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## The Construction of Gender Symbolism in Ibn Sīrīn's and Ibn Shāhīn's Medieval Arabic Dream Texts\*

### INTRODUCTORY AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

It was years ago when I first bought my Bulaq edition of Arabic dream texts authored by the three canonical interpreters: Ibn Sīrīn, Ibn Shāhīn, and al-Nābulusī. In the eighties it was a favorite pastime among some Cairene intellectuals to read such popular classics, a way to converse with and learn more about the past. But what began as a pastime developed into an exercise in cultural and historical probing, a wish to use the dream text as a potential source for examining the cultural assumptions that shape us as social beings. In this article, I propose to use a gender-sensitive reading of selected narratives so as to explore both accepted and undetected cultural constructs of gender, and to examine how the text re-enforces or subverts conventional notions of gender hierarchy. In doing so, a dialogue is established with the text, infusing it with new grounds of sensibility, with memory, and questions that may help us understand the genealogy of cultural assumptions.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that although linguistic symbols reflecting a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity may not be remarkable in and of themselves, they do serve as reminders of the underlying connection between the textual or ideological construction of gender and the existing structures of order which constitute the social ground of the text. An interactive relationship between the symbols used in the dream text and its social context is thus expected to be at play. Notions of gender, economic status, age, religion, and sometimes race and color closely intersect in dream imagery, just as they do in the existing social context. And as Toufy Fahd rightly remarks, these texts may be considered as mirrors of society, providing reflections about everyday life in medieval Arab-Muslim society that cannot be found in conventional historical texts.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from a few recent studies, modern scholars still show little interest in the use of the dream text as a source for understanding the cultural assumptions of

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<sup>1</sup>Toufy Fahd, "The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society," in *The Dream and Human Societies*, ed. Gustave. E. von Grunebaum and Roger Caillois (Berkeley, 1966), 362.



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Arab-Muslim society.<sup>2</sup> Such lore of dreams has been doubly ignored: historians dismiss it as not pertaining to facts and events, psychologists and psychoanalysts follow Freud's famous devaluation of such popular manuals in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. For him, the key to a dream was to be sought in the unconscious of the dreamer, and not in manuals that simply offer ready-made correspondences between dream motifs and their meanings. My approach in examining the dream narrative does not simply focus on the psychological, but rather on how the dream text might be helpful in contributing to our knowledge of cultural constructs. This study therefore will draw attention to the wealth of social implications latent in the dream narrative, to the complexity and ambivalence of its mode of symbolizing, without however appropriating its meaning.

While many of the Arabic dream texts still survive in manuscript form, only a few of these texts have been published. However, the fact that these three canonical dream texts have been published together and continue to circulate widely in the Egyptian Bulaq edition is significant in its own right, for it implies that these dream texts continue to have a certain level of credibility and relevance in the popular imaginary of the Egyptian-Arab reader. For the purposes of this article, I will examine in some detail two of these three dream texts. The first is the text attributed to the eighth-century interpreter Ibn Sīrīn (born in Basra, died there in 110/728), and who is unanimously acknowledged by later Muslim scholars to be the greatest master in the field. It should be noted, however, that Ibn Sīrīn may not have written this text himself, but most probably it was his disciples who collected his teachings in a text that was later attributed to him and which is entitled *Muntakhab al-Kalām fī Tafsīr al-Aḥlām* (A concise guide for the

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 351–63; idem, "Les Corps de metiers au IV/Xe siècle a Bagdad d'après le chapitre xii d'al-Qadiri-fi-t-Ta'bir de Dinawari," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 8, no. 2 (1965): 186–212. For a more detailed discussion of Arabic dream texts, see idem, *Le Livre des Songes* (Damascus, 1964); see also his *Les Songes et leur Interpretation*, Sources Orientales, vol. 2 (Paris, 1959). More recently, Leah Kinberg published a critical edition of Ibn Abī al-Dunyā's dream text entitled *Morality in the Genre of Dreams* (Leiden, 1994). See Steven M. Oberhelman's recent study of medieval Greek and Arabic dreams, *The Oneirocriticism of Achmet: A Medieval Greek and Arabic Treatise on the Interpretation of Dreams* (Lubbock, TX, 1991). See also his article "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power in Medieval Greek and Arabic Literature," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. Jerry Wright, Jr., and Everett Rowson (New York, 1997), 55. For a comparative approach on dreams, see *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*, ed. David Shulman and Guy Stroumsa (New York, 1999). Western scholarship has produced numerous studies on dreams; for example, see Michel Foucault's classic work *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3 (New York, 1988); John Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990); Patricia Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton, 1994).



