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Women in the Pre-Modern Arabic Islamic Tradition

Marlé Hammond

Prelude

In the autumn of 1989, when I was in my final year of a bachelor’s degree at Columbia University in New York City, a banner was hung at the top of Butler Library featuring seven names of great women writers:

Sappho, Marie de France, Christine de Pizan, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Bronte, Dickinson, Woolf

They were meant to form an alternative canon, vying for supremacy with the eight ancient Greek and Roman male authors whose names are permanently engraved on the façade of the building: Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, Vergil. At the time I appreciated the feminist gesture but bemoaned the eurocentrism of the list. Where is al-Khansā’?, I thought. Even at this relatively early stage of my Arabic literary education, I took the fact that she was overlooked as an affront.

More than three decades later, I look back upon the list beginning with Sappho with less consternation. Instead, I gloat, for it seems to me that its creators strained to compile it. To find seven classic female authors— or nine, as the name Bronte stands for three individual authors – they had to comb through multiple European cultures and languages, and to draw from a host of eras right up through to modernity. Imagine, by contrast, how easy it would be to create such an alternative canon in Arabic. I can see their names now:

al-Khansā’, Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, ‘Ulayya Bint al-Mahdī, Wallāda Bint al-Mustakfī, Nazhūn, Taqiyya al-Şūriyya, ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya.

These women span three continents and approximately nine centuries, but they are united in their language of expression, and they all impose themselves on our consciousness from the depths of history. What European literary tradition can compete with the likes of that?

Four Environments

Where did all these women writers come from? Given the sheer volume of literary texts recorded in Arabic, it is safe to say that they came from all over the Arabic-speaking world. However, due to processes of preservation and canonization, there are four areas and epochs which seem to have been particularly rich: Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia, Umayyad Arabia and Syria, Abbasid Iraq and Islamic Iberia. Allow me to describe each of these environments in turn.

Pre- and Early Islamic Arabia

In the predominantly oral society of pre- and Early Islamic Arabia, where poetic composition required neither literacy training nor the instrument of a pen, and where poetry functioned as a communicative register accompanying all kinds of human interactions, be they private or public, it is safe to assume that women uttered verses in all manner of genres. They would employ rhyme and meter to comfort and amuse their children, to flirt with love interests, and to scold their husbands – to name just a few examples. We have specimens of women’s bawdiness, their invective and their praise. Yet the genre with which women of this era are most associated is elegy (*rithāʿ*), and more specifically, lamentation or elegy for the dead. Often the beloved deceased is a fallen warrior, a father, a brother or a son, whose qualities the poet enumerates. Poems of this type are called *marāthī* (sing. *marthiya*) and their performance would seem to have had musical qualities such that the Abbasid philosopher al-Fārābī (d. 950) situates them as a form of ‘complete’ (or vocal) melody, which is distinct from straightforward song on the one hand, and the incantation of poems and the Quran on the other.¹ Theories abound as to why women found a niche in the elegy. Some have postulated that it suited their feminine temperaments. Others have argued that women played an important role in restoring a sense of order to a bereft community. Still others have pointed out that the association is a distorted one: we cannot assume that women composed more elegies than other types of poems, but rather only that their elegies, as sublimations of patriarchal discourse, were the poems that were mostly likely to be selected for preservation by men. Moreover, many would say, it is wrong to see the elegy as a female genre when most of the extant elegiac compositions of this era were male-authored.

Within the framework of the *marthiya*, pre- and early Islamic women explored many themes and topoi. Thus, although their corpus is often bound to one genre, their longer poems often demonstrate a topical versatility which is similar to that of the so-called polythematic *qaṣīda*. The elegy, as it foregrounds the admirable qualities of the deceased, almost by definition contains panegyric within it, a fact which was observed by Ibn Rashīq (d. 456 or 463/1063 or 1071), who suggested that the only difference between the two genres was that in one case the subject is dead.² Beyond praise (*madh*), the *marthiya* also often contains wisdom (*ḥikma*) and incitement to war (*taḥmīs*) and to blood vengeance (*taḥrīd*). Moreover, the opening of the *marthiya*, in which the poetic persona often beseeches her eye or eyes to cry, has sometimes

¹ Al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-mūsīqī [al-mūsīqā] al-kabīr*, eds. Ghaṭṭās ʿAbd al-Malik Khashaba and Maḥmūd Aḥmad al-Ḥifnī (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī, 1967), 68.

² Ibn Rashīq, *al-ʿUmda fī ṣināʿat al-shiʿr wa-naqdih* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 1907), 2:117.

been likened to the nostalgic prelude (*nasīb*) of the *qaṣīda*, perhaps because of the posture of weeping often assumed in the latter, as made famous in Imru' al-Qays' *mu'allaqa*.

The names of scores of women poets, and the verses of countless anonymous women, have come down to us from this period. Identifiable poets include the pre-Islamic al-Khirniq and Dakhtanūs, but the towering figure is the *mukhaḍrama* al-Khansā'. Al-Khansā' is, and always has been, a canonical poet. Her *dīwān* and its multiple commentaries circulated widely in the medieval era, and, in his *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-Shu'arā'*, Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī (d. 232/846 or 47) features her prominently in his chapter on elegists, seemingly placing her second only to Mutammim ibn Nuwayra.³ Another noteworthy figure from the pre- or early Islamic era is a certain Su'dā bint al-Shamardal. Although we know next to nothing about her, her elegy for her brother As'ad is included in the *Aṣma' iyyāt*.⁴ Thus, she, too, has secured a position at the heart of the Arabic poetic canon.

Umayyad Arabia and Syria

The early Islamic and Umayyad eras witnessed a number of developments affecting women's verbal expression. Many related to the new value systems that developed in tandem with the rise of Islam. Some of these values affected women's daily lives, such as the tendency for free women to practice veiling and seclusion. Such practices may have contributed to the diminishment of the woman poet as a public persona. Her status as elegist was furthermore threatened by the religious authorities' attempts to put an end to rituals of lamentation, especially the activities of professional female mourners (*nā'ihāt*). Ostentatious displays of grief were considered unseemly. Instead, the bereaved should exhibit a calm forbearance (*ṣabr*) commensurate with the acceptance of God's will. Indeed, the transition away from outward manifestations of grief is already observable in a poem by al-Khansā', presumably composed after she embraced Islam, where she states:

فإنَّ الصَّبْرَ / خَيْرٌ مِنَ النَّعْلَيْنِ وَالرَّأْسِ الْحَلِيقِ

'Forbearance is better than [beating oneself with] sandals and shaven heads'.⁵

Despite the apparent demise of the female mourner, a figure at the heart of women's Arabic poetic tradition, women's poetry continues to thrive in many respects, and we see women branching out into new genres. Particularly noteworthy is Laylā al-Akhyaliyya (d. c. 80/699), whom al-Aṣma'ī is reported to have implied was 'more

³ Ibn Sallām al-Jumāḥī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu'arā'*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Jedda: Dār al-Madanī, n.d.), 1:203.

⁴ Al-Aṣma'ī, *al-Aṣma' iyyāt*, eds. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir and 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964), 101-4.

⁵ Abū Suwaylim, Anwar (ed.), *Dīwān al-Khansā' sharaḥahu Tha'lab Abū I-'Abbās Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. Sayyār al-Shaybānī al-Naḥwī* (Amman: Dār 'Ammār, 1988), 63.

poetic' (*ash'ar*) than al-Khansā'.⁶ Although Laylā was also an elegist, composing many laments for Tawba ibn al-Ḥumayyir, a fellow poet and love interest, she also ventured into invective (*hijā'*) and boasting (*fakhr*), and her poems contained many passages of exquisite description (*waṣf*). She even went so far as to compose a polythematic panegyric *qaṣīda* for the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān.⁷

Another kind of poetry which may be related to migrations occurring as a result of the Islamic conquests, and which is sometimes associated with women is 'longing for homelands' (*al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*). In fact, one of the most celebrated poems of this genre is attributed to Maysūn bint Baḥdal al-Kalbiyya, wife of the Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya. It begins:⁸

أَبَيْتُ تَخْفُقُ الْأَرْوَاحُ فِيهِ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِنْ قَصْرِ مُنِيفِ

Here she prefers tent flaps ruffling in the breeze to the solid walls of a palace. Whilst the authenticity of the attribution is uncertain, it is generally ascribed to a female figure.

