of Poetry and Poets) by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889).¹⁴ Here, it is relayed that the poet once entered upon 'Ā'isha bt. Abī Bakr, wife of the Prophet Muḥammad, wearing a *ṣidār* made of goats' hair. A *ṣidār* was a mourning garment covering parts of the head, shoulders and chest.¹⁵ That such a practice was frowned upon in early Islam becomes apparent when 'Ā'isha chastises the poet, saying that she did not even wear one when Muḥammad passed away. Al-Khansā' then tells 'Ā'isha a story that helps to explain this behaviour: on an occasion when Ṣakhr had been extraordinarily generous with al-Khansā' and her husband, Ṣakhr had expressed in verse his desire for her to wear a goats' hair *ṣidār* after his death. Al-Khansā' thus felt beholden. Later in Ibn Qutayba's entry on al-Khansā', he refers to her oft-cited statement about her grief for her brother persisting after she embraced Islam. “I used to cry over Ṣakhr because of his slaying,” she said, “but now I cry for him because he is in Hell.” If anything, her acceptance of Islam and its teachings only intensified her grief.

c) *The Avenging, Warrior Woman*

One fascinating and obviously fictional rendition of her life story occurs in a collection of folkloric tales dating from around the fourteenth century and entitled *Kitāb al-hikāyāt al-‘ajība wa-l-akhbār al-gharība* (*Tales of the Marvellous and News of the Strange*, trans. Malcolm Lyons, 2014). In “The Story of Ṣakhr and al-Khansā’ and Miqdām and Hayfā’,” the female protagonist, who incidentally has a different patronymic than the real-life al-Khansā’, is raped by a stranger as a young girl and falls pregnant. In an effort to stave off their father’s wrath, her brother Ṣakhr falsely confesses to having impregnated her inadvertently when he was drunk. The father then banishes the two of them from the tribe’s domain, and al-Khansā’ and Ṣakhr set out into the lands of other Arab tribes. They stay for a while as guests with one tribe before moving on to the next, looking all the while for al-Khansā’’s rapist and the father of her son, Taghlib. They search all over for years and years before they find him. When they finally do find him, among the tribe of the Rabī‘a, it is revealed that the rapist is an incredibly handsome prince called al-Miqdām who has an exquisitely beautiful sister called al-Hayfā’. Ṣakhr then has his way with al-Hayfā’, taking her against her will and seducing her at the same time. Al-Miqdām walks in on the two of them in her tent engaged in an embrace, and he plans to burn the two of them alive, but al-Khansā’ sends Taghlib to al-Miqdām, identifying himself as his son. Al-Miqdām then aborts his murderous plans and marries al-Khansā’. Meanwhile Ṣakhr marries al-Hayfā’. Ṣakhr then gets caught up in a feud and is killed. It is only at this point in the story that al-Khansā’ utters an elegy for her brother, and she rallies her people to war, seeking to avenge her brother’s death. She even dons armour and bears a sword, participating in battles where the enemy is killed in great numbers. Her thirst for vengeance is not quenched until a thousand enemy women bereft of their brothers are brought to her. They weep and wail in her presence, and she makes peace with them.¹⁶

That al-Khansā' assumes a thoroughly Muslim personality in this fanciful account of her life story is evidenced by the opening line of the elegy that she recites on the occasion of Ṣakhr's death:

أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ إِنْ اللَّهَ غَفَّارٌ وَأَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ آفَاتِ الْأَخْبَارِ

I ask *God's* pity, *Who* is merciful,

And I take refuge with *Him* from this awful news.¹⁷

Indeed, in this verse the name of God (الله) appears three times. This kind of Islamicization of pre-Islamic protagonists is well known in popular literature. B. Heller, in his entry on "Sīrat 'Antar" in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, writes: "By a bold stroke 'Antar, the solitary hero, is raised to be the representative of all that is Arab, 'Antar the pagan is made the champion of Islām."¹⁸ This Islamicizing tendency, which is operative in a number of epics about pre-Islamic warriors is perhaps a function of the urge to bring the protagonists closer to the audience, to make them more relatable.¹⁹ Yet this Islamicizing tendency is not limited to folklore; one could argue that it presents itself in "authored" literature as well. Indeed, an image of al-Khansā' at her most pious comes to us via the third-/ninth-century historian and *racconteur* Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī.

d) The Supporter of Men's Jihād

Ostentatious displays of grief are considered by some, as we shall see below, as un-Islamic. Therefore al-Khansā' 's devout Muslim persona would be contingent upon her renunciation of her previous ways, and there is an anecdote in Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī's *Kitāb al-futūḥ* (the Book of Conquests) which seems to indicate that she did just that. In this account, which is set at the Battle of Qādisiyya, a famous victory of Muslim forces over the Persian army, al-Khansā' urges her sons to fight to the death for the new religion:

Khansā' came to her four sons, who were hardy men, and said to them: "O sons, you have become Muslim willingly, and you have emigrated as chosen ones, and by God, you are the sons of one man just as you are the sons of one woman. And by God, I have not lowered your noble descent, nor have I scandalised your state. You may see what the Persians have prepared for the Muslims. If you approach war, come skin to skin with its army, get right in the middle of it, and strike its leaders with swords. You will earn your spoils, safety, station and nobility in the hereafter."²⁰

The account continues:

So her sons accepted her words. And when the [armies] approached one another, her first son advanced and attacked, and he did not stop fighting until he was killed, may God have mercy on him. Then the second son advanced and attacked, and he did not stop fighting until he was killed, may God have mercy on him. Then the third advanced and attacked and fought until he was killed, may God have mercy on him. Then the fourth advanced and attacked, and he did not stop fighting until he was killed, may God have mercy on him. [...] So, these four sons of al-Khansā' were killed, *and she did not shed a tear.*²¹

This anecdote, despite its early provenance—it dates from the ninth century,²² does not strike me as particularly authentic. It is very formulaic and is lacking in key details, such as the names of her sons. What is important to note here is that it suggests that she abandoned the rituals of mourning that were associated with the Jāhiliyya and that she embraced Islam with such fervour that she was happy to see her four sons die for the cause. In a way the anecdote negates the personality that comes through in her poetry, where she often declares that she will never stop crying and mourning for her beloved kinsmen.