interpretation of dreams). The second text which I will examine is authored by the Mamluk statesman and scholar Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī (born in Jerusalem, died in 873/1468 in Tripoli), and is entitled *Al-Ishārāt fī ‘Ilm al-‘Ibārāt* (Signs in the science of dream interpretation). In light of its authoritative status in the Arabic dream tradition, Ibn Sīrīn’s text will be used as a basic reference source against which Ibn Shāhīn’s later text is compared and examined, thus allowing us to investigate the degree of continuity or discontinuity within the tradition of dream interpreting. As for ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī’s text (born in Damascus, died there in 1143/1731), it is used more as a supplementary source for the useful commentaries that the author makes on interpreting dreams, and when necessary, for further comparative purposes.<sup>3</sup>

The Arabic medieval dream text is an encyclopedic maze. Whereas Ibn Sīrīn’s earlier text comprises 59 chapters, Ibn Shāhīn expands them to 80, each dealing with related dream motifs. The list of such motifs is exhaustingly long and varied, and a few examples of these will suffice to give the reader an idea of their rich variety: death, heaven and hell, sacred spaces, religious rituals, the Prophet and his Companions, food, sexual relations, man, woman, slaves, children, body parts, houses, furniture, funerals, festivals, torture, plants, beasts, insects, birds, etc.<sup>4</sup> Given such a wide variety of topics, I decided to narrow down the data to be studied to a more manageable size. Out of the various chapters dealing with animals, I chose the one on the bird kingdom, and out of the numerous chapters dealing with human actors and related activities, I chose two: one dealing with men, women, children, and slaves; the other dealing with sexual and marital relations. For analytical and comparative purposes, textual choice of chapters from the two dream texts was based on the detected similarities in title and content. Furthermore, the choice of examining and comparing two different dream motifs, one dealing with birds, the other with humans, allows us to investigate how the two interpreters constructed correspondences between animal and human

<sup>3</sup>For this article, I have used the Bulaq two-volume edition, reprinted by Maṭba‘at ‘Īsā al-Bābī (Cairo, n.d.). The edition includes the three dream texts attributed respectively to al-Imām Muḥammad Ibn Sīrīn, Ibn Shāhīn al-Zāhirī, and the eighteenth-century scholar ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī. On the upper section of the first volume is al-Nābulusī’s text entitled *Ta‘tīr al-Anām fī Tafṣīr al-Aḥlām*. Ibn Sīrīn’s text *Muntakhab al-Kalām* is printed on the lower section of the same volume. Al-Nābulusī’s text is continued in the second volume, but on the lower section of this volume is Ibn Shāhīn’s *Ishārāt*. For more information on these three authors, their lives, and their works, see Yehia Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings in the Old Arab Tradition* (New York, 1991), 29–34. On the importance of Ibn Sīrīn as the most authoritative oneirocritic, see Fahd, “The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society,” 360–61.

<sup>4</sup>For a full English translation of Ibn Sīrīn’s table of contents, see Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings*, 21–25.



symbols. In the first part of this article findings based on the bird chapters will be examined, and in the second part such findings will be compared with those deduced from chapters directly dealing with human actors.<sup>5</sup> While animals, birds, and insects are generally used in the dream texts to signify events or actions relating to human subjects, the choice to examine the bird, as opposed to any other animal category, is based on the observation that the dream narratives of the bird kingdom appear to be analogously constructed according to the social structures that informs them.

Closer examination of our two historically disparate dream texts reveals more similarities than differences in structure and content, suggesting a high degree of continuity within the tradition of dream interpretation. Both Ibn Sīrīn's and Ibn Shāhīn's texts follow a thematic classification that demonstrates similarity in content and structural sequence. For instance, both texts begin with introductory chapters on the theoretical principles of dream interpretation, followed by those on dreams dealing with eschatological and religious themes, and then by those dealing with mundane matters. Finally, both conclude with anecdotes about master interpreters, addressed primarily to those who wish to study the discipline of dream interpretation. The two texts also reveal close parallels in the manner symbols are interpreted, which is not surprising, given the well-known dependence of later interpreters on earlier masters. Ibn Shāhīn seems to have had great respect for Ibn Sīrīn's teachings, for the latter is frequently used as one of his authoritative sources.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, some thematic differences or emphases may be noted; a notable example of this is the subject of human torture and violence, a theme which does not merit a separate chapter in Ibn Sīrīn's text, but to which Ibn Shāhīn devotes four chapters. The prevalence of torture in Mamluk society is

<sup>5</sup>The chapter I used from Ibn Sīrīn's text *Muntakhab* are 21, 35, and 54. Chapter 21 is entitled "Fī Ru'yā al-Nās: al-Shaykh minhum wa-al-Shābb wa-al-Fatāh wa-al-'Ajūz wa-al-Atfāl" (The vision of people: the old man, the young man and woman, the old woman, and children); Chapter 35 is entitled "Fī Ru'yā al-Ṭuyūr al-Waḥshīyah wa-al-Ahliyah wa-al-Mā'iyah" (The vision of wild, domesticated, and water birds); Chapter 54 is entitled "Fī al-Nikāh wa-Mā Yaṭṭasilu bihi" (Concerning marriage and other matters which relate to it). Chapters from Ibn Shāhīn's *Ishārāt* are 16, 27, and 60. Chapter 16 is entitled "Fī Ru'yā al-Rijāl wa-al-Nisā' wa-al-Ṣibyān wa-al-Ṣighār wa-al-Ṭawāshīyah wa-al-'Abīd wa-al-Khadam wa-al-Khinathā" (The vision of men, women, male adolescents, children, eunuchs, slaves, servants, and hermaphrodites); Chapter 27 is entitled "Fī Ru'yā al-Khuṭbah wa-al-Tazwīj wa-al-'Urs wa-al-Ṭalāq wa-al-Jimā' wa-al-Qublah wa-al-Mulāmasah wa-Mā naḥwahu" (The vision of engagement, marriage, weddings, divorce, sexual intercourse, kissing, touching, and other matters relating to it); Chapter 60 is entitled "Fī Ru'yā Sā'ir al-Ṭuyūr min al-Jawāriḥ wa-Ghayrihā" (The vision of birds, those that are predatory and otherwise).

<sup>6</sup>In his introduction, Ibn Shāhīn lists at least thirty master interpreters whom he cites as his sources (*Ishārāt*, 3).



confirmed by contemporary historical sources, suggesting that the practice may have reached special heights during this period.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, on examining al-Nābulusī's eighteenth-century dream text, which is structured along alphabetic rather than thematic lines, I have observed that the interpretive meaning of bird symbols does not seem to have changed in substantial ways. In a general statement on this textual tradition, Toufy Fahd tells us: "This seemingly very rich literature will appear in rather more modest dimension, I think, when all known manuscripts have been collated."<sup>8</sup>

### THE MEDIEVAL ARABIC TRADITION OF DREAM INTERPRETATION

Medieval Arabic dream texts were primarily written by men and for men, for they were mostly addressed to the male dreamer, his desires, anxieties, hopes, and obsessions relating to society. The female dreamer, on the other hand, makes fewer appearances in these texts, and when she does, her dreams appear to relate primarily to household matters such as marital or domestic affairs, physical looks, pregnancy, and birth of children.<sup>9</sup> This being so, the dream discourse may be viewed more as an expression of the Arab-Muslim masculine imaginary, one in which the male author replays, among other things, cultural notions of difference, interdependence of gender, and other social boundaries. How much of what the interpreter says is a reflection of his social and cultural makeup is a question that will be addressed in the course of this article.<sup>10</sup>

The belief that dreams could have a predictive value was almost universal in both ancient and medieval cultures of the Mediterranean region. To fulfill the need to understand the symbolic value of the dream, interpreting dreams developed as a profession performed by the ancient priestess and priest of the temple. But it was in the precincts of the market place that dream interpreters were readily accessible to their clients, and where much rivalry between different prognostic practices prevailed. In time, dream texts were produced recording standard interpretations of culturally defined and shared dream symbols. And while there is evidence that an extensive literature has been written on the subject, we are told that most ancient dream texts have been lost.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup>See Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, chapters 17, 24, 25, and 26. For more details on this subject see Tamer el-Leithy's excellent M.A. thesis, "Public Punishment in Mamluk Society," Darwin College, Cambridge University, 1997.

<sup>8</sup>"The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society," 362.

<sup>9</sup>For example, see Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 58, 59, and Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 133–34.

<sup>10</sup>On this question, see Oberhelman, "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power," 56.

<sup>11</sup>Fahd, "The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society," 351, 359–63. Fahd argues that while the Greco-Romans seem to have produced a large body of dream literature, very little survived apart from Artemidorous of Ephesus's text, which was translated into Arabic from Greek by Ḥunayn



Arabic medieval dream texts did not suffer such a loss, for a large legacy of manuscripts on dreams still survives. "Enriched by a Greek element working within like ferment, Arab-Muslim oneirocriticism reached heights no other civilization seems to have known."<sup>12</sup> Despite its discomfort with earlier pagan practices, medieval Muslim discourse privileged dream interpreting with an honored status not accorded to any of the other common prognostic practices. Visions conveyed through dreams were taken seriously because they were considered to be intimately connected to prophecy. Consequently, the "science of dream interpreting," as our Arab-Muslim scholars liked to call it, enjoyed the same respectability bestowed on canonical religious sciences.<sup>13</sup>

The profession of dream interpreting came to be primarily perceived in the written texts as the reserve of the male scholar who has received training in the formal religious sciences. And despite the fact that women continued to be dream interpreters, they do not appear to have enjoyed the status they had occupied in earlier historical periods.<sup>14</sup> The dream texts that I have examined also testify to the less important status given to female interpreters; thus whereas master male interpreters are normally mentioned by name, female interpreters only appear in anonymous terms. For example, in Ibn Sīrīn's dream text they are referred to simply as *al-mu'abbirah* (female interpreter) or *al-'ālimah* (female scholar).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, although Ibn Shāhīn meticulously lists his bibliographic sources in his introductory chapter, I have not been able to find any reference to names of

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Ibn Ishāq (d. 873/260). On the practice of dream interpreting in the ancient world, see A. Leo Oppenheim, "Mantic Dreams in the Ancient Near East," in *The Dream and Human Societies*. On the significance of dreams in the Indic tradition, see Wendy O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago, 1984).

<sup>12</sup>See Fahd, "The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society," 359 ff.

<sup>13</sup>See 'Abd al-Raḥmān Abū Zayd ibn Muḥammad Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abridged edition by N. J. Dawood (London, 1967), 371, 367. On dream interpretation, Ibn Khaldūn states:

This is a science resplendent with the light of prophecy, because prophecy and dreams were related to each other. . . . This is one of the sciences of the religious law. It originated in Islam when the sciences became crafts, and scholars wrote books about them. The science of interpretation implies a knowledge of general cultural norms upon which the interpreter bases the interpretation and explanations of what *he* is told. . . . The dream interpreter knows these general norms by heart and interprets the dreams in each case as required by the data establishing which of these norms fits a particular dream vision best.

<sup>14</sup>In the ancient Near East dream interpretation was largely practiced by women. For more details, see Oppenheim, "Mantic Dreams in the Ancient Near East," 350.

<sup>15</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 143, 144, 150. All translations of the dream texts I have used are mine, unless otherwise stated.



female interpreters. This inadequate recognition of women's contribution confirms what we already know of the authorship of the medieval text, for it was more the prerogative of the male-author to inscribe his society's cultural traditions and values. Perhaps the question of literacy among women interpreters might also explain why they were less likely to have left a written record of interpretations.

Whereas Ibn Sīrīn's earlier text does not contain explicit restrictive statements with regard to who should or should not practice dream interpretation, by the time we reach the fifteenth century we find Ibn Shāhīn emphatically insisting that "visions should not be related except to an interpreter (*mu'abbir*). As for those who are not versed in the "science of interpretation" (*'ilm al-ta'bīr*), they should not interpret dreams for anyone. For if he does so he sins, because it is like issuing a religious decree (*fatwá*). Indeed this is a demanding science."<sup>16</sup> Ibn Shāhīn here is defining the boundaries within which only those who belonged to a professionally trained elite could practice interpreting. In effect, he is calling for the censoring of the unprofessionally-trained interpreter, who may have been nonetheless an equally talented interpreter. Furthermore, he seems to elevate the interpreting of dreams to the status of issuing a religious decree (*fatwá*), which we know could only be performed by professionally recognized male scholars. Two interpretive traditions may very well have coexisted here, a written one that is accorded respectability, and an orally popular tradition that is considered suspect. It was probably within the latter tradition that women performed the practice of dream interpreting. And while our dream texts furnish little evidence for the existence of a separate oral feminine tradition, we can assume the earlier presence of one practiced by and for women within the context of the household. For we can still find today *baladī* Egyptian women continuing the practice of interpreting dreams for neighbors and members of their family.<sup>17</sup>

What constituted the required training in the formal discipline of dream interpretation seems to have already been in the making as early as the ninth century, when Muslim scholars were earnestly synthesizing, recording, and codifying what they constructed as the cultural canons. For such purposes, the famous ninth-century literary scholar and critic Ibn Qutaybah outlined a demanding curriculum for the dream interpreter:

For every scholar of some branch of the sciences, the tool of his science can be sufficient for practicing it; but the oneirocritic has

<sup>16</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 361.

<sup>17</sup>The term *baladī* here refers to urban traditional women of Cairo. On the living practice of interpreting dreams by Cairene women, I have consulted Ḥasan Surūr, an Egyptian anthropologist who works on Egyptian folklore, and who confirmed that Egyptian women in the traditional quarters of Cairo continue to interpret dreams for their neighbors and relatives.



to be a scholar of Quran and hadith in order to interpret dreams according to their ideas, to be acquainted with Arab proverbs and rare verses of poetry, to have a knowledge of Arabic etymology and of current colloquial speech. Besides, he has to be an *adīb*, gentle, sagacious, endowed with a capacity to judge the countenance of people, their character-features, their rank and state, to have a knowledge of analogy (*qiyās*) and an acquaintance with the principles (*uṣūl*) of oneiromancy.<sup>18</sup>

Again, such statements remind us that the profession of dream interpretation is cast in preference for a male practitioner. The professional interpreter seems to be at once a religious scholar and a connoisseur of his culture, as well as of people. Such scholarly consensus to define the practice of dream interpreting as a formal science has significant gender implications, as it may have contributed to marginalize the practice of female interpreters who lacked such training.

Just like other canonical religious sciences, dream interpreting also developed its own parameters of interpretation as well as its own biographical narrative. Following the canonical model of the science of the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), the science of dream interpretation also developed its own principles of interpretation (*uṣūl al-ta'bīr*) inscribed by male scholars who pronounced its interpretive rules. The tradition also produced its own specialized biographical dictionaries (*ṭabaqāt al-mu'abbirīn*), classifying its interpreters according to chronological categories that stretch back as far as pre-Islamic times.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>M. J. Kister, "The Interpretation of Dreams: An Unknown Manuscript of Ibn Qutayba's *Ibārat al-ru'yā*," in his collected volume entitled *Society and Religion from Jāhiliyya to Islam* (Hampshire, 1990), 75.

<sup>19</sup>See *Ṭabaqāt al-Mu'abbirīn* by al-Ḥasan ibn Ḥusