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Rayḥāna “The Mad”: Her Persona and Poetry

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Abstract: This article on the intriguing second-/eighth-century Iraqi Muslim ascetic poet Rayḥāna al-Majnūna, or Rayḥāna “The Mad,” consists of two parts: (1) a study contextualizing her persona and corpus and arguing that her historical and folkloric identity as a black woman poet situates her at a creative nexus of wisdom, madness, and worship, and (2) appendices including translations of her poems and their anecdotal frameworks as they are preserved in three medieval sources: *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn* by Abū al-Qāsim al-Ḥasan ibn Ḥabīb al-Nīsābūrī (d. 406 H/1015–16 CE), *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. circa 597 H/1201 CE), and *Talkhīṣ al-mutashābih* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463 H/1071 CE). It is hoped that the translations will give the reader direct knowledge of Rayḥāna’s distinctive poems and that the contextual analysis will support informed interpretations of both the poems and the narratives in which they are embedded through its attention to various discursive prisms including textual traditions relating to mental health, religious devotion, and women’s writing.

Keywords: Rayḥāna al-Majnūna, *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn*, black women’s poetry, Umayyad/Abbāsīd Iraq, asceticism, madness

Introduction

Kitāb ‘uqalā’ al-majānīn (The book of the wise among the insane),¹ a treatise and compendium of anecdotes with entries on more than 70 individuals, and including

¹ Michael DOLS uses the phrase “intelligent insane.” See DOLS 1992, especially his chapters on “The Wise Fool” (349–365) and “The Holy Fool” (366–422). Note that there were many works on this theme with the same title – *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn* – in circulation. See SEZGIN (2015), 16, 215: Ibn Abī al-Dunayā (d. 281 H/894 CE); 17, 114–115: Abū ‘Alī Sahl ibn ‘Alī al-Baghdādī (d. 278 H/900 CE?); 17, 164: Abū Bishr al-Dūlābī Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Ḥammād (d. 310 H/923 CE); 17, 166: Abū Bakr al-Qibābī Aḥmad ibn Luqmān (d. c. 325 H/937 CE); 17, 145: Ibn al-Jundī, Abū al-Ḥasan Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Imrān (d. 396 H/1005 CE).

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numerous short poems, by the ‘Abbāsīd Qur’anic scholar and grammarian from Nīsābūr Abū l-Qāsim al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb al-Nīsābūrī (d. 406/1015–1016),² does not neglect to include a chapter on women. The first and longest entry in the chapter is devoted to a certain Rayḥāna, often dubbed al-Majnūna or “the Mad.” Given that the author ascribes to her no fewer than 33 lines of verse, the figure of Rayḥāna al-Majnūna deserves scrutiny. As is the case with most of her contemporary female poets, her biographical information is scant. The anecdotes about her in Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nīsābūrī’s chapter tell us that she was black and perhaps a slave, a freed slave, or a recent convert to Islam and that she was from the city of Ubullā. When we consider the death dates of some of the notable figures who serve as eyewitnesses and sources for her compositions, we can deduce that she probably lived as far back as the early- to mid-eighth century. Although her nickname would suggest that she was thought to be insane, she was also received as a religious sage.³

Rayḥāna’s Intellectual Environment

Rayḥāna flourished during the late Umayyad and/or early ‘Abbāsīd Dynasties. This was a period when the seat of political power in the expanding empire was shifting from Syria, whence the Umayyads reigned, to Iraq, where the ‘Abbāsīds were based. Society was transitioning from an oral to a literate culture, and texts such as poems were still largely transmitted by word of mouth. We should not understand such transmission as necessarily casual, however, since great effort was spent on the memorization, preservation, and authentication of certain texts. Such efforts are often partly captured by the *isnāds*, or chains of transmission, that introduce many of the accounts of Rayḥāna’s doings and sayings. The names in these *isnāds* help to situate Rayḥāna within an intergenerational community of circulation. Her reports trace back to transmitters and eyewitnesses who, like Rayḥāna, were renowned for their spirituality and extreme or exemplary piety, individuals who would come to be celebrated by later Sufi scholars. These characters attest to various manifestations of Rayḥāna’s devout behavior.

One individual placed within earshot of Rayḥāna (in § 480) is Farqad al-Sabakhī, a prominent ascetic (*zāhid*) from Basra who, much like Rayḥāna, called on people to renounce earthly pleasures. He died at the tail end of the Umayyad era,

² See MALTI-DOUGLAS (2012); SEIDENSTICKER (2010); SEZGIN (1967), 1, 47; SEZGIN (2015), 17, 175; LOOSEN (1912); and ZAKHARIA (1997).

³ Hence her inclusion in *Ṣifat al-ṣāfiya*, a biographical dictionary of pious people and mystics, by Ibn al-Jawzī (d. c. 1201). See Appendix 2 for a translation of her entry in that book.

by 131/748–9.⁴ Another report (Appendix 2) situates her in the company of Muḥammad ibn al-Munkadir, a Medinese *ḥadīth* transmitter who died, at the age of 76, at around the same time – 130-1/748-9.⁵ Should there be any truth in these reports – and it should be mentioned that the *isnāds* are missing in the relevant accounts – then this would suggest that Rayḥāna was already an established religious figure before the dawning of the ‘Abbāsīd age. Other reports can be traced back to people who died a few decades later. Two reports (§ 475 and § 486) trace back to Ibrāhīm ibn Adham (d. c. 161/777-8), a prominent ascetic from Balkh.⁶ Another ascetic, the Basran preacher Ṣāliḥ al-Murri, who died in 172/788,⁷ is an eyewitness in three reports (§ 479 and Appendices 1 and 2). A further report (§ 477) places Rayḥāna in the company of Sha‘wāna, a devout figure also from Ubulla who was famed for her devotional weeping.⁸ Sha‘wāna’s precise dates are unknown, but she seems to have flourished in the mid-eighth century. In another report (§ 478), the eminent ninth-century Sufi theologian Sahl ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 283/896)⁹ is asked what he thinks of Rayḥāna. The existence of this report suggests that she continued to be a source of inspiration for generations after her death. Rayḥāna’s reception in this community was apparently not impeded by her status as a woman,¹⁰ despite the “mad” label attached to her by society at large.

The Umayyad era, as a transitional age in which Arabic literary culture was internalizing the values of the new religion, and as an age of conquests in which Arabs came into close contact with people from a variety of cultures, marked a period of intense literary and poetic creativity, whose experiments were, according to Salma JAYYUSI, “more varied than those of any other period before modern times.”¹¹ It was also a time when women poets were venturing outside the framework of the elegy,¹² a genre with which they had been closely associated. In this

4 MELCHERT 2012.

5 JUYNBOLL 2007.

6 JONES 2012.

7 al-Dhahabi 1985, 8:46–48.

8 A profile of Sha‘wāna may be found in SMITH 2001, 174–177. See also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (2012), 722–724.

9 BÖWERING 2012.

10 On the parity of men and women in the sphere of religious knowledge, Arezou AZAD states, “The topic of female mysticism in medieval Islam is particularly important because religious scholarship was one area in which Muslim women assumed roles equal to those of men.” AZAD (2013), 54. Representing an opposite viewpoint, Sara ABDEL-LATIF argues that Sufi hagiographical literature tends to marginalize women, as well as enslaved and black individuals, often including them as foils to reinforce notions of an idealized elite masculinity. ABDEL-LATIF 2020.

11 JAYYUSI 1983, 432.

12 HAMMOND 2010, 8.

respect, Rayḥāna's legacy as a poet is twofold. First, many of her poems are early Islamic expressions of *zuhd* (renunciation), a genre of poetry that had existed in pre-Islamic times but which would come into its own in the 'Abbāsīd era.¹³ Second, her expressions of love for the divine take on almost erotic dimensions, anticipating images of reciprocal love that would be found in the later Sufi poetry of Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya.

Her City

Ubullā, an ancient, pre-Islamic Iraqi town situated in the region of the Euphrates-Tigris delta, was "famed as the terminal for commerce from India and further east."¹⁴ Its name apparently represents an Arabicization of the Greek Apologos,¹⁵ but Yāqūt suggests other, Arabic etymologies, defining *al-ubullā* as a clump of dates, amongst other things.¹⁶ The city was conquered by the Muslim armies in two stages in the second decade of Islam,¹⁷ and it continued to prosper even after the founding of nearby Basra in 16/637 or 17/638.

Ubullā was, by all accounts, a magnificent place. Of it the eleventh-century Persian traveler Nāṣir-i Khusraw states: "I found the town of Ubullā, located by the channel named for it, to be populous, with more palaces, markets, mosques, and caravanserais than can be described. [...] There are such pleasant edifices there as are to be found nowhere else in the world [...]."¹⁸ Admittedly, Khusraw was writing a few centuries after Rayḥāna lived, but a much earlier luminary – a near contemporary of Rayḥāna – the Umayyad orator Khālid Ibn Ṣafwān (d. 135/732), also attests to Ubullā's grandeur: "I have never seen a land of greater expanse than Ubullā, nor one more abundant in pure water, nor one more trodden by riding beasts, nor one more profitable for the merchant, nor one which would be easier for seeker of protection to hide in."¹⁹ One imagines that, as a port city serving Indian Ocean trade routes, its population would have been diverse and its atmosphere cosmopolitan, perhaps serving as a welcoming place for an eccentric character like Rayḥāna.

13 For an overview of 'Abbāsīd *zuhd*, see HAMORI 1990.

14 KRAMERS 2012.

15 LE STRANGE 1966, 19.

16 Yāqūt 1995, 1:77.

17 RAMINI and AL-ZURAIQI 2020.

18 Khusraw 2001, 120.

19 Yāqūt 1995, 1:77.

Her Piety

Her profile as an early mystic, in the sense of a spiritual role model whose time is consumed in acts of devotion to the divine,²⁰ is a composite one; as a persona she seems to partake in several different trends and practices of “vigorous worship.”²¹ Al-Nisābūrī’s entry on her consists of 12 reports or *akhbār* (sing. *khabar*), all but one of which are constructed around a verse or verses. The introductory report (§ 475), in the voice of the aforementioned ascetic Ibrahīm ibn Ad’ham, states that tears are said to have scarred her cheeks, thereby positioning her as one of the so-called “weepers” (*bakkā’ūn*), early Islamic ascetics who cultivated grief as a devotional practice.²² Other reports (§ 480, § 482) represent her as one of the worshippers who stay up all night praying and reciting the Quran; for she was said to be the woman who was most vigilant at night (*aqwam bi-l-layl*) (§ 480). Still others express her renunciation of pleasures (§ 476, § 485) and her fear of the afterlife (§ 477, § 486).²³ But the verses for which she is most famous, which are contained within three anecdotes (§ 478, § 479, § 481), express a love for God through amorous verse and images of physical intimacy in a manner that is highly reminiscent of later Sufi poets. Rkia CORNELL has translated the most widely circulated of Rayḥāna’s poems as follows:

You are my Intimate Companion, my Aspiration, and my Happiness,
And my heart refuses to love anything but You.
Oh, my Dear, my Aspiration, and Object of my desire,
My yearning is endless! When will I finally meet You?
My request is not for Heaven’s pleasures;
I desire only to encounter You!²⁴

CORNELL sees Rayḥāna’s verses expressing love for God in amorous terms as foreshadowing the mystical love poetry of the legendary figure Rābi’a al-‘Adawiyya.²⁵

²⁰ Scholars avoid the application of the term “mystic” to the early Islamic religious figures whom later Islamic mystics or Sufis would profile in their hagiographical literature. This is because these early models of piety did not necessarily emphasize communion with God in their practices, and when they did express a desire to apprehend God directly, they did not represent it as a reciprocal process. See MELCHERT 2015, 14–15.

²¹ The phrase “vigorous worshippers” is Laury Silvers’s translation of *muta’abbidāt*, a term applied to female role models of piety. She states that they were “known for their intense ritual practice, scrupulous ethics, and ability to inspire a sense of intimacy with God” (SILVERS 2015, 25–26).

²² MEIER 2012.

²³ Fear, like grief, was cultivated as a devotional practice by early ascetic Muslims (MELCHERT 2011). Fear of damnation was particularly prevalent.

²⁴ CORNELL 1999, 94. See our alternative translation in § 479.

²⁵ CORNELL 2013, 117–118.

The “Mad” Moniker

Before we consider Rayḥāna’s label as an insane person, it is necessary to come to grips with the various relevant meanings of the term *junūn* (madness or insanity). At the opening of his compendium, Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nisābūrī expounds upon this matter at some length. Indeed, he approaches the term from many angles, three of which have direct bearing on Rayḥāna’s case. The first definition is socially constructed and would seem to apply to people who transgress cultural norms. It reads as a pedestrian or street definition: “The madman (*al-majnūn*), according to the common folk, is one who reviles (*yusammi*’), curses (*yasubb*), reproaches (*yarmi*’), and tears [his] clothing, or one who disrespects their traditions, and does what they disavow.”²⁶ This definition contrasts somewhat with another that al-Nisābūrī attributes to the spiritual elite, namely the Sufī mystics, for whom it is the hedonist who is insane: “The madman, according to the people of the truth (*ahl al-ḥaqā’iq*), is one who betakes himself to This World (*al-dunyā*), who works for its sake, and who finds life pleasurable in it.”²⁷ Al-Nisābūrī later explains the term etymologically by finding a metaphorical connection between the word madness (*junūn*) and the basic meaning of the verbal root (*j-n-n*) from which it stems, which is “to cover,” “to veil,” or “to hide”: “Madness, in language [i. e., its primary meaning], is veiling” (*al-junūn fī al-lughā al-istitār*), he states.²⁸ Hence the night is said to veil (*janna*, *ajanna*),²⁹ and the fetus (*janīn*) is derived from the same root because it is hidden by its mother’s womb.³⁰ Similarly, the *jinn* – djinn or supernatural spirits – are called that because they are unseen by human eyes.³¹ The madman is covered, al-Nisābūrī suggests, because his reason (*‘aql*) is “veiled” (*mastūr*).³² Perhaps this unseen-ness – this lack of transparency in thought processes – creates a sense of mystery that may be appreciated as well as rejected. Plato, in his *Phaedrus*, distinguishes four kinds of madmen: prophets, mystics, lovers, and poets; Shakespeare, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, writes “the lunatic, the lover and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact.”³³ Likewise, in Arabic literature the figure of the madman becomes intricately linked with the mystic, the poet, and the lover, all arguably positive forces.

26 [Al-Nisābūrī], *‘Uqalā’* (1987), 30. The editor reads *yusmi*’ rather than *yusammi*’.

27 *Ibid.*, 35.

28 *Ibid.*, 39.

29 *Ibid.*, 39.

30 *Ibid.*, 41.

31 *Ibid.*, 40–41.

32 *Ibid.*, 42.

33 VAN GELDER 2017, 150.

It is curious that, in his relatively thorough discussion of the basic meanings of the word *majnūn*, Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nisābūrī does not mention the definition that Lane positions first, namely: “possessed by a *jinnī* or by *jinn*, or by a devil, or demon, a demoniac.” Perhaps his predilection for profiling devout Muslims dissuaded him from associating the “intelligent insane” with demons.

Her Social Status

As discussed above, Rayḥāna may very well have been enslaved. This we can infer from her description as a *jāriya* in the initial report (§ 475). Whilst this word does indeed very often denote “female slave,”³⁴ its basic meaning is “girl” or “young woman.” It is also possible that it describes her status as freed slave or as a “client” (*mawlā*) – a recent convert who has entered a contractual relationship with an Arab tribe. The grammatically feminine version of client (*mawlāt*) is relatively hard to come by in this type of anecdotal literature.³⁵ Other than the occurrence of this one ambiguous word – *jāriya* – in the first report about Rayḥāna, there is no indication in her profile in al-Nisābūrī’s book that she was either enslaved or free.

Two of the reports (§ 475 and § 483) describe her as “black” (*sawdā*). This may imply that she was of non-Arab origin, perhaps of East African or South Asian descent, given the Indian Ocean context, or it may simply indicate that she was dark-complexioned. In any case, the description may be seen to reaffirm Rayḥāna’s status as probably enslaved, especially by ‘Abbāsīd scholars such as al-Nisābūrī. For, according to Rachel SCHINE, “Arabic literary sources (and popular literature especially) attest that the conflation between Blackness and slavery became entrenched during the ‘Abbāsīd period.”³⁶

It is sometimes possible to determine a woman’s status as either free or enslaved through consideration of her name. A woman with a patronymic, for example, who is known as the daughter of a certain person, is more likely to be free, or free-born. There is also a sense in which the meanings of given names yield clues. Fedwa MALTI-DOUGLAS, commenting on the tendency for enslaved women to have certain types of names, states: “What is certain, however, is that with some exceptions, the

³⁴ MYRNE 2017, 66n, explains that, in an urban ‘Abbāsīd setting, the term *jāriya* typically applies to relatively high-status slaves such as domestic servants and courtesans, and that the word for a “common” female slave is *ama*. She adds, however, that “this differentiation is not absolute.”

³⁵ Given the ubiquity of the male *mawlā* (pl. *mawālī*) among the scribal classes, it is strange that one rarely finds the feminine version applied to women writers and poets.

³⁶ SCHINE 2021, 4.

names of slave girls and those of free women derive conceptually from different realms.³⁷ MALTI-DOUGLAS does not identify or characterize these different realms, but she does give the example of Danānīr, the name of a celebrated ‘Abbāsīd courtesan that means “dinars,” as prototypical of the *jawārī* realm.³⁸ However, the main difference is that the names of the enslaved are less established and more unusual names. The word *rayḥāna*, as a relatively uncommon name whose most immediate meaning evokes a fragrant plant like sweet basil,³⁹ may strike us as the name of a slave. However, the name is known among free-born women from an early era: two examples are Rayḥāna bint Zayd, one of the wives of the Prophet Muḥammad, and Rayḥāna bint Ma’dikarīb, a woman who was taken captive by and later married to the poet Durayd ibn al-Ṣimma (d. 8/630).⁴⁰ Moreover, the word *rayḥāna*, as an individual instance of the collective noun *rayḥān*, may also mean “offspring” or “descendent,” and the phrase *rayḥān allāh* means “bounty of God,”⁴¹ so the name could denote something more akin to “cherished daughter” and therefore seem more like the name of a free woman as opposed to an enslaved one. Rayḥāna’s name, in other words, does not serve as a reliable clue to her social status.

Madness and Early Mysticism

Quite a few of the personalities profiled in Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nisābūrī’s book would fall under the classification of early mystics in the sense that their nonnormative behaviour was religiously sanctioned and received as evidence of their piety and religious fervor. In fact, as Laury SILVERS observes, a theme of madness runs throughout Sufi literature. She writes:

Madness (*jadhba* or *junūn*) is regarded positively in Sufi literature; so much so, it becomes a well-worn romantic trope [...] Their imagined or real social isolation and suffering may have been understood in terms of the emotional and physical suffering displayed by renunciants demonstrating their intimacy with God and perceived as redemptive.⁴²

Among the behaviors that were received as both strange and admirable were excessive weeping, excessive expressions of fear, excessive fasting, and forgoing

³⁷ MALTI-DOUGLAS 1991, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37–38.

³⁹ LANE 1863–1867, 1, 1181.

⁴⁰ See their biographical entries in KAḤḤĀLA 1984, 1, 474–475.

⁴¹ LANE 1863–7, 1, 1182.

⁴² SILVERS 2015, 44.

sleep to make time for devotional activities.⁴³ SILVERS suggests that the last activity, relinquishing sleep, was particularly common among women and the enslaved, as chores would keep them too busy during the day to make time for prayer and worship.⁴⁴

These “abnormal” activities, reported upon in the *akhbār* about Rayḥāna, serve as *leitmotifs* throughout al-Nisābūrī’s book, where many characters are depicted as rolling or writhing in the dirt (as Rayḥāna does in § 486) or suddenly dropping dead (as she does in § 483) out of an overwhelming fear of God. At times, these stock themes give the narrative a folkloric veneer that challenges credibility and might cause us to doubt that Rayḥāna’s story is true or to question the advisability of treating her as a historical persona. It is important to bear in mind, however, that a text that is folkloric, either by origin or by transmission, need not be read as fiction, and that it may convey historical truths even if it does so through folkloric poetics.⁴⁵ It is not only the anecdotal frameworks of her *akhbār* that reflect this folkloric impulse, but also some of her poems, which one often finds attributed to others, or which resonate strongly with other verses found in al-Nisābūrī’s book. Take, for example, this poem by a certain Thawbān al-Majnūn, which bears a striking resemblance to the aforementioned poem by Rayḥāna:

You are my pleasure, my aspiration, my support.
 My ultimate companion, my object of desire.
 You are the soul of my heart, you are my hope.
 You keep me company, my yearning for you is my sustenance.⁴⁶

⁴³ Readers who are more skeptical about religious practices may find parallels between expressions of extreme grief and fear and a phenomenon that Robert BURTON (2021) describes as “religious melancholy.” In his book about madness entitled *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, he devotes a lengthy section to the subject, citing many examples of pious people despairing of being saved (see Part 3, Section 4, Subsections 2–6: Despair; Causes of Despair; Symptoms of Despair; Prognostics of Despair; Cure of Despair). The notion may easily be applied to the anecdote about Rayḥāna in al-Nisābūrī’s *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn* (§ 284) and her poem with the eightfold repetition of “Woe is me!”

⁴⁴ SILVERS 2015, 35.

⁴⁵ For the relationship between folklore and history, see PROPP 1984, especially “Folklore and Reality,” 16–38, and “On the Historicity of Folklore,” 48–63. Just what constitutes folkloric poetics and how it may be differentiated from literary poetics is a complex issue, but PROPP suggests that repetition and parallelism are characteristically folkloric devices (6) and that in folklore there is an emphasis on what he calls “empirical space” or “the space that surrounds the hero at the moment of action” (22). For a study of folkloric patterns of escalation in the narrative framing of an ancient genre known as the “denigration of spouses,” see HAMMOND 2014.

⁴⁶ Al-Nisābūrī, *‘Uqalā’* (1987), 225.

Further verses that resemble the same poem by Rayḥāna and that end in the same rhyme (-ākā) are attributed to a certain ‘Abbās. These end with a line whose meaning is nearly identical to Rayḥāna’s closing line:

My request to enter paradise is not for its blessings,
I only want to be there to see You.⁴⁷

A second correspondence between her poetry and that of another individual profiled in the volume pertains to a half-verse by the “probably mentally deranged ascetic character” Buhlūl (d. circa 190/805).⁴⁸ The hemistich in question, which features a threefold repetition of the word *wayl* (woe), translating roughly as “woe, then woe, then [yet more] woe,”⁴⁹ evokes comparison with Rayḥāna’s couplet (§ 486) in which she repeats *waylī* (woe is me) no less than eight times – at the beginning and end of each hemistich:

Woe is me! My sin is in my book. Woe is me!
Woe is me! When my name is called. Woe is me!
Woe is me! If it said, “take her.” Woe is me!
Woe is me! My destiny is the Fire. Woe is me!

Blackness and Piety

Two of the reports describe her as black: the aforementioned anecdote (§ 475) representing her as a black *jāriya* and a later report (§ 483) that calls her “black” in the word’s grammatically feminine form (*sawdā*). Rayḥāna’s apparent blackness may or may not play a role in her individual profile and her status as a “wise insane person,” but when we read her biographical sketch in conjunction with other accounts in the book, it would seem that blackness itself is a *leitmotif* connecting the different reports about women, whose identity as black women seems to situate them at a nexus of wisdom, madness, and worship.

Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nisābūrī includes a total of ten figures, two of whom are unnamed, in his chapter on women. Three of these women are described as black: (1) Rayḥāna, (2) Maymūna al-Sawdā’ (“the Black”) (§ 506, p. 292), and (3) ‘Awsaja (§ 512, p. 300). A fourth woman, a certain Ḥayyūna, is said to have “blackened”

⁴⁷ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁸ This characterization comes from MARZOLPH 2010, 160.

⁴⁹ Al-Nisābūrī, *Uqalā* (1987), 153.

from fasting (*ṣāmat Ḥayyūna ḥattā swaddat*) (§ 493, p. 287), which is a recurring image in Sufi literature.⁵⁰ One may say, then, that a black complexion figures into the imagery of forty percent of the entries on women. This is interesting when one considers that blackness is not mentioned in any of the entries on named male personalities, and it only arises in a few of the entries on anonymous men. There, one finds, for example, a report (§ 576, p. 332) attributed to Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī⁵¹ about a black man who would “whiten” (*ibyaḍḍa*) when remembering God. Such an anecdote conveys a sense in which blackness is more remote from the divine than whiteness, and yet in the case of the women al-Nisābūrī profiles, blackness seems to confirm or enhance the strength and depth of their piety, empowering them as worshippers. Indeed, as Laury SILVERS gleans from her perusal of anecdotes about enslaved women renowned for their mysticism, “black skin seems to articulate the ideal of spiritual poverty by connecting the lowest social status, an enslaved black woman, with the highest spiritual status.”⁵² SILVERS goes on to cite Rayḥāna’s more famous contemporary Sha’wāna,⁵³ also a woman from Ubulla renowned for her piety, reading her statement that she was “a sinful black slave” as an affirmation of her spirituality.⁵⁴ It is important to note here that the word Sha’wāna uses for “slave,” *ama*, like its masculine equivalent *‘abd*, also means *worshipper*.

Rayḥāna’s Poetry

Most of the poems al-Nisābūrī ascribes to Rayḥāna serve to illustrate aspects of her particular forms of worship. She addresses God with amorous verse; she extols the virtues of keeping night-time vigils; she renounces earthly pleasures; and she expresses an overwhelming fear of damnation. Some of these poems seem quite formulaic, as discussed above, and they seem to prove, illustrate, or exemplify the various statements describing her behaviors and personality, whilst others contain imagery and figures of speech that are highly unusual but that again serve to account for her reported characteristics.

⁵⁰ SILVERS 2015, 43n.

⁵¹ Two other accounts of anonymous black men (§ 523 and § 571) are attributed to him as well. See al-Nisābūrī, *Uqalā’* (1987), 306 and 330.

⁵² SILVERS 2015, 43.

⁵³ Sha’wāna appears as a source in one of al-Nisābūrī’s reports about Rayḥāna (§ 477).

⁵⁴ SILVERS 2015, 43. The original Arabic of the phrase is *ama sawdā’ ‘āṣiya*. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (2012), 724.

The Qur'ān Has Lovers

One poem stands out as a bit mysterious in the sense that it contains beautiful and provocative imagery whilst being imperfectly explicated by its narrative framework. The chain of transmission of the poem's report (§ 482) leads back to a certain 'Abbād al-Qaṭṭān who speaks of getting up one night and asking God to cover his ['Abbād's] face with modesty [from God]. At this point Rayḥāna screams (*ṣarakhat*), accusing him of hypocrisy and suggesting that he try scrupulous piousness (*wara'*) instead. She then states:

Get yourself accustomed to staying awake at night,
for sleep is loss.
Do not betake yourself to sin:
the punishment for sin is the hellfire.
Study well the Revelation,
for the Quran has lovers,
Who, when surprised by the night,
are God-fearing men in the darkness,
Bending and swaying,
like branches in the wind.

In this most unusual and provocative of her poems, Rayḥāna compares those who stay up late reading and/or reciting the Quran to “lovers.” Curiously, the connotations of the word for “lovers” (*akhdān*, sing. *khidn*) are somewhat negative and often convey illicit relationships. The lexicographer Edward William LANE suggests that the basic meaning is “secret” or “private” friend, but according to one of his sources, the word usually means “an amorous companion or associate” or “a companion, or an associate, affected with sensual appetency.”⁵⁵ The word *akhdān* appears twice in the Quran: interestingly, it occurs once in association with women and once with men. In Q 4:25, we find the phrase *muttakhidhāt akhdān*, meaning the “female keepers of secret companions.” The first half of the verse reads:

If any of you does not have the means to marry a believing free woman, then marry a believing slave – God knows best [the depth of] your faith: you are [all] part of the same family – so marry them with their people's consent and their proper bride-gifts, [making them] married women, not adulteresses or lovers ...⁵⁶

⁵⁵ LANE (1863–1867), 1, 712. See also al-Zabīdī's *Tāj al-'Arūs*, which is LANE's source, and where al-Rāghib (al-Iṣbahānī) is quoted (34, 483) as saying that *khidn* is most often used *fīman yuṣāhibu bi-shahwa nafsāniyya*.

⁵⁶ Abdel Haleem 2005, 53.

Note that the phrase *muttakhidhāt akhdān*, which the translator M.A.S. Abdel Haleem renders simply as “lovers,” occurs in a synonymous pairing with “adulteresses” (*musāfihāt*).

Then in Q 5:5, we find the masculine construct *muttakhidhī akhdān*, meaning “male keepers of secret companions.” Abdel Haleem translates:

Today all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them. So are chaste, believing, women as well as chaste women of the people who were given the Scripture before you, as long as you have given them their bride-gifts and married them, not taken them as lovers [*musāfihīn*] or secret mistresses.⁵⁷

Again, the phrase “keepers of secret companions” (*muttakhidhī akhdān*) occurs in a synonymous pairing with “adulterers” (*musāfihīn*), but this time both are grammatically masculine. Stating that the Qur’ān has lovers (*akhdān*) is thereby *sexually* suggestive. In a way, Rayḥāna compares the act of studying the Qur’ān with sexual activity, presumably because it is a pleasurable, private activity that often takes place in the night. The poem seems to be saying, study the Qur’ān, instead of sinning, for in it you will find sensual pleasure. The imagery of branches (*aghṣān*) bending and swaying at the end of the poem is particularly evocative, for in Arabic poetry the figure of the beloved is often compared to a branch.⁵⁸ Moreover, the word translated above as “God-fearing” (*ruhbān*) more commonly means “monks,” figures who in classical Arabic poetry – especially the bacchic verse of ‘Abbāsīd poet Abū Nuwās (d. *circa* 198/813) – are often associated with homoerotic liaisons.⁵⁹ Rayḥāna seems to argue that immersing oneself in the Qur’ān is as pleasurable as sexual contact and has the added benefit that it does not result in damnation. This poem, with more or less the same anecdotal framework, also appears in the *Maṣārī’ al-’ushshāq*, but there the narrator is called ‘Abbād al-’Aṭṭār rather than ‘Abbād al-Qaṭṭān,⁶⁰ and at the closing of the poem he adds, “So I wept until I recov-

⁵⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁵⁸ Thomas BAUER 1998, 314–318, has a section on “Figur” (*qadd, qawām*), with many references to “Zweige” (branches) in poetry. These are predominantly *muḥdath*, but the image is much older, see, for example, the first-/seventh-century Ibn Muqbil’s *Yahzuzna li-l-mashyi awṣālan muna’ammatan | hazza l-janūbi ma’an ṯdāna Yabrīnā* (Ibn Abī ‘Awn, *Tashbihāt* [1950], 100).

⁵⁹ The association develops due to the fact that monasteries often produced and served wine. Robert IRWIN notes that tenth-century scholars wrote guides to monasteries “which were simultaneously evocations of the pleasures of life, since drinking bouts, picnics and assignments with lovers took place in monastery gardens.” IRWIN 1999, 123.

⁶⁰ They must be scribal variants of the same person, but neither name has been identified.

ered,”⁶¹ as if the poem had cured him of his sinful overindulgence, whatever that might have been.

Remembrance in the Dark

In a poem that is not found in al-Nisābūrī’s book but preserved in Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (extracted in Appendix 2), Rayḥāna similarly seems to advise her listener to resist earthly pleasure, and amorous flirtation more particularly, for the sake of an even more pleasurable communion with the divine. Here the imagery is drawn from mildly erotic verse and wine poetry:

Do not befriend those whose sight flusters you,
lest you are prevented from remembrance [of God] in the dark.
Labor! Exert yourself! Be full of sorrow at night,
and He will quench your thirst with the loving cup of glory and generosity.⁶²

Recalling a Natural Beauty

A third poem attributed to Rayḥāna that plays on conventional poetic tropes is recorded in another volume, namely *Talkhiṣ al-mutashābih* (extracted in Appendix 3) by the ‘Abbāsīd historian and hadith scholar al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḏādī (d. 463/1071). The poem is framed by an anecdote set during the hajj, or more specifically the circumambulation of the Kaaba, in which Rayḥāna, having overheard fellow pilgrims, including the “weeper” Ṣāliḥ al-Murri, recite verses in the Qur’ān on the topic of the beautiful maidens who await the pious in paradise, composes a poem in the *nasīb* genre, or verse that may be described as nostalgically amatory or erotic. Whilst it is not uncommon for the (usually male) poetic persona to weep in poems of this kind, Rayḥāna’s expression of excessive weeping in the first line more closely resembles the lament for the dead, a genre closely associated with women poets.⁶³

⁶¹ al-Sarrāj (n.d.), *Maṣāri‘* 1, 174.

⁶² See Appendix 2.

⁶³ For a study of women’s laments, see HAMMOND 2010. The opening line of Rayḥāna’s poem also reinforces the idea that she was one of the aforementioned “weepers.” It is worth mentioning here that Laury SILVERS finds a link between ritual ascetic weeping and pre-Islamic practices of wailing for the dead, which were somewhat frowned upon under the new religion. She suggests that it was

Eyes well up with abundant drops,
 Tear ducts spill over in streams,
 Recalling a natural beauty, in her boudoir,⁶⁴
 Ensnaring hearts with flirtatious glances,
 With a smile revealing teeth, perfectly arranged,
 Or friendly young women, coquettes living in comfort.
 When they kiss you, you will think that musk is wafting,
 Its perfume mixing in their mouths
 With slim bellies but full buttocks,
 My descriptors fall short of their awesome light.

That this poem evokes the houris of paradise, the reward for true believers, with images that are palpably erotic, in a narrative context of the hajj, an act of worship, juxtaposes the erotic with the divine in a manner reminiscent of the phrase “for the Qur’ān has lovers,” discussed above, but on this occasion the juxtaposition occurs only in conjunction with the narrative framework.

An Expansion of her Corpus?

At least two other sources contain further verses that may or may not have been composed by Rayḥāna. Al-Sarrāj’s *Maṣāri’ al-’ushshāq*, which includes a brief entry on Rayḥāna constructed around her “The Quran has lovers” poem, also features a sketch about her grammatically masculine namesake Rayḥān al-Majnūn. He is said to have uttered a prayer, expressing a desire to commune with God, and to have followed this up with a brief poem:

The ascetic (*al-nāsik*) has written to the houris,
 A letter of tears,
 Not with quills but rather,
 A line of cloud drops,
 From a young man unsettled by longing,
 Languishing, emaciated.⁶⁵

It is tempting to read this poem as having been mistakenly attributed to a man due the male perspective expressed in the poem. Yet we know that verses that are

an “acceptable redirection” of the practice (SILVERS 2015, 33). On the status of practices of lamentation in early Islam, see HALEVI 2007.

⁶⁴ The original Arabic of this hemistich does not scan properly, and there is a word which we think is corrupt that is untranslated. See note 104 below.

⁶⁵ Al-Sarrāj, *Maṣāri’* (n.d.), 1, 183.

ascribed to Rayḥāna represent masculinist forms of desire, such as the masculine homoerotic imagery in “The Qur’ān has Lovers” and the seemingly heterosexual male stance in “Recalling a Natural Beauty.”

It is also worth mentioning that the three verses of the poem in § 478 constitute part of a nine-line poem in Abū Nu’aym’s *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*.⁶⁶ There, the poem is presented as having been recited by Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. circa 248/862) without reference to an author per se. It is therefore not unreasonable to infer that all nine lines may have been composed by Rayḥāna.

Conclusion

With a total of 42 verses attributed to Rayḥāna – 33 in Ibn Ḥabīb al-Niṣābūrī (Appendix 1), a further four in Ibn al-Jawzī (Appendix 2), and five in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (Appendix 3), she represents a poet of some standing. Her complex identity, furthermore, poses interesting questions for those interested in intersectional approaches to classical Arabic literature. Whilst forming part of what may be seen as a mystical canon, her verses illuminate perspectives that are traditionally relegated to the periphery. As the voice of a black woman renunciant, potentially enslaved, whose persona is inextricably bound up in ideas of madness, Rayḥāna offers her readers glimpses into a poetics of otherness that is at times empowering, and which often disrupts normative literary conventions, especially in her merging of religious and libidinal poetic discourses. That the biographical sketch that may be reconstructed from the various reports framing her poetic output should have folkloric aspects need not prevent us from identity-based interpretations, but it does add a collective consciousness to some of her assertions and the narratives embedding them. Rayḥāna in this sense embodies many folks: womenfolk, black folk, ascetic folk, and mad folk.

⁶⁶ Abū Nu’aym, *Ḥilya* (1988), 9, 391. See note 69 below.

Appendix 1: The entry on Rayḥāna in Ibn Ḥabīb al-Nīsābūrī’s *The Wise among the Insane* (‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn)⁶⁷

Rayḥāna

[§ 475]

She is a woman from Ubulla. Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ ibn ‘Umar told us: ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd told us: Ibrāhīm ibn al-Junayd told us on the authority of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn, on the authority of Ṭarīf al-Rūmī, the student of Ibrāhīm ibn Ad’ham, who said: I heard Ibrāhīm ibn Ad’ham say: Rayḥāna was mentioned to me, so I went out to Ubulla, and there I saw a black *jāriya* whose crying had left marks on her cheeks. I conversed with her a bit about the afterlife. Then she said:⁶⁸

If someone is a rider of a day⁶⁹ in which he is unsafe,
or spends a night at the end of his world,
Then how can he relish a life that is not sweet for him?
How can his eyes know the taste of rest?

[§ 476]

Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ told us: ‘Alī told us: Ibrāhīm told us on the authority of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn on the authority of Ismā‘īl ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shāmī, who said, I heard ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ibn ‘Alī say: Rayḥāna recited to me:⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Al-Nīsābūrī 1987, 279–284.

⁶⁸ The verses are quoted anonymously in Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Dhamm* (1993), 115, introduced by *wa-anshadanī Muḥammad ibn Ishāq*.

⁶⁹ The expression *rākib yawm* is unusual; compare a verse attributed to Abū al-‘Atāhiya, quoted by Ibn al-Mu‘tazz, *al-Badī‘* (1935), 20: *rākibu l-ayyāmi yajrī ‘alayhā/wa-lahū minhunna yawmun ḥarūnū*.

⁷⁰ The verses are quoted anonymously in Waṭwāt, *Ghurar* (2008), 12. There is an additional verse between vss. 1 and 2: *wa-jarra’uhā l-makrūha ḥattā tajarradat | wa-law ḥummilat’hu jumlatan la-shma’azzatī*. Vss. 1 and 3 are, also anonymously, in al-Māwardī, *Adab* (n.d.), 35; al-Sarrāj, *Maṣārī‘* (n.d.), 1, 225; al-Anṭākī, *Tazyīn* (1993), 1, 302. The three verses, again anonymously, are in al-Sulamī,

I abstained from pleasures until they turned away;
 I made my soul endure their absence and she persisted.
 She stood firm as the days passed,
 and when she saw my resolve to be lowly, she self-effaced.⁷¹
 The soul is defined by what a man makes of it;
 If she covets, she yearns; if not, she is consoled.

[§ 477]

Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us: Ḥafṣ told us: ‘Alī told us: Ibrāhīm told us on the authority of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn on the authority of Mūsā ibn Khālid, who said: I heard Sha’wāna say, “We were talking about the here-and-now in front of Rayḥāna al-Majnūna.” She said:⁷²

Ṭabaqāt (1998), 332, quoted by a certain Abū al-‘Abbās al-Sayyārī al-Qāsim ibn al-Qāsim, and in al-Sulamī, *al-Amthāl* (2009), 103, with a similar introduction. Al-Ghazālī, *Sirr* (2003), 89, quotes the verses with two additional ones and ascribes them to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, see ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, *Dīwān* (1985), 52–53: two pieces, one being vss. 1 and 3 and the other consisting of four verses of which vs. 2 is the last. This last piece is also in al-Tanūkhī, *al-Faraj* (1978), 5, 6, attributed to ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān “or another (*wa-qīla li-ghayrih*).” Rayḥāna’s three verses are part of a poem attributed to the Cordoban vizier Ja’far ibn ‘Uthmān al-Muṣṣaḥfī in al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ* (1968), 1, 593 and 604 (as *ṣabartu ‘alā l-ayyāmi ...*), and a version of vs. 1 is found as the opening line of a poem of 13 lines quoted anonymously in al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt* (1964), 4, 231–232: *ṣabartu ‘alā ba’ḍi l-adhā khawfa kullihī | wa-alzamtu nafsi ṣabrahā fa-staqarratī* (“I endured some harm out of fear for all of it, | and I made my soul endure it; then it was at rest.”). Vs. 3 is quoted anonymously in various sources, including al-Iṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt* (AH 1287), 2, 328 and Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ* (1995), 3, 148.

⁷¹ Treating the self or soul (*nafs*, a feminine word) as an entity distinct from the “lyrical I” is common in classical Arabic poems. Poets may address their soul, e. g., *fa-yā nafsu ṣabran lasti wa-llāhi fa-lamī | bi-awwali nafsin ghāba ‘anhā ḥabībuhā* (Majnūn Laylā); *aqūlu li-nafsi wāqifan ‘inda mushrifin | ‘alā ‘araṣātin ka-l-dhibāri l-nawāṭiqī* (Dhū l-Rumma); *aqūlu lahā (viz., li-nafsi) wa-qad ṭarat sha’ān | mina l-abṭāli wayḥaki lā turā’ī* (Qaṭarī ibn al-Fujā’a); or they may address themselves in the second person singular, especially at the opening of longer poems, see, e. g., VAN GELDER 1983, 22–30; VON GRÜNEBAUM 1937, 233: “Labid behandelt seine Seele als eine von ihm selbst – was so viel sagen will, wie von seinen Willen – unabhängliche Wesenheit, die ihren Wünschen gegenüber Wahlfreiheit besitzt.”

⁷² The verses are quoted anonymously in Abū Nu’aym, *Ḥilyat*, (1988) 10, 132, in the entry on Aḥmad ibn al-Ghamr (with *ṣaghghara ... qadrahū* instead of *ṣaffara ... baytahū*) and in al-Dīnawarī, *al-Mujālasa* (2002), 7, 160, introduced with: *ḥaddathanā Aḥmad ḥaddathanā Muḥammad al-Mustamlī qāl: wajadtu ‘alā ba’ḍi al-wāḥi al-maqābir* (“... I found on a tombstone”), and with the variant *ṣaghghara ... qadrahū* (“... had his status diminished”). It is difficult to decide which reading is better, but *ṣaffara ... baytuhū* may be preferred because it is the *lectio difficilior* and it goes better with the following *fa-ukhrija min*, etc.

No lover of this world is safe from perdition,
 nor will he depart from it without burning thirst.
 How many a king has had his house emptied by death!
 How many cast out from shaded protection!⁷³

[§ 478]

Sahl ibn ‘Abdallāh was asked, “What do you think of Rayḥāna?” He said, “I have nothing but good to say about her,” and they recited to me the following verses by her:⁷⁴

She has an understanding, coming from a subtle resolve,
 by which she rends, with her thoughts,⁷⁵ what is inside⁷⁶ the veils.
 If she feels safe from fear of being separated from her friend,⁷⁷
 [It is because] she loves a loved one who demands intimacy up close.
 He was pleased with her,⁷⁸ so she pleased Him, until she was full of pleasure,
 and she alighted with the beloved in a spacious dwelling.⁷⁹

[§ 479]

Muḥammad informed us, saying: al-Ḥasan informed us, saying: Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ told us: ‘Alī told us: Ibrāhīm told us, on the authority of Bakkār ibn Khālid on the authority of Ṣāliḥ al-Murri, who said: I saw Rayḥāna al-Majnūna and she had written on the back of her garment:⁸⁰

73 I.e., from a life of ease and pleasure. Compare Q 4:57: *wa-nudkhilluhum zillan zalilā*, “We shall make them enter an extensive (lit., “shaded”) shade.”

74 These lines are part (vss. 7, 8, 6) of a poem of nine verses found in Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat* (1988), 9, 391, introduced by the ambiguous *fa-anshadanī Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī*, “Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī quoted to me.” Consequently, one finds it attributed to him, but he may have been merely quoting. This version has *lahā min laṭīfi l-ḥubbi ‘azmun*, “she has a resolve, coming from a subtle love,” which may be better than *lahā min laṭīfi l-‘azmi fahmun* as in the edition.

75 Reading, with *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, *bi-l-afkār* instead of *bi-l-astār*, “with the veils/curtains,” which does not seem to make sense.

76 Reading *dākhila* instead of *dākhilu*, as voweled in the edition.

77 The elision of the *hamza* in *min-ilfihā* is a poetic license, required by the meter. The variant *li-ilfihā* in *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’* obviates this license.

78 *Raḍihā* (for *raḍiyahā*) is another poetic license.

79 This line would seem to qualify as “mystical” in the sense that the intimate love for and communion with the divine is here represented as reciprocal. See note 20 above.

80 The following poem and the next, but not the third and fourth, are also in al-Bayhaqī *al-Jāmi’* (2003), 2, 30, with an introduction: *akhbaranā Abū ‘Alī al-Rūdhbārī akhbaranā Abū Zakariyyā ‘Ab-*

You are my intimate friend, my desire and my pleasure,
 my heart has refused to love anyone but you.
 O my dear one, my aspiration, my intent!
 I have yearned for such a long time. When may I meet with you?
 Tis not for the good life that I seek entry to heaven:
 I only want it in order to see you.

And on her chest was written:

It suffices the lover that the beloved knows
 that the lover has cast himself at his door,
 When his heart, when he breathes in the darkness,
 is wounded by the arrows of the pangs of passion.

And on her right sleeve was written:⁸¹

By your face (I implore you), do not torment me,⁸² for
 I am hoping to get the best abode,⁸³
 Upholstered, upper rooms ornamented,
 a refuge – a blessed place to settle down!
 You are a neighbor to the pious in it:
 were it not for You, it would not be so pleasant to visit.

dallāh ibn Aḥmad ibn al-Balādhurī al-ḥāfiẓ ḥaddathanā Ibrāhīm ibn al-Junayd ḥaddathanī Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ‘an Bakkār ibn Khālīd ‘an abīhi ‘an Šālīḥ al-Murrī qāl: ra’aytu Rayḥāna al-maj-nūna wa-katabat min warā’ jaybiḥā: ... Vss. 1–3 are in al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt* (1998), 392, attributed to “Rayḥāna al-wāliha” (*wāliḥ* meaning “distracted, out of one’s wits, passionately in love”). As ‘Umar al-Asad, the editor of *al-Nisābūrī*, *‘Uqalā’* (1987), says, the first poem is very similar to the four verses ascribed to ‘Abbās, another *majnūn*, on p. 258, § 459.

81 Vss. 1 and 3 are quoted in Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (2012), 724, introduced with *Qāla Abū al-Qāsim ibn Sa‘īd: sami’tu Šālīḥan al-Murrī yaqūl: ra’aytu Rayḥāna al-majnūna fa-sallamtu ‘alayhā fa-qālat li: Yā Šālīḥ isma’*. As the editor of *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn* remarks, the epigram has a rhyme defect called *iqwā’* (vs. 1 ending in *-ārī*, the other verses in *-ārū*).

82 An alternative interpretation of *bi-wajhika lā tu’adhhibnī* is “With Your face do not torment me!” but the syntax makes the translation given above more likely. Compare the hadith attributed to the Prophet: *Lā yus’ālu bi-wajh Allāh illā al-janna* (WENSINCK 1992, 2, 380).

83 She is speaking of heaven: for *khayr dār*, compare for instance Q 12:109: *wa-la-dāru l-ākhirati khayrun li-lladhīna ttaqaw*. In the next verse, *nī’ma hiya l-qarār* echoes Q 40:39: *wa-inna l-ākhirata hiya dāru l-qarār*. Perhaps *al-‘alālī* (pl. of *‘uliyya*) is to be connected with *‘illiyyīn/‘illiyyīn*, a somewhat enigmatic word in Q 83:18–19.

And on her left sleeve was written:⁸⁴

My longing wore out my bones and exhausted my strength,
and I allied myself with my sorrows, so my sleep was disturbed.

[§ 480]

Farqad al-Sabakhī said: There was no one among the women of Ubulla or Basra who stayed up late at night as often as Rayḥāna. One night I heard her say,⁸⁵

Make yourself vigilant in the night,
then your vigils will keep you awake during sleep.⁸⁶
Make yourself familiar with the length of prayer, out of endurance,
and leave the pleasures of sleep and dreams.⁸⁷

[§ 481]

Muḥammad informed us saying: al-Ḥasan informed us saying: Abū ‘Abdallāh told us: Ḥafṣ told us: ‘Alī told us: Ibrāhīm told us, on the authority of Aws al-A‘war,⁸⁸ who said: I saw Rayḥāna al-Majnūna one night calling and saying: “I seek protection in you from any figure that does not stand up straight before you. May any eyes that do not cry out of longing for you go blind! May any hand that does not pray and supplicate to you wither!” Then she said:⁸⁹

O beloved of hearts, you are my beloved,
You, O my desire, are always my joy.

⁸⁴ Not found elsewhere.

⁸⁵ Not found elsewhere.

⁸⁶ This sounds like a contradiction, but so does the Arabic.

⁸⁷ Again, there is *iqwā’* (*qiyāmū/aḥlāmī*).

⁸⁸ Perhaps an error for Aws ibn al-A‘war ibn Jawshan ibn ‘Amr, a transmitter mentioned, e. g., in Ibn al-Athīr, *Usd al-ghāba* (2012), 82.

⁸⁹ The verse is quoted in al-Bayhaqī, *al-Jāmi’* (2003), 2, 29, introduced by an *isnād* ending with *ḥaddathanā Ibrāhīm ibn al-Junayd ḥaddathanī Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ḥaddathanī Aws al-A‘war qāla: ra’aytu Rayḥāna al-majnūna laylatan tad’ū*, etc.

[§ 482]

Muḥammad informed us, saying: al-Ḥasan informed us, saying: Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ told us: ‘Alī told us: Ibrāhīm told us on the authority of Rawḥ ibn Mansūr, who said: ‘Abbād al-Qaṭṭān said: I got up one night, saying in my prayer: “God, cover my face with modesty given by You!” Rayḥāna then shouted at me and said, “Pray for the fall of hypocrisy! Scrupulous pioussness is better for you than that.” Then she uttered:⁹⁰

Get yourself accustomed to staying awake at night,
 for sleep is loss.
 Do not betake yourself to sin:
 the punishment for sin is the hellfire.
 Study well the Revelation,
 for the Qur’an has lovers,
 Who, when surprised by the night,
 are God-fearing men⁹¹ in the darkness,
 Bending and swaying,
 like branches in the wind.

[§ 483]

Muḥammad informed us, saying: al-Ḥasan informed us, saying: Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ told us, saying: ‘Alī told us, saying: Ibrāhīm told us, on the authority of ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Jābir, who said: I was circumambulating the Kaaba

⁹⁰ This poem is found in al-Sarrāj, *Maṣāri‘* (n.d.), 1, 174, with an introduction: *akhbaranā Abū Ḥafṣ ‘Umar ibn Muḥammad al-Makkī ṣāhib Qūt al-qulūb bi-qir’ati ‘alayhi (...) ḥaddathanī Ibrāhīm ibn al-Junayd qāl: ḥaddathanā Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ḥaddathanā Rawḥ ibn Mansūr qāla ‘Abbād al-‘Aṭṭār: qumtu dhāt layla ..., etc.* The anecdote ends with *Qāla: fa-bakaytu ḥattā shtafaytu*, “Then I cried until I felt better.” Amusingly, the anonymous editor apparently thinks that Rayḥāna is not a name but a noun meaning “sweet basil” (or any aromatic plant). This is obvious from the vowel-eling *rayḥanātun*, with *tanwīn*, and the editorial heading, “*Rayḥāna nāṭiqa*,” “A speaking sweet basil plant.” Consequently, she is not in the index, unlike Rayḥān al-majnūn (see 1, 183), who has not been found elsewhere.

⁹¹ *Ruhbān* (sing. *rāhib*) usually means “monks,” as it does several times in the Qur’an, and in Islamic texts it often has a distinctly negative, Christian connotation. But the literal sense is “God-fearing,” which fits better here. Mu‘āwiya, hearing a kinsman pray at night, says to his wife Fākhita, “Those are my people, princes during the day, *ruhban* during the night!,” quoted in Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd* (1983), 6, 18. One notes that there is a two-volume work by a modern Muslim author, Sayyid ibn Ḥasan AL-‘AFFĀNĪ, entitled *Ruhbān al-layl* (1990), on people, all Muslim, involved in nightly vigils, where Rayḥāna is also quoted (I, 501), but not, surprisingly, her verse about *ruhban*.

when lo, before me was Rayḥāna, a black woman from Ubulla. I saw that her veil had fallen from her head, and she was saying, “The house is Your house, the sacred area is Yours, and these people are Your servants. I am Your guest and Your visitor. For if You sent me back to Basra as a Muslim and I were asked, What has He granted you?, I would say: forgiveness, due to the fact that I hold You in high esteem and that You are beloved to me, so do what You will.” [‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Jābir] said, I approached her and said, “Be quiet, woman!” Then she said, “You parasite, is the house your house or His?” I said, “His.” She said, “And am I your guest or His?” I said, “His.” Then she said, “You hopeful one! He asks us to visit and does not forgive? No, He does not do that.” Then she screamed and convulsed and then died, may God have mercy on her.

[§ 484]

Muḥammad informed us, saying: al-Ḥasan informed us, saying: Abū ‘Abdallāh informed us, saying: Ḥafṣ told us, saying: ‘Alī told us, saying: Ibrāhīm told us, on the authority of ‘Abdallāh ibn Sahl, who said, I asked Rayḥāna to marry me. She replied:⁹²

O you who ask for the hand of lunacy for yourself,
what will you say if you stand abased?

[§ 485]

And ‘Abdallāh ibn Sahl said: Rayḥāna recited to me:⁹³

I see this world, for the one who is in its grip,
is torture whenever it gets to be too much,
Those who honor her are slighted,
and it blesses everyone to whom it is despicable.
If you don’t need something, leave it,
and take what you really need.

⁹² The verse has not been found elsewhere.

⁹³ The following poem is by Abū al-‘Atāhiya, see his *Dīwān* (1965), 410–411; al-İṣfahānī, *al-Aghānī* (1927–1974), 4, 56; al-Māwardī, *Adab* (n.d.), 122; Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ* (1995), 1, 452 (all attributed to Abū al-‘Atāhiya). Quoted anonymously (*li-ba’ḍ al-tārikīn li-l-dunyā*) in al-Makkī, *Qūt* (2001), 2, 776; vss. 1–2 anonymously in al-İṣbahānī, *Muḥāḍarāt* (AH 1287), 2, 222.

[§ 486]

Muḥammad informed us, saying: al-Ḥasan informed us, saying: Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Ṭayyān al-Qummī informed us, saying: ʿUthmān ibn Mardān al-Nahāwandī told us, saying: Khalaf ibn al-ʿAbbās al-Dimashqī told us on the authority of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn, who said, I heard Ṭarīf al-Rūmī say: I heard Ibrāhīm ibn Adʿham say: Rayḥāna was mentioned to me, so I sought her out and I saw her in a ruin rolling over in the dirt and saying,⁹⁴

Woe is me! My sin is in my book. Woe is me!⁹⁵
 Woe is me! when my name is called. Woe is me!
 Woe is me! If it said, “take her.” Woe is me!
 Woe is me! My destiny is the Fire. Woe is me!

Appendix 2: The Entry on Rayḥāna in Ibn al-Jawzī’s *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*⁹⁶

Among the wise madwomen in Ubulla is Rayḥāna. Abū l-Qāsim ibn Saʿīd said: I heard Ṣāliḥ al-Murrī say: I saw Rayḥāna, the madwoman. I greeted her and she said to me, “Ṣāliḥ, listen”:⁹⁷

By your face (I implore you), do not torment me, for
 I am hoping to get the best abode!
 You are a neighbor to the pious in it:
 were it not for you, it would not be so pleasant to visit.

⁹⁴ The following poem has not been found elsewhere. The four lines in *rajaz* meter all “rhyme” with the same word, *waylī*. This is a speciality of mystical poets, see, e. g., MCAULEY 2012, Ch. 6, “Ultra-Monorhyme,” 141–159, and VAN GELDER 2012, 241–243. For another example, see al-Nisābūrī, *ʿUqalāʾ* (1987), 136 (§ 235).

⁹⁵ This “book” is clearly the book or record mentioned in Q 17.71: *yawma nadʿū kulla unāsin bi-i-māmihim fa-man ʿūtiya kitābahū bi-yamīnihi fa-ulāʾika yaqraʿūna kitābahum wa-lā yuḏlamūna fatilā* (“On the day We shall call all people with their record; those who are given their book in their right hand, they will read out their book and they will not be wronged one bit”).

⁹⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (2012), 724–725. An alternative English translation of this entry may be found in CORNELL 1999, 306–309.

⁹⁷ See al-Nisābūrī, *ʿUqalāʾ* (1987), 280–281, § 479.

Al-Rabīʿ said, I spent a night in the company of Rayḥāna al-Majnūna in Ubulla, together with Muḥammad ibn al-Munkadir and Thābit al-Bunānī. She got up at nightfall and said:⁹⁸

The lover got up to meet the one he hoped for,
and his heart almost flew up from joy.

In the middle of the night, I heard her say:

[725] Do not befriend those whose sight flusters you,
lest you are prevented from remembrance in the dark.⁹⁹
Labor, exert yourself! Be full of sorrow at night,
and He will give you to drink¹⁰⁰ from the loving cup of glory and generosity.

Then she cried out, “O alas! O what loss!” I asked her, “Why this?” She replied,

The dark has gone with his company and friendship:
would that the dark with his company were renewed!

Appendix 3: An Anecdote Featuring Rayḥāna in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s *Talkhīṣ al-mutashābih*¹⁰¹

§ 722 Muḥammad ibn ‘Attāb

A shaykh who was the source for a story related by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Burjulānī that was recorded by Abū al-‘Abbās ibn Masrūq in the book *‘Uqalā’ al-majānīn*.

⁹⁸ The following four verses are in al-Yāfīʿī, *Rawḍ* (2007), 71. In Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Mud’hiṣ* (2005), 209, the first verse is attributed to “Rābī’a the Worshipper (*al-‘ābida*)”. In Ibn al-Imād, *Shadharāt* (1988), 3, 211–212, the verse is spoken by “Rābī’a the Syrian woman (al-Shāmiyya)”, during a nightly vigil; she is the wife of Aḥmad ibn Abī al-Ḥawārī (d. 246/860–1). See on her also Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa* (2012), 858–860; she is not to be confused with the more famous Rābī’a al-‘Adawiyya of Baghdad.

⁹⁹ Instead of *fi l-ḡalāmī*, as wrongly in *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*, read *fi l-ḡulamī*.

¹⁰⁰ Instead of *yasqika*, as in the sources, one could read *yasqika*, as the syntax seems to demand. A short second syllable in the *basīṭ* metre is unusual but occasionally found in older poetry.

¹⁰¹ Al-Baghdādī 2003, 382.

Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Ibn Rizqawayh reported: ‘Uthmān ibn Aḥmad al-Daqqāq reported: Aḥmad ibn Masrūq al-Ṭūsī reported: Abū al-Ṭayyib ibn al-Shahīd told me: Ruzayq the Sufi reported, on the authority of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn, on the authority of Muḥammad ibn ‘Attāb, who said: I went out for the hajj and lo, I came across Šāliḥ al-Murrī and Muḥammad ibn al-Sammāk. Šāliḥ al-Murrī took to the Yemeni Corner [of the Kaaba], whilst Muḥammad ibn al-Sammāk took to the Corner of the Black Stone. Then Šāliḥ recited: «They will all sit on green cushions and fine carpets»¹⁰² He [Muḥammad ibn ‘Attāb] said: And Rayḥāna al-Majnūna was there, circumambulating. He [Muḥammad ibn ‘Attāb] said: Then she screamed and uttered “Get tired, and you will arrive. If you take it easy, then you will fail.” Then Ibn al-Sammāk recited «Untouched beforehand by man or jinn».¹⁰³ At that she stood up and uttered:

Eyes well up with abundant drops,
 Tear ducts spill over in streams,
 Recalling a natural beauty, in her boudoir,¹⁰⁴
 Ensnaing hearts with flirtatious glances,
 With a smile revealing teeth, perfectly arranged,
 Or friendly young women, coquettes living in comfort.¹⁰⁵
 When they kiss you, you will think that musk is wafting,
 Its perfume mixing in their mouths,
 With slim bellies but full buttocks,
 My descriptors fall short of their awesome light.

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¹⁰² Q 55:76, Abdel Haleem 2005, 355.

¹⁰³ Q 55:74, Abdel Haleem 2005, 355.

¹⁰⁴ This hemistich (at *fi khidrihā ḥ.j.bātī*) does not scan and is therefore corrupt. The final word has been left untranslated.

¹⁰⁵ This hemistich is also unmetrical as printed and should be amended as follows: *wa-awānisin fi na’matin shakilātī*.

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