2. Modern Constructions: Islamic vs. Un-Islamic

The pre-modern personae associated with Tumādir bt. ‘Amr feed into modern interpretations of her texts, colouring perceptions of her corpus in complex ways. In this section I discuss the indelible association of al-Khansā’ with Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and the scholarly consensus that she was a pagan poet, on the other. In an Egyptian feminist film, Atef Hetata’s *Closed Doors* (al-Abwāb al-Mughlaqa, 1999)²³ Islamist ideologues use al-Khansā’’s poetry to lure young men into their circle, teaching them literary analysis, empowering them to identify literary tropes such as personification in lessons that they are not getting as part of their regular schooling.²⁴ In the film a teenage boy comes under the influence of fundamentalist Islamist ideology and he ends up killing his mother in a jealous rage. Here the filmmaker, who is the son of world-renowned radical feminist Nawal El Saadawi, relies on irony. He shows how a poet whose corpus could be interpreted in a feminist light is instead manipulated to promote, however indirectly, misogyny.

This feminist perspective, which receives the poet with cynicism and suspicion, is to be expected. If some would find in al-Khansā’ a powerful female voice, challenging the parameters of male authority, others would argue to the contrary that al-Khansā’’s poetry, which celebrates masculinity and celebrates the male as protector, benefactor, and warrior, and which sometimes participates in cycles of violence by calling for blood revenge, hardly counts as female-authored—they would argue that there is little if any difference between what she wrote and what her male contemporaries wrote. As a matter of fact, so seemingly mired in patriarchal values are pre-Islamic women’s elegies that one Orientalist scholar, R.A. Nicholson, asserts that “the poetry of Arabian women of the pre-Islamic period is distinctly masculine in character.”²⁵ That al-Khansā’’s corpus could be appropriated and manipulated by characters portrayed as misogynists should perhaps then come as no surprise.

What is surprising is that she is revered by Islamic fundamentalists as an ideal Muslim woman when literary scholars often suggest that her poetry reflects a purely pre-Islamic pagan ethos. F. Krenkow, in his entry on al-Khansā' in *the First Encyclopedia of Islam*, for example, writes:

[...] al-Khansā' lived long enough to see the final victory of the new faith and she is said to have been reproved both by the caliph 'Umar and by 'Ā'isha for her unreasonable mourning for her brothers, especially Ṣakhr. The new religion had no real influence upon her and her poems.²⁶

F. Gabrieli, following on from Krenkow in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, states: "Although tradition makes her welcome Islam and even exhort her sons to fight to the death for the new faith, her poetry is *wholly pagan* in feeling, and her view of life and death is invariably that of the ancient *Djāhiliyya*."²⁷ More recently, Clarissa Burt, in her chapter on al-Khansā' in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, states: "Although al-Khansa' embraced Islam [...], the story of her life after her conversion continues to express pre-Islamic values rather than those of the early Muslim community."²⁸ Helmer Ringgren concedes that an Islamic influence may be felt in the poetry of al-Khansā' when he says that "there are some traits in her *dīwān* that show her knowledge of Islamic terms and ideas," but even he emphasizes her pre-Islamic mindset when he adds that "most of her poems are not appreciably affected by the new religion."²⁹

Arab scholars, too, reflect this viewpoint. In her seminal monograph on al-Khansā', Bint al-Shāṭi' speculates that whilst al-Khansā' was a *mukhaḍrama*, she did not embrace Islam until after she completed her poetic career, and that artistically she therefore falls squarely within the domain of the late *Jāhiliyya*.³⁰ This is not something Bint al-Shāṭi' mentions in passing, rather it is the point by which she opens her first chapter. She goes on to

validate this opinion by citing similar assertions by medieval critics such as the ninth-century Ibn Qutayba, who likewise categorise al-Khansā' as a Jāhiliyya poet.³¹

So al-Khansā' has these seemingly contradictory personalities, one notable for its emotional vitality and humanity, the other for its militancy and fanaticism, one for its paganism, the other for its monotheistic belief. There are a couple of paradoxes at the heart of her legacy, it seems. She is, on the one hand, a feminist icon, demonstrating that women can compete in the realm of poetry which was traditionally a male domain. On the other hand, since her poems celebrate the virtues of deceased warriors, they uphold patriarchal values. Her poetry may be read as feminist or as patriarchal or as some peculiar combination of the two. Furthermore, there is tension between the idea that al-Khansā' was a devout Muslim, and that her poetry was "wholly pagan." In order to tease out these strands of her persona, I will examine her verses in the light of their religious components, thereby drawing on her words to show how a religious profile of her may be built. In the pages that follow, I pursue these questions: Is it true that her poetry is "wholly pagan"? Or can we detect the influence of Islam? And, whatever the religious impulse of her verses, can she be reclaimed by feminists as a positive role model? What is the relationship between the religiosity of al-Khansā''s poetry and its feminine agency? When al-Khansā' uses the word "God" (*allāh*), does she refer to the one, monotheistic deity, who is grammatically masculine by default? Or does she, conversely, allude to the pre-Islamic male godhead, who distinguishes himself from the female godhead (*allāt*).³² Such words which capture concepts of the divine were, after all, undergoing a semantic shift during her time. Meanings, particularly as they related to religion and perceptions of the cosmos, were transmutable. For this reason, it is helpful, when trying to determine the connotations of a word at any particular moment of historical change, to refer to Raymond Williams and his notion of "structures of feeling."