Further expressions of longing, this time on the theme of chaste love, may be found in the voices of the 'Udhri beloveds, the female protagonists of those tales of unconsummated, innocent love. It would be a stretch to consider them poets, both because their verses are scant and because they would seem to be more the products of folkloric imagination than historical figures. Nevertheless, Buthayna, beloved of Jamīl, 'Afrā', beloved of 'Urwa, and Laylā al-'Āmiriyya, beloved of Qays, all frequently have entries in modern dictionaries of ancient Arab women poets.

On the other end of the spectrum, during this period one also finds the poetry of warrior women, most notably those who fought amongst the ranks of the Khawārij. In a valorization of martyrdom, the Khārijite poets often express a longing for death. Such is the case for Umm Ḥakīm where she states:⁹

أَحْمِلُ رَأْسًا قَدْ سَنِمْتُ حَمَلَهُ
وَقَدْ مَلَلْتُ دَهْنَهُ وَغَسَلَهُ
أَلَا فَتَى يَحْمِلُ عَنِّي ثِقَلَهُ

Abbasid Iraq

In Abbasid Iraq, as the conventions regulating the segregation and seclusion of women become quite strict, especially for free-born Arabs, it is the enslaved woman poet, often of foreign provenance, who emerges as the female wordsmith. It is the

⁶ Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qāhir Aḥmad, *Fuḥūlat al-shu'arā' li' Abī Ḥatīm al-Sijistānī: taḥqīq wa-dirāsa* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1991), 129.

⁷ Ibn Maymūn, *Muntahā al-ṭalab min ash'ar al-'arab*, ed. Fuat Sezgin (Frankfurt: Ma'had Tārīkh al-'Ulūm al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Islāmiyya, 1986-93), 1:43-44.

⁸ Ibn al-Shajarī, *al-Ḥamāsa al-Shajariyya*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'īn al-Mallūḥī and Asmā' al-Ḥimṣī (Damascus: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 1970), 2:573.

⁹ Iḥsān 'Abbās, *Dīwān shi'r al-Khawārij*, 4th rev. edition (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982), 25 and 142-3.

voices of concubines, courtesans and entertainers such as singing girls (*qiyān*) that are most frequently cited, often in witty exchanges with male elites, notables and literati. Among the famous enslaved or formerly enslaved women who composed verse are Danānīr, ‘Inān, ‘Arīb and Faḍl al-Shā‘ira. Paradoxically, perhaps, the enslaved women, usually called *al-jawārī*, were freer to socialise with men and engage in the flirtatious and sometimes bawdy banter that was recorded by eyewitnesses for posterity. Freewomen were expected to have nobler pursuits. It is telling that the most prominent freewoman among the Abbasid poets, ‘Ulayya the daughter of the caliph al-Mahdī, is said to have occupied herself with poetry and song only when she was menstruating and therefore ritually impure. Otherwise, as tradition would have it, she would pray and study the Quran.¹⁰ Equally revealing, and possibly indicative of a secluded lifestyle, is the fact that she dedicated much of her amatory verse to two eunuchs.

Situated somewhere between the freeborn (*ḥurra*) and the enslaved (*jāriya*) stands the *mawlāt* (مولات), the ‘freedwoman’, the ‘non-Arab-Muslim’ or the ‘client’. The *mawālī* tended to be new converts to Islam who were adopted by an Arab tribe in a system of clientage. Literary history is full of male *mawālī*: Ibn al-Muqaffa‘, Muslim ibn al-Walīd, and Abū al-‘Atāhiya, to name a few. But the feminine form of the term comes up relatively infrequently. Is this because there were fewer *mawlāt* (مولات) than *mawālī*? Or is there some slippage between terms such that the *mawlāt* (مولات) is often labelled a *jāriya*?

Some women of this period, be they free, enslaved or clients, seem to operate autonomously as poets. That is to say, their poems are not embedded in dialogues with male personalities and cannot be understood as mere versified interlocutions subordinate to the promptings of men. Instead, their poems are for the most part self-initiating. Among the poets who fall into this category are the proto-mystical figures of Rayḥāna al-Majnūna, a woman from Ubulla known as one of the ‘wise among the insane’ (*‘uqalā’ al-majānīn*), and Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, the legendary Sufi saint. Both these women express devotion to God through the language of love poetry.

It is clear from the anecdotal literature that by the time the shift from an oral to a literary culture has taken place, that is to say before the age of codification in the third and fourth/ ninth and tenth centuries, we may speak of women as writers (that is to say, with pen and paper) and not just speakers and composers of verse. That many women were literate is evident by the number of poetic exchanges that are explicitly reported to have occurred through letters and other written messages. Moreover, women were not just in the business of composing poetry, they also composed prose. A certain Qarība Umm al-Buhlūl, one of three female scholars listed in the *Fihrist* of al-Nadīm, authored a work [on grammar?] entitled *Kitāb al-nawādir wa-l-maṣādir*.¹¹ Furthermore, there is evidence that the renowned poet and

¹⁰ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā al-Šūlī, *Ash‘ār awlād al-khulafā’ min kitāb al-awrāq*, ed. J. Heyworth-Dunne (London: Luzac/E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1936), 55.

¹¹ [Ibn] al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-fihrist li-l-Nadīm*, ed. Riḍā Tajaddud (Tehran: Maṭba‘at Dānishgāh, 1971), 53. Note that the attribution of the work is different in the Flügel edition.

musician Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, who was the son of the caliph al-Mahdī and brother to ‘Ulayya, employed a woman named Maymūna as a scribe.¹²

Islamic Iberia

Women poets of al-Andalus are often grouped together across dynasties, with many generalisations applied regardless of dynastic considerations. One finds a kind of unity of poetic culture in the designation of its place, al-Andalus, and the impact of the ruling authority, be it that of the Umayyads, the Party Kings, the Almoravids or the Almohads is secondary. The impression that one often has when perusing scholarship on the subject is that the women poets of al-Andalus operated with greater freedom than their counterparts in the Eastern Arab world. This was especially the case for free-born women, who seemingly had more opportunities to interact with men, and whose amatory and invective verses often draw on erotic and raunchy imagery. If we compare the case of Cordoban princess Wallāda bint al-Mustakfī with that ‘Ulayya bint al-Mahdī, for example, we note that the love poems the latter addressed to eunuchs, however transgressively gender-bending they may have been, were the opposite of obscene, whereas the former, when angry with a lover, the poet Ibn Zaydūn, satirizes him with sexually evocative slurs:¹³

فلوطي ومأبون وزانٍ وديوتٌ وقرنانٌ وسارقٌ

This relative freedom is matched by what was apparently copious scribal activity. One modern author cites a report in an account of Cordoba by a certain Ibn Fayyāḍ that there were 170 women working as copyists of the Quran in one district of the city alone.¹⁴ Moreover, under the Umayyads, women worked as caliphal secretaries: 1) Muzna (d. 358/968 or 9) worked as a *kātibā* for ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III,¹⁵ 2) Lubnā (d. 394/1003 or 1004), worked as a *kātibā* for al-Ḥakam ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān,¹⁶ and 3) Niẓām (dates unknown) worked as a *kātibā* for Hishām ibn al-Mu‘ayyad ibn al-Ḥakam (r. 366-403/976-1013).¹⁷

Andalūsī women composed poetry in a variety of genres, including love poetry, satire, panegyric and nature poetry, but there is one form which, irrespective of authorship, was particularly inclusive of women’s voices. This form is known as the *muwashshaḥa*. Unusually for classical Arabic poetry, it is a strophic, sung form, consisting of stanzas and having relatively complex rhyme schemes. The final stanza, which is known as the *kharja*, and which, unlike the rest of the poem, is

¹² Maymūna, identified as ‘kātibat Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī’, appears as the source in an *isnād* for a *khabar* about Ibrāhīm. See al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2002), 11:430.

¹³ Al-Maqqarī, *Nafh al-ṭīb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 4:205.

¹⁴ Muḥammad Kurd ‘Alī, ‘Ghābir al-Andalus wa-ḥāḍiruhā’, *Majallat al-majma‘ al-‘ilmī bi-Dimashq* 2 (1922), 265.

¹⁵ Al-Dabbī, *Bughyat al-multamis fī tārikh rijāl al-Andalus* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1967), 546.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 546.

¹⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-Malik al-Marrākushī, *al-Dhayl wa-l-takmila li-kitābay al-Mawṣūl wa-l-Ṣila*, Tome 8, ed. Muḥammad ibn Sharīfa (Rabat: Akādīmīyat al-Mamlaka l-Maghribiyya, 1984), 2:493.

composed in colloquial Arabic or sometimes Romance dialect, often occurs as a quotation of a presence distinct from that of the poetic persona. Frequently this presence is female. *Muwashshaḥāt* come in various genres, most notably panegyric and love poetry. In any case, one often finds that the *kharja* singer is a beautiful maiden speaking back to the poetic persona's desire, either flirting with him or warding off his advances.

In the realm of the *muwashshaḥa*, it seems that women's voices were not limited to the *kharja* speakers. A few women are known to have authored *muwashshaḥāt*. One such *muwashshaḥa*, by the twelfth-century Granadan poet Nazhūn bint al-Qilā'ī, is an exquisitely constructed portrait of an elusive masculine beloved. To my knowledge, it is the only female authored *muwashshaḥa* that is extant.¹⁸ Another woman poet who is known to have composed *muwashshaḥāt*, but whose compositions in this form are unfortunately lost, is Umm al-Kirām bint Ṣumādīh, the daughter of a ruler of Almería. A third woman, Qasmūna bint Ismā'īl, is said to have co-authored *muwashshaḥāt* with her father, but again, no poems thus attributed have survived. Indeed, the problem of incomplete literary records is a great one, particularly in the case of al-Andalus. We know of many women poets, but their preserved output is rather limited.

Exceptional Women Emerging Elsewhere

Having described these four environments in which women writers, especially poets, thrived and prospered, it is important to acknowledge that women engaged in verbal artistry outside these settings and that their legacy cannot be easily contained. Equally, it must be assumed that there were centers of such activity that have not been captured here in many parts of the Arabo-Islamic world. Moreover, women, like men, moved around, calling many places their home. The career of the seventh-/thirteenth-century Sāra al-Ḥalabiyya is a case in point. She hailed from Aleppo and spent a substantial amount of time in al-Andalus before settling in present-day Morocco. The opening line of a poem composed for a woman of the 'Azafī family of Ceuta easily fits into the longing for homelands (*al-ḥanīn ilā l-awṭān*) genre:¹⁹

إذا ما ذكرتُ الشرقَ طرْتُ له شوقاً وشوقي لمن بالشرقِ أذكرني الشرقا

Another woman straddling continents was the Fatimid poet Taqiyya al-Ṣūriyya (d. 579/1184). She had roots in Ṣūr, was born in Damascus, and ultimately settled in Alexandria. Taqiyya similarly expresses longing for her hometown in a seven-line poem that begins:²⁰

نأيتُ وما قلبي عن النَّأيِ بالرّاضي فلا تَغْتَرِّزْ مني بصّدي وإعراضي
وإنّي لمشتاقٌ إليهم متيماً وقد طعنوا قلبي بأسمر عراض

¹⁸ It may be found in Alan Jones (ed.), *The 'Uddat al-jalīs of 'Alī ibn Bishrī: An Anthology of Andalusian Arabic Muwashshaḥāt* (Cambridge: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1992), 360-361.

¹⁹ Ibn al-Qāḍī al-Miknāsī, *Jadhwat al-iqtibās fī man ḥalla madīnat Fās* (Rabat: Dār al-Manṣūr, 1974), 2:527.

²⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-julasā' fī ash'ār al-nisā'*, ed. 'Abd al-Laṭīf 'Āshūr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur'ān, n.d.), 35.

Also living between Syria and Egypt was the prominent scholar, poet and Sufi mystic ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya (d. 923/1517), the first woman whose writing is extracted in this volume. She lived at the tale end of the Mamluk era, and she is the last of the pre-modern women writers with whose work I am familiar. She penned book-length works, both poetry and prose. Among her celebrated works are *al-Faḥ al-mubīn fī madḥ al-amīn*, a *badī’iyya* poem in praise of the Prophet Muḥammad, *al-Mawrid al-ahnā fī l-mawlid al-asnā*, an account of the life of the Prophet, interspersed with poems of praise.

A Word About Women’s Prose

Although, when we think of women as ‘writers’ in the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition, we think mostly of poets, there is a fair amount of women’s prose as well, especially if we think of prose in the broadest terms, especially when applied to the oral literature of pre- and early Islamic Arabia, as well as the Umayyad and Early Abbasid Eras, as non-versified utterances. However, if we are looking for purposeful prose forms and genres, or, in other words, specimens of prose composed with some deliberation and with some attention to artistic expression, there is much less to explore, especially if we exclude the work of ‘Ā’isha al-Bā’ūniyya. Nevertheless, Ibn Ṭayfūr’s *Balāghāt al-nisā’* contains a fair amount. There are multiple orations, including the speech that Fāṭima delivered to Abū Bakr and his companions after being denied the inheritance at Fadak.²¹ Ibn Ṭayfūr reports on a variety of types of statements from all manner of women from revered figures in religious history to the notoriously obscene and most likely folkloric character of Ḥubbā al-Madīna. The book includes poetry, as well as prose, and there are many instances of rhymed prose (*saj’*).

Women also composed letters, consisting of prose and/or verse, and some of these letters have been preserved for posterity. Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat’s four-volume anthology of Arabic letters up until the Abbasid period contains some seventeen letters authored by women.²² Among them are letters by Nā’ila bint al-Farāfiṣa, wife of the caliph ‘Uthmān, Umm Salama and ‘Ā’isha, both wives of the Prophet Muhammad, Zubayda, wife of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, and a certain Umm al-Sharīf. There are also anonymous correspondences: a letter by a wife to her husband, a letter to al-Ma’mūn by one of his *jawāri*, a letter to Ibn al-Mu’tazz by a *qayna*. Another source of women’s epistolary writing is the chapter on Abbasid poet and minister Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mudabbir (d. 883 or 4) in al-Iṣfahānī’s *Kitāb al-aghānī*.²³ In it one finds eight letters addressed to him which were written by the enslaved poet and singer ‘Arīb. Further letters written by the fourth-/tenth-century Basran courtesan

²¹ Ibn Ṭayfūr, *Balāghāt al-nisā’* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1987), 21-23.

²² Aḥmad Zakī Ṣafwat (ed), *Jamharat Rasā’il al-‘Arab* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1937).

²³ Abū I-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1927-), 22:157-86.

Zād-Mihr to her owner Ibn Jumhūr may be found in al-Ābī's *Nathr al-durr*.²⁴ Zād-Mihr's letters are at times quite raunchy.

In terms of story-telling, there is not much from the pre-modern literary tradition that we can identify as female-authored, certainly nothing that is fictional. But we do have a couple of instances of sacred literature recounted by women. The first is ʿĀ'isha al-Bā'ūniyya's aforementioned *al-Mawrid al-ahnā fī l-mawlid al-asnā*, which contains biographical narrative about the Prophet Muhammad. The second is the so-called *ḥadīth al-ifk*, ʿĀ'isha bint Abī Bakr's account of both the incident that sparked accusations of adultery against her as well as the Quranic revelation that occurred in its aftermath. ʿĀ'isha narrated many ḥadīth texts, but this one is exceptional for its length and intricate storyline. It may be found in many ḥadīth collections and other compendia, but perhaps the most exquisitely rendered version of the text is found in al-Wāqidī's *Kitāb al-maghāzī*.²⁵ Whilst some question the extent to which ʿĀ'isha may be considered the author of this text, given that her voice has been mediated by transmitters and redactors who wished to represent her in a certain way, in my view, the text captures ʿĀ'isha's storytelling momentum and emotive force at many junctures and she deserves authorial credit, even if her original statements are somehow distorted.

Primary Sources

People interested in pre-modern Arabic women's writing may wonder where to look for it. Truth be told, it is spread out over a vast tradition, and to get a comprehensive overview, if such a thing is possible, one needs to peruse a wide variety of sources. When it comes to poetry, there are not very many women, historically speaking, whose collected verse amounted to enough to fill a *dīwān*, al-Khansā' and Layla al-Akhyaliyya being notable exceptions. One therefore needs to browse through poetry anthologies and see what's there. This can be a frustrating endeavour, as some anthologies contain little to no poetry by women. The *Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*, a canonical anthology originally compiled by the second-/eighth-century Kufan transmitter al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī, includes only one five-line poem by a woman, and she is anonymous.²⁶ The *Aṣma' iyyāt*, another classical collection anthologised by the Basran scholar ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Qurayb al-Aṣma'ī (d. 213/828), again contains only one female-authored poem, but this time the poem is lengthier and its author is named: this is the aforementioned elegy by Su'dā bint al-Shamardal which runs to 30 lines.²⁷ In his famous anthology known as the *Ḥamāsa*, Abū Tammām features more than fifty female-authored poems and poetic fragments. The *Muntahā l-ṭalab min ash'ār al-ʿarab* by Ibn Maymūn (d. c. 1193) does not contain a lot of women's poetry, but it does have three substantial pieces by Laylā l-Akhyaliyya, as well as poems attributed to Janūb and ʿAmra bint al-ʿAjlān.

²⁴ Al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durr*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAlī Qurna (Cairo: al-Hay'at al-Miṣriyya l-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1985), 4: 264-271.

²⁵ Al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 2:426-435.

²⁶ Charles James Lyall (ed.), *The Mufaḍḍaliyyāt: An Anthology of Arabian Odes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918-1921), 2:549-551.

²⁷ See note 4 above.

Then there are several classical works dedicated to women, free or enslaved, that include samples of texts and anecdotal information. These include *Risālat al-qiyān* by Al-Jāhiz, (d. 255/868 or 9), the aforementioned *Balāghāt al-nisāʿ* by Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (d. 280/893), which was originally part of a larger work called *Kitāb al-manthūr wa-l-manzūm*, *al-Imāʿ al-shawāʿir* by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. c. 363/972), *Ashʿār al-nisāʿ* by al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994), *Nisāʿ al-khulafāʿ* by Ibn al-Sāʿī (d. 674/1276), *Nuzhat al-julasāʿ fī ashʿār al-nisāʿ* by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), and *al-Mustazraf min akhbār al-jawārī*, also by al-Suyūṭī.

In addition to the above works which are devoted specifically to women, one finds that women feature prominently in *adab* compilations more generally. The standard biographical dictionaries often profile women, and women's voices are embedded in countless compilations on a variety of topics. Among the compendia that are particularly rich in this regard is the *Kitāb al-aghānī* by Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. c. 363/972), which contains distinct chapters on ʿUlayya bint al-Mahdī, Laylā al-Akhyaliyya, al-Khansāʿ, Danānīr, Faḍl al-Shāʿira, ʿArīb, ʿInān, and several other literary women, especially women engaged in musical pursuits. Numerous other anthologies and compendia figure as important sources of women's writing: the *Yatīmat al-dahr* by al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038), the *Kharīdat al-qaṣr wa-jarīdat ahl al-ʿaṣr* by al-Kātib al-Iṣfahānī, (d. 597/1201), and *Nafḥ al-ṭīb min ghuṣn al-Andalus al-raṭīb* by al-Maqqarī, (d. 1041/1632), to name a few.

A Living Legacy

Whilst we often think of the early modern women writers of Arabic as 'pioneers', going where no woman had gone before, and whilst we should not diminish the courage and tenacity of these women who managed to carve out a public-facing space in a discursive regime which would rather have limited their contributions to the domestic sphere, there is a sense in which their achievements represent continuity over change. Women have composed texts in Arabic since the dawn of its literature, and they continued to do so throughout the centuries, even if their voices were not valorised equally in all corners of the Arabic-speaking world and at all times. Women writers of Arabic have had countless precedents, a fact of which the pioneers of the Nahḍa were all too aware, as were their male counterparts. Did Zaynab Fawwāz (circa 1850-1914) see herself as a first when she composed her biographical dictionary of famous women *al-Durr al-manthūr fī ṭabaqāt rabbāt al-khudūr* (1894)? Or did she, rather, see herself as ensconced in a well-established tradition of female authorship? Whilst her two novels, published in 1899 and 1905, may be said to be pioneering, her status as female is not what made them unprecedented, as they are among the earliest Arabic novels penned by either woman or man.

There is no doubt that the legacy of the *mukhaḍrama* al-Khansāʿ, as the most canonical of the pre-modern women poets, looms large in women's literary imagination. The status of her figure, coupled with the fact that her chosen genre, the elegy for the dead, was closely associated with ancient corpus of women's poetry, has meant that it has been easy for modern and contemporary women writers to reference and otherwise summon the creative energy of their forerunners in this

domain. Those women who have composed in the genre, such as ‘Ā’isha Taymur in her elegies for her daughter, or Fadwā Ṭūqān in her poems dedicated to her brother, invite ready comparisons, but there are many others, including writers of prose fiction, for whom the mournful stands as both deeply personal and authoritative.

If we look a little further, beyond the elegiac, and beyond the canonical, we find that women’s literary legacy in Arabic is multifaceted and multigeneric, hence there is no shortage of role models for women seeking to find inspiration in the past. The women who worked as entertainers and musicians, especially at Umayyad and Abbasid courts, also figure prominently in modern imaginative culture. This is why one finds, for example, that early in her career Fadwā Ṭūqān published a poem under the name of the enslaved Abbasid poet and songstress Danānīr. Indeed, movies have been made about these courtesans: Umm Kulthūm starred in *Danānīr*, a 1940 film directed by Aḥmad Badrakhān. She also played an Umayyad singing girl in a 1945 film entitled *Sallāma*, which was directed by Togo Mizraḥī. Novelists and playwrights also took inspiration from the lives and careers of ancient female luminaries. Mizraḥī’s film was adapted from the 1944 novel *Sallāmat al-Qass* by ‘Alī Aḥmad Bākathīr. The figure of Laylā bint Lukayz, or Laylā ‘the Chaste’ (al-‘afīfa), who is certainly apocryphal but who was thought to have been among the very earliest Arabic women poets, inspired a novel, a film and a song – ‘Layta lil-Barrāqi ‘aynan’ –made famous by the legendary Asmahān. Another ancient figure who imposed herself on the popular imagination was Wallāda bint al-Mustakfī. Her love story with the poet and minister Ibn Zaydūn was the subject of several modern works of historical fiction including Aḥmad Rāmī’s play *Gharām al-shu‘arā’* (1934), Fārūq Juwayda’s play *al-Wazīr al-‘āshiq* (1981) and ‘Ālī al-Jārim’s novel *Hātif min al-Andalus* (1949). That most of these modern tributes have been created by men is a testament to how well integrated these women’s stories are in mainstream popular culture. In fact, their stories are hard to avoid because, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the Arabic tradition teems with them.