Structures of Feeling

The notion of “structures of feeling” elaborated by Raymond Williams is, in some ways, a simple one, and, in other ways, hard to pin down.³³ “As a concept,” Alan O’Connor explains, “it refers to something more general than the ideas of a period, yet something more organized than its culture.”³⁴ The sense that applies most directly to my argument is the one that he articulates in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) that relates to systems of thought that are in formation, that are vying with each other, and that may be discerned, sometimes rather indirectly, in semantic and symbolic patterns that characterize a work of art which is the product of a changing environment. It opens up interpretative possibilities by acknowledging that ideological positions and their manifestations need not be fixed nor fully formed. It would seem that Williams believes that there is a tendency to overlook “structures of feeling” because it is easier to identify the fully-formed whole:

In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished projects. [...] Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now, as in that produced past, only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding.³⁵

Intuitively, one would expect al-Khansā’'s poetry to exhibit some degree of transitional thinking; she was, after all a *mukhadrama*. Two religions, paganism and Islam, with their contrasting worldviews, were competing for her attention. Yet for some reason, when we read her, we have trouble accommodating for religious ambiguity. We read the word “God” as fixed in meaning. The scholarly consensus is that she was a pagan poet, that she composed most if not all of her poetry prior to her conversion to Islam, and that seemingly monotheistic

references to God in her corpus are probably textual distortions inserted by scholars and scribes of later eras. In other words, she must have been one or the other, but not *both*, and not *neither*. But what if she was both—what if her “God” is a pagan godhead who is emerging as the one preeminent and only God? Perhaps it is time that we reread her corpus for its religious instability, its reflections of changing ideas and ideas in the process of formation.

Two major ideological transitions took place during al-Khansā’'s lifetime: one was a question of faith—or theory—and another of ritual—or practice. First of all, there was a transition from polytheism, or belief in many gods, to monotheism, or belief in the one omnipresent all-encompassing God. This was a conceptual and abstract shift, but there were other concomitant shifts involving behaviour, and the one that was most central to al-Khansā’'s universe was the Islamic prohibition of certain mourning rituals. That we, when reading between the lines, find inconsistencies or areas of ambivalence in regards to these two phenomena, should not disconcert us. Instead we should recognize the complexity of the ideological formations of her poetry, a complexity that reflects both societal theological shifts and personal positions that al-Khansā’ stakes out with regard to them. The ambiguities that result from these shifts in meaning sometimes occur at the level of vocabulary (as is the case with “God” and, as we will see below, *ṣabr*) and sometimes at the level of imagery.

Women, Elegy and Lamentation

Women’s agency, in the poetic sphere, in pre-Islamic Arabia, was largely confined to the genre of elegy (*rithā’*).³⁶ Women proved to be successful composers of laments for the dead (*marāthī*), and many specimens of female-authored pre- and early Islamic elegies survive. Usually these elegies are dedicated to male relatives who have been killed in battle, and often they contain elements of *tahrīd* or incitement to blood revenge. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych

speaks of the female author of the elegy as a woman who is empowered to speak by virtue of her state of ritual impurity, implying that once her kinsman's death is avenged and a state of purity re-attained, she would stop speaking publicly.³⁷

That women excelled at elegy is often related to practices of female-dominated rituals of lamentation and the professional female mourners (*nā'ihāt*) who were often called upon to assist the bereaved in their mourning. According to T. Fahd, there were three persistent pre-Islamic customs associated with paganism that were frowned upon in Islam: “invoking the planets in order to receive rain,” “attacking genealogies,” and “lamenting the dead” (*niyāha*).³⁸ In addition to weeping and wailing, lamenters would shave their heads, tear their chest coverings, slap and scratch at their cheeks, and hit their faces with their sandals.³⁹ All of these practices were deemed problematic by many adherents of the new religion, who found raising the voice in ostentatious grief unseemly and who thought that death, inasmuch as it reflected God's will, should instead be faced with *ṣabr*, that is forbearance or patience.⁴⁰ The elegy, to the extent that it resembled lamentation, was therefore challenging to the emerging religious ethos. As Leor Halevi remarks, “The poetic elegy (*marthiya*) concealed with a thin veil the fervor and passion of spontaneous laments. Here lay its power.”⁴¹

Lamentation was, in theory if not in practice, banned,⁴² but the composition of elegies was not. It is often said that the Prophet Muḥammad was an admirer of al-Khansā's poems and liked to hear her recite them.⁴³ Moreover, there is an account of Muḥammad being so moved by an elegy composed by the daughter of al-Naḍr, a member of Quraysh whom Muḥammad reportedly killed in captivity, that he—Muḥammad—wept and said he would have pardoned al-Naḍr if he had heard the poem beforehand. The elegy also made him decide that no member of Quraysh would be killed in captivity again.⁴⁴ Hence there was toleration for and appreciation of *rithā'* amongst early Muslims.

Nevertheless, the genre's association with practices of lamentation meant that, according to the tenets of the new religion, it bordered on the problematic. Why then is someone who devoted her life to mourning and lamenting her dead brothers, and who did so apparently from a pagan perspective, celebrated by jihadists as a Muslim role model?

Did she have, as reported, these two stages to her life: the pre-Islamic stage when she composed poetry reflecting a pagan ethos and cried and wept over her deceased brothers, and a post-Islamic stage where she became a devout Muslim, presumably abandoning her career as a composer of laments and dispensing with conventional rituals of mourning such as weeping? Or is there evidence that she continued to compose poetry after her conversion? Do we find in her corpus pagan laments and Islamic ones? Or was her conversion gradual? Do her poems reflect a changing ethos? How does one translate and interpret "Allāh" or "God"?

Pagan Imagery

If we turn to her poetry and read it for its religious content, we find that there are few direct references to paganism—she makes mention of no names of gods other than *the* God.⁴⁵ But perhaps one could find paganism in its fatalism, in its discussion of Time and the Fates and the Accidents of Fortune. In his article "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry," Th. Emil Homerin suggests that pagan deities were largely absent from ancient Arabic poetry, which expresses its paganism instead through fatalistic imagery:

The prevalent view of Arabian life in the poetry, however, is one in which the gods are usually irrelevant. *Dahr* (time/fate) or *manīyah* (fate/destiny) was the tyrannical sovereign, unpredictable and capricious, which set the appointed time (*ajal*) for every

man's death. Grudgingly, fate drove man into misfortune, separating him from his loved ones, acting treacherously, corrupting and destroying all that he cared for.⁴⁶

This figure of a tyrannical time is commonplace in al-Khansā's poetry. The following verses are a good example:

تَبْكِي خُنَاسٌ عَلَى صَخْرٍ وَحَقٌّ لَهَا إِذْ رَابَهَا الدَّهْرُ إِنَّ الدَّهْرَ ضَرَّارٌ
لَا بُدَّ مِنْ مَيِّتَةٍ فِي صَرْفِهَا غَيْرٌ وَالدَّهْرُ فِي صَرْفِهِ حَوْلٌ وَأَطْوَارٌ

Khunās weeps for Ṣakhr and she has every right to do so

Time has disturbed her; indeed, Time is injurious

There is no escape from a death in whose price is a bloodwit

Time, in its shifting, revolves and goes round⁴⁷

The word for time (الدهر) occurs thrice in these two lines, first as the subject of the verb (راب) which I have translated with the word “disturb” but which means something closer to “to plague with doubt.” Then it is described with the emphatic active participle (ضَرَّار), “injurious.” Finally, it is spoken about in terms of its inevitable circularity. Time in the pre-Islamic pagan ethos, like the Fates (المنون) and the vicissitudes (الحوادث), is often personified. In her book *Ethics & Poetry in Sixth-Century Arabia*, Nadia Jamil describes *al-dahr* as “a multi-faceted hunter-predator, locked in a quasi-contractual relationship with the living, to collect the pledges (*rihān*) that constitute their lives.”⁴⁸

Time acts with intent, and it is often portrayed as the ultimate cause. It is this attribution of causation to a personified Time that makes the fatalism prevalent in pre-Islamic

Arabic poetry, and particularly the elegy, un-Islamic. The nature of this personification is striking in the following line:

لو أنّ الدّهر متّخذ خليلاً لكان خليله صخر بن عمرو

Were Time to take a lover

That lover would be Şakhr, son of ‘Amr⁴⁹

Here, Time is both personified and, more significantly perhaps, compared to God, for the term *khalīl*, meaning “intimate friend” or “lover,” is associated with the prophet Abraham who is called *al-Khalīl* or *khalīl Allāh* because God took him as a friend.⁵⁰

Apart from this fatalism, I find very little distinctly pagan content in al-Khansā’s corpus.⁵¹ One should be aware as well that fatalism is not entirely inconsistent with monotheism and that themes of fatalism and the thematic importance of Time persist in later Islamic elegies.⁵² Thus paganism per se is not readily apparent in al-Khansā’s poetry. What one does find, however, when one reads her verses for their religiosity, is scattered references to God or Allāh.

References to God

Allāh exists as a deity in pre-Islamic times, so references to God, on their own, are not necessarily evidence of an Islamic influence. According to Helmer Ringgren, Allāh as a pre-Islamic deity was specifically bound up with notions of destiny, which, of course, would have repercussions for the elegy. He writes: “[...] the question of the relation between Allah and Time is one of the most complicated. It has long been recognized that the pre-Islamic Allah was a god of fate, controlling the destiny of man.⁵³ So bound up with destiny is this Arabian

high-god,⁵⁴ argues Ringgren, that one often finds that the words *al-dahr* (Time) and Allāh (God) “often occur as variants in the same verse.”⁵⁵

This substitutability of “God” and “Time” could also be explained away as retrospective editing. With regard to the question of variant texts, it has been suggested that the references to God, when they occur in one version of a poem but not in another, are not authentically pre-Islamic but rather later distortions of the original text that occurred during the process of transmission. Such is the argument of Alan Jones regarding the following line of al-Khansā’'s verse:

أفارق مهجتي ويشقّ رمسي فلا يا صخر لا أنساك حتى

Jones translates this:

Ah, O Ṣakhr, I shall [never] forget you until I part from my soul and my grave is cut⁵⁶

According to Jones, in those editions of her *dīwān* where the phrase “O Ṣakhr” (يا صخر) is replaced by the words “by God” (والله), this represents a distortion: “This line, incidentally, shows how references to Allāh could *creep in* during the course of transmission even in cases where a pagan deity is not involved.”⁵⁷

Thus, references to Allāh in her poetry cannot serve as conclusive evidence of al-Khansā’'s status as Muslim at the time of composition, both because Allāh was a pre-Islamic pagan deity and because the poetry was recorded in writing centuries after it was composed, hence those references could have been added in the process of transmission. Nevertheless, the fact that we have references to Allāh in the absence of references to other gods, and the fact that Allāh is portrayed at times, as the one, eternal entity, do encourage monotheistic, Islamic readings of her verse.

God's name occurs rather frequently in the poetry of al-Khansā'. For example, she uses the oaths (والله) and (تالله).⁵⁸ There are, furthermore, several instances where al-Khansā' expresses the wish that God "irrigate" the deceased's grave with rain.⁵⁹ Since watering the grave is an ancient Arab custom,⁶⁰ the idea that this imagery of God causing rain to fall on a grave could represent the Islamicization of a pagan ritual is intriguing. Elsewhere al-Khansā' uses the phrases "with God's permission" (بإذن الله)⁶¹ and "refuge in God" (معاذ الله), the latter of which I have translated in the aforementioned anecdote featuring Durayd b. al-Ṣimma as "God forbid."⁶² One also finds passing references to God in the use of idiomatic expressions, such as "to God be attributed the deed of..." (لله دَرّ).⁶³ On further occasions she addresses the deceased with the formula (فلا يبعدنك الله)—"May God not make you distant," or, as Gert Borg has argued, "may God not cause you to fade away."⁶⁴ On another occasion, she uses the phrase (لا يبعدنك المليك), or "may the 'sovereign' not let you fade away,"⁶⁵ where the word "sovereign" may very well be a reference to God. Indeed, this seems certain when one considers the following line where she would appear to be talking about God's eternal nature and where she again uses the word "sovereign":

لا شيء يبقى غير وجه مليكنا ولست أرى شيئاً على الدهر خالدا

Nothing endures but the face of our sovereign,

And I see nothing eternal over time⁶⁶

It is important to bear in mind that al-Khansā''s corpus is unstable, and that the examples I am citing may occur in one redaction of her *dīwān* and not in others. Nonetheless, the examples are numerous enough that we can see that al-Khansā', for at least part of her poetic career, expressed monotheistic inclinations through her references to God or Allāh.

Sometimes these references are expressed through the variant of Allāh (الله), al-Ilāh (الإله)⁶⁷:

إنّ الحوادث لا يبقى لنائبها إلا الإله وراسي الأصل معلوم

Nothing remains for one affected by vicissitudes

Except God, and he with fixed origins is known⁶⁸

In the following example, al-Khansā' displays what is perhaps a more sophisticated awareness of God, when she refers to him by two of his nicknames, *al-Wāḥid*, the one, and *al-Bāqī*, the everlasting:

لا تَبْعَدَنَّ فَإِنَّ الْمَوْتَ مُحْتَرَمٌ كُلُّ الْخَلَائِقِ غَيْرَ الْوَاحِدِ الْبَاقِي

Do not fade away, for death cuts off/ Every creature save the Eternal One⁶⁹

One could argue that what really marks al-Khansā' 's poetry as pagan is its lack of Islamic eschatological imagery: there are no rewards of paradise awaiting the deceased. There is, however, in Cheikho's edition of her *dīwān*, an important exception to this rule. One finds the following line:

إِذْهَبْ حَرِيْبًا جِزَاكَ اللهُ جَنَّتِهِ عَنَّا وَخَلَدْتَ فِي الْفَرْدُوسِ تَخْلِيدًا

Go, with nothing left of ours, may God reward you in his heaven,

You have been immortalised in paradise⁷⁰

The above line, which Cheikho identifies as coming from only two of his sources, would, if it is authentic, confirm an Islamic outlook. It is a rare instance in which al-Khansā' pays heed to Islamic notions of the afterlife. However, in its spirit it is not entirely atypical, for we find that the idea of "resting in peace" at the mercy of God comes across loud and clear in the following concluding verse:

رَحْمَةُ اللهِ وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَقَى قَبْرَهُ الرَّبِيعُ خَرِيْفًا

May God's mercy and peace be upon him

And may the autumn rains irrigate his grave⁷¹

In one extraordinary poem, al-Khansā' invokes the name of God six times, three of them in the same expression "may God not let [...] fade away" (لا يبعث الله). Whilst this seemingly exaggerated use of repetition may cause some to doubt the poem's authenticity, it should be acknowledged that repetition is characteristic of the elegy. This is true be it applied on a universal scale,⁷² or in the context of the Arabic elegy,⁷³ or in the case of al-Khansā',⁷⁴ specifically. I quote the poem in its entirety:

أرى الدهر أفى معشري وبني أبي	فأمسيت عبرى لا يجف بكائيا
أيا صخر هل يغني البكاء أو الأسى	على ميث بالقبر أصبح ثاويا
فلا يبعث الله صخرأ وعهده	ولا يبعث الله ربى معاويا
ولا يبعث الله صخرأ فإته	أخو الجود بيني للفعال العواليا
سأبكيهما والله ما حنّ واله	وما أثبت الله الجبال الرواسيا
سقى الله أرضاً أصبحت قد حوتهما	من المستهلات السحاب الغواديا

I see Time has made my people, my brothers, disappear,

So I became a weeper, my tears do not dry up

O Şakhr, does crying or mourning suffice

For the dead man who now resides in the grave?

May God not let Şakhr and his time fade away

And may God, my Lord, not let Mu'āwiya fade away

And may God not let Ṣakhr fade away, for he is

The Brother of goodness, building edifices for action

I will cry for them, by God, as long as the bereft moans

And as long as God keeps the firm mountains fixed

May God irrigate a land that has come to contain them

With morning clouds that yield the first rain⁷⁵

This insistent repetition of the name of God, in the absence of other gods, does perhaps signal a shift from an understanding of Allāh as a “high god,” and a “god of fate,” to one in which he is the only God.

Muslim and Feminist

In the next, final example of the use of the word Allāh in al-Khansā’'s corpus,⁷⁶ we have an image that asserts the primacy of God and, more significantly, the worshipping of God in the natural environment. We also have an act of resistance in the form of a defence of wailing on al-Khansā’'s part. It is in this example where we can see both her religiosity and her feminist stance. It must be said that in order to read this as a feminist and a Muslim text, one needs to dispense with the usual chronologies of her career:⁷⁷ the poem would seem to situate us in an Islamic environment after al-Khansā’'s conversion, even though it is dedicated to her brother Mu‘āwiya, who predeceased Ṣakhr, and who is seen as the lesser of the two poetic subjects in terms of the strength of al-Khansā’'s emotional attachment to them. Hence it is unlikely, according to the standard narrative, that she would be elegizing Mu‘āwiya at this late stage, that is both after her conversion and, I would argue, after her practices of lamentation were

under threat by the incoming religious authorities. Nevertheless, the textual evidence would suggest that either this was the case or that al-Khansā's monotheism predates her conversion to Islam and that lamentation practices were perhaps already facing harsh criticism. I quote the poem now in full:

ألا لا أرى في النَّاسِ مثلَ معاوية	1	إذا طرقت إحدى اللَّياليِ بدهية
بدهيه يضغي الكلاب حسيبها	2	وتخرج من سرِّ النَّجِيِّ علانية
ألا لا أرى كالفارس الجون فارساً	3	إذا ما علتة جرأة وغلانية
وكان لزاز الحرب عند شبوبها	4	إذا شمّرت عن ساقها وهي ذاكية
وقواد خيل نحو أخرى كأنها	5	سعال وعقبان عليها زبانية
بلينا وما تبلى تعازٍ وما ثرى	6	على حدّث الأيام إلا كما هية
فأقسمت لا ينفك دمعى وعولتي	7	علّيك بحزنٍ ما دعا الله داعية

1 No indeed, I see not among people the likes of Mu'āwiya

When a night comes knocking with misfortune

2 A misfortune whose moan causes dogs to whimper,

And which emerges, openly, from the confidant's secret

3 No indeed, I see not a horseman like the black horseman⁷⁸

When overcome by daring and fury

4 He clung to war when she broke out

When, blazing, she raised up her garment from her shank

5 Leading horses towards others, as if they

Were female demons and black she-camels carrying the guardian
angels of hell

6 We have perished, but Ti‘ār has not. It is seen

Despite the passage of days, only as it is

7 So I swore that my tears and wailing would not cease

In mourning for you as long as the *dā‘iya* prays to God⁷⁹

I leave the word *dā‘iya* untranslated because, as Alan Jones points out, there is more than one way to translate it.

Dā‘iyah, a pausal form of *dā‘iyatun*, is the feminine active participle of *da‘ā* and means “a woman who prays.” This would refer in a natural way to al-Khansā’ herself—the masculine verb is no barrier to that. However, it is also possible to take *dā‘iyah* as a masculine intensive form (see Wright I, 139).⁸⁰ That would be more strongly Islamic, and on that basis is somewhat more doubtful.⁸¹

A brief look at the medieval dictionary *Lisān al-‘Arab* by Ibn Manzūr (d. 1311 or 1312 C.E.) confirms that the intensive form of the male active participle *dā‘in* existed in actuality and not just in theory. He writes:

ورجلٌ داعيةٌ إذا كان يدعو الناس إلى بدعة أو دين أُدْخِلَتْ الهاء فيه للمبالغة

And a man is a *dā‘iya* when he calls people to apostasy or to religion. The *hā’* [read *tā’ marbūṭa*] is introduced in it for intensification.⁸²

The image is arguably “strongly Islamic” whether the *dā’iya* is a masculine intensive form, meaning “a man who prays much,” an “emissary,” or a “missionary” or whether it is a feminine form, meaning “a woman who prays.”⁸³ The image is one of continuity and regularity. The *dā’iya*, male or female, prays incessantly—he or she will not stop praying just as al-Khansā’ will not stop weeping. For, in another formulation of a similar sentiment, al-Khansā’ states:

سوف أبكيك ما ناحت مطوقة وما أضاءت نجوم الليل للساري

I will cry for you as long as the dove coos

And as long as the stars light the way for the night-traveller⁸⁴

I will cry as long as...

...the dove coos

...the stars shine

...the *dā’iya* prays to God

By substituting “the *dā’iya* prays to God” for “the dove coos” and “the stars shine,” al-Khansā’ is incorporating the worshipper of the one all-powerful God into the natural environment, incorporating, in other words, Islam into her soundscape. The dove continuously coos, the stars shine every night, and now the *dā’iya* may be heard praying at all times. This is not a passing reference to God, but an incorporation of God into an enduring image—and an image of endurance. It is, therefore, possibly, the most Islamic of the references we have come across. Note that, through parallelism, it also lends religious legitimacy to her act of weeping and wailing at the same time that it may be read as a statement of defiance against those co-religionists who would find something problematic in

her lamentation, by asserting that she will continue to mourn as long as the supplicant prays to God, she is equating the two activities and equating them on two levels: the level of sound, and the level of persistence. Her mourning resonates like prayer to God—perhaps like the call to prayer—just as her mourning sounds like the cooing of doves. Moreover, her mourning, the dove cooing and the *dā'īya* praying all continue indefinitely into the future. This represents a feminist impulse, as it both resists the suppression of a woman's custom, indeed of a woman's form of self-expression, and draws parallels between that custom and the socially-sanctioned practice of religious worship. Al-Khansā' in this sense, stands up to those patriarchal religious authorities who would wish to silence women at their time of mourning.

A couple of observations to be found in the secondary literature bolster my interpretation of the poem as a defence of wailing practices. The first relates to the poem's rhythms. Bint al-Shāṭi', when discussing the emotional impact of the poem, says: "Its moving plaintive sound, which is made to resemble wailing by the pausal *hā'* (الهَاءُ السَّاكِنَةُ), shakes our very being."⁸⁵ The *iyah* rhyme, in other words, accentuates the poem's status as a lament. *Dā'īya* is not just pronounced but wailed. The second observation, which solidifies the poem's Islamic context, comes from Alan Jones, who points out that the term *zabāniya*, the rhyme-word of line 5, appears in the Qur'ān (96:18). Jones, however, does not believe that al-Khansā' directly references the Qur'ān but rather that "the Qur'ān and al-Khansā' are both drawing on the high-level lexicon of the period to put across notions about what we may call demons."⁸⁶

Whether or not al-Khansā' is referencing the Quran,⁸⁷ the use of the word *zabāniya* further strengthens our argument that the poet expresses emergent Muslim sentiments, because it draws on Islamic eschatological imagery. The *zabāniya*, a collective noun, refers to "certain angels" or "the tormenters of the damned in Hell."⁸⁸

Thus al-Khansā', at her most Muslim, puts forward what we may call a feminist defence of lamentation practices when she says that she will continue to wail as long as the *dā'iya* prays to God. This does not mean that she rejected all criticism of mourning rituals. Indeed, in another poem⁸⁹ she states:

فإنَّ الصَّبْرَ خَيْرٌ مِنَ النَّعْلَيْنِ وَالرَّأْسِ الْحَلِيقِ

She says, “Patience/forbearance is better than sandals and shaven heads,” thereby suggesting that the virtue of forbearance, with which the pious Muslim is meant to confront death, is more effective than some outward displays of grief associated with the Jāhiliyya—namely beating oneself with sandals and shaving one’s head. Here, too, we find the influence of Islam.

Summation

Thus, we have seen how the poetry of al-Khansā', far from being “wholly pagan,” at times reflects an emergent Islamic ethos, and one which is compatible with a feminist stance. Or at least it does so *from a certain perspective*. The “structures of feeling” that inform her work and mark it with ambivalence and ambiguity make it open to many possible avenues of interpretation. This is why her persona can be claimed as prototypical of the Jāhiliyya, on the one hand, and of the early Islamic era on the other. She swears by God, *the* God; she often calls on God to rain on the deceased’s grave; she refers to God’s eternal nature; and she beseeches God to keep her loved ones near. But is this God the abstract monotheistic divine presence, or is this “god” a preminent and specifically male god in a constellation of pagan deities? That largely depends on the beliefs of the reader. Even a word with universal semantic reach, such as “Allāh,” yields a multiplicity of meanings.

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¹ I am indebted to two of my mentors, Professors Geert Jan van Gelder and Wen-chin Ouyang, for their input into drafts of this article. Furthermore, I owe my gratitude to an anonymous outside reader for *Middle Eastern Literatures* whose insightful critique of the article inspired certain revisions and

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSndzkd8Gks&t=2261s>.

² Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 10-16.

³ An engaging study of al-Khansā'’s influence on the Palestinian poet Fadwā Ṭūqān may be found in DeYoung, “Love, Death, and the Ghost of al-Khansā' .”

⁴ Al-Khansā', *Moi, poète et femme d'Arabie*, tr. Anissa Boumediène (Paris: Sindbad, 1987).

⁵ Saikal, “Women and *Jihad*,” 318.

⁶ Bint al-Shāṭi' ('Ā'isha 'Abd al-Raḥmān) carefully considers the question of whether she had two or three husbands, reviewing both the arguments of scholars and the evidence in the sources, in her monograph *al-Khansā'*, 33-9.

⁷ Hartman, “An Arab Woman,” 31.

⁸ Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-nisā'*, 261.

⁹ Probably Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā. See G.J.H. van Gelder, “Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn al-Muthannā (110-209/728-824 or 5),” *EAL*, 49.

¹⁰ This must be Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī (d. 232/846 or 7),¹⁰ author of *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*, a classificatory anthology of esteemed poets that includes al-Khansā' in its chapter on elegists. See G.J.H. van Gelder, “Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī (139-232/756-846 or 847),” *EAL*, 369.

¹¹ al-Iṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 15:76-7. Translation mine.

¹² Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-nisā'*, 257. Translation mine.

¹³ Alan Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 1: 89.

¹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *al-Shi'r wa-l-shu'arā'*, 197-201.

¹⁵ Lane, *Lexicon*, ṣ-d-r. Lane suggests that a woman mourning her husband would wear one made of wool.

¹⁶ Wehr, *Kitāb*, 340-67. An English translation may be found Lyons, *Tales*, 295-315. For a study of the tale, see Chraïbi, “Genre et narration.”

¹⁷ Wehr, *Kitāb*, 357. Translation Lyons, *Tales*, 309. Emphasis mine.

¹⁸ Heller, “Sīrat ‘Antar,” *EF*².

¹⁹ An interesting example of the Islamicisation phenomenon occurs in the Christian version of what we may call an ‘epic’ about a hero who is identified at the outset as Christian and yet who behaves and speaks as a Muslim. This is the epic of al-Barrāq b. Rawḥān. See Abkāriyūs, “Ḥarb al-Barrāq.”

²⁰ Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, 206. Note that in the version of this story related by Bint al-Shāṭi’ (*al-Khansā’*, 49-50), which is drawn from a number of sources, each of the four sons responds to his mother in verse.

²¹ Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūḥ*, 206-7. Emphasis mine.

²² Conrad, “Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī,” 314.

²³ Hetata, *Closed Doors*.

²⁴ *Ibid*. The scene occurs about thirty-two minutes into the film.

²⁵ Nicholson, *Literary History of the Arabs*, 126. Note that this work was first published in 1914.

²⁶ Krenkow, “al-Khansā’,” *EF*¹.

²⁷ Gabrieli, “al-Khansā’,” *EF*². Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Burt, “al-Khansā’,” 258.

1. ²⁹ Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism*, 81. See also 82.

³⁰ Bint al-Shāṭi’, *al-Khansā’*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid*, 9. For the relevant passage in Ibn Qutayba, see *Kitāb al-shi‘r wa-l-shu‘arā’*, 197.

³² Here, I am going with what Toufic Fahd calls the ‘scientific’ derivation of Allāt, which reads the word as a feminine form of Allāh, rather than the ‘traditional’ derivation (*Le panthéon*, 111), which is prevalent among Arab lexicographers and which understands the word as being derived from the verb *latta*.

³³ For a discussion of the evolution of the term and its various connotations, see O’Connor, *Raymond Williams*, 83-5.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

³⁵ Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” 20.

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- ³⁶ A discussion of the association of women poets with the genre of *rithā*’ is found in Hammond, “On Stallions, Viragos, and Tears”, Chapter 1 of *Beyond Elegy*, 29-58.
- ³⁷ Stetkevych, *Mute Immortals*, 165.
- ³⁸ Fahd, “Niyāḥa”, *EF*².
- ³⁹ On these customs, see, for example, Dayf, *al-‘Aṣr al-jāhilī*, 207.
- ⁴⁰ Halevi, “Wailing for the Dead,” 114, 120, 133.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 117.
- ⁴² For a discussion of the various traditions banning lamentation, see Juynboll, “The *man kadhaba* tradition.”
- ⁴³ Fernea and Bezirgan, *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak*, 4. See also Muhannā, *Mu‘jam*, 74. I have not found classical references for this.
- ⁴⁴ Al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, 963-4.
- ⁴⁵ In point of fact, there are so many names for gods—Toufic Fahd lists some ninety-three (*Le panthéon*, 38-201), that I cannot rule out the possibility that one of these names does occur in her corpus, which is, after all, variable.
- ⁴⁶ Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl,” 167.
- ⁴⁷ Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 379-380. Translation mine.
- ⁴⁸ Jamil, *Ethics & Poetry*, 93.
- ⁴⁹ Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 189; al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 46; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā*’, 73. Translation mine.
- ⁵⁰ Paret, “Ibrāhīm,” *EF*².
- ⁵¹ One pagan elegiac motif is that of the owl which emerges from the head of the deceased and which hoots and hangs around the grave until the death has been avenged. See Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl.” I have found only two references to owls in al-Khansā’ ’s corpus. One, in the form of the *ṣadā*, may be found in Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 284/Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā*’, 252/al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 139. The second, *būm*, occurs in Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā*’, 230/al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 127, but in this instance, it is glossed by the editors as meaning *aḥmaq* (idiotic) rather than “owl.”
- ⁵² For an overview of the evolution of the elegy, its motifs and themes from the pre-Islamic era and up until Abbasid times, see Smoor, “Death, The Elusive Thief.”

⁵³ Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism*, 46.

⁵⁴ According to Toufic Fahd, the word “Allāh” signifies not so much one specific god, but rather any number of high-gods. He states: “En somme, Allāh nous semble avoir été, avant l’Islam, un appellative applicable à toute divinité supérieure du panthéon arabe...” See *Le panthéon*, 44.

⁵⁵ Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism*, 46-7. An example of this may be found in the phrase “God/Time built” appearing in al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 115, and Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 191.

⁵⁶ Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 93.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 90. Emphasis mine. Note that the line is not found in the Abū Suwaylim edition. It is found in al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 85, and Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 151.

⁵⁸ See Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 66 and 125 and Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 176.

⁵⁹ These may be found in 1) Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 353; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 243, 2) al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 109; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 219, and 3) al-Bustānī, *Dīwān* 134; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 237. See further examples in the remainder of the article.

⁶⁰ Homerin, “Echoes of a Thirsty Owl,” 168.

⁶¹ al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 25; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 38.

⁶² Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 372; al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 77; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 120.

⁶³ al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 42; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 66.

⁶⁴ See Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 262 and 306; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 110 and 182; and al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 58 and 106. For a discussion of this phrase and its variants, see Borg, “*Ammā ba‘du*.”

⁶⁵ Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 351; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 219.

⁶⁶ Al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 32; Cheikho, *Anīs al-Julasā’*, 48. Translation mine.

⁶⁷ It seems that there is some ambiguity surrounding the term *al-ilāh*. D.B. MacDonald, in his entry on the term in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, suggests that it meant “God” to monotheists whilst it meant “the god about which I am speaking,” or something to that effect, to pagans. This is rather similar to Fahd’s explanation of the term “Allāh”—see note 54, above.

⁶⁸ Al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 127; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 241. Translation mine.

⁶⁹ Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 344-5, al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 105; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā’*, 179-80.

Translation: Hammond, “Al-Khansā’: Representing the First-Person Feminine.”

⁷⁰ Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 65. Translation mine.

⁷¹ Al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 99; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 169. Translation mine. A moving translation of the poem featuring this line appears in a selection of al-Khansā's poems translated into English by James Montgomery. See "Why? Why this Reign of Terror?" *Loss Sings*, The Cahiers Series 32 (London: Sylph Editions, 2018), 12-13.

⁷² Peter Sacks comments on the function of repetition in the elegy: "Repetition creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death." See *English Elegy*, 23.

⁷³ Al-Nowaihi, "Elegy and the Confrontation of Death," 10-11.

⁷⁴ 'Āmir al-Ḥilwānī enumerates types of repetition in his analysis of al-Khansā's corpus. See his *Jamāliyyat al-mawt*, 101-277. See also Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Khansā'*, 115-18.

⁷⁵ Al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 144; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 267. Translation mine.

⁷⁶ Here I should mention a further apparent reference to God that does not employ the word "Allāh." It may be found in the phrase, "by the Lord of the reddish she-camels":

حلفت برب صُهَبِ مُعْمَلَاتٍ إِلَى الْبَيْتِ الْمَحْرَمِ مِنْتَاهَا

I swore by the Lord of the reddish she-camels

Urged along to the sacred house, their destination

Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 279; al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 139; Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 248. Translation mine.

⁷⁷ Bint al-Shāṭi' divides al-Khansā's career into three stages and attempts to sort her poems accordingly. The first stage includes what she composed before the death of Mu'āwiya, the second stage that which she composed after his death and before the death of Ṣakhr, and the third stage, which begins after the death of Ṣakhr, and which covers her copious elegies for him. See *al-Khansā'*, 85-6. Naturally, she situates this poem in the second stage, 94.

⁷⁸ (الفارس الجون) can be translate variously as "white horseman" or "black horseman." See Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 99.

⁷⁹ Translation mine, yet I have drawn on that of Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, vol. 1, 98-101. The poem may be found in al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 15:91. See also al-Bustānī, *Dīwān*, 145, and Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 260. Note that this last line does not exist in the main text of the Abū Suwaylim edition of her *dīwān*. Other lines do. See 58-62.

⁸⁰ Wright, *Grammar*, I: 139. Note that Wright mentions the derivation from *dā'in* to *dā'iya* specifically, saying that it means, “calling or summoning, an emissary or missionary.”

⁸¹ Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, vol. 1, 101.

⁸² Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab*, d-'w. Translation mine.

⁸³ To complicate matters further, the verb “*da'ā*” is also associated with female lamentation. See al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās*, 128, where he states:

والنادبة تدعو الميِّت: تندبه.

In the context of the elegy, the word “*dā'iya*” would, if it is understood to be feminine, thus evoke someone engaged in an act of mourning.

⁸⁴ Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 293. Translation mine.

⁸⁵ Bint al-Shāṭi', *al-Khansā'*, 94.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 97-8.

⁸⁷ As this article goes to press, I have become aware of Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila's recently-published piece, “Al-Khansā's Poem in *-ālahā* and its Qur'ānic Echoes: The Long and Short of it,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 29.1 (2019), 1-15. Whilst I have not had time to digest all of the findings of this important study and to see how they interrelate with my argument, it is clear that any discussion of the Quran as intertext in her corpus would be broadly supportive of the idea that her verses reflect an emergent Islamic ethos. Hämeen-Anttila, in line with the general scholarly consensus that her poetry is largely unaffected by Islam, considers the poem he analyses an “exception” (2). I would dispute that.

⁸⁸ Lane, *Lexicon*, z-b-n.

⁸⁹ Leor Halevi reads this poem, as it appears in al-Bustānī (ed.), *Dīwān*, 103-4, as a “spirited defense” of wailing. The poem is also found in Abū Suwaylim, *Dīwān*, 62-71 and Cheikho, *Anīs al-julasā'*, 173-9. This is an interesting idea, but I am not sure that I entirely agree with it; for the poem, whilst it

persists in elegizing her deceased brothers, seems to concede that certain lamentation practices were excessive. See Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 292, n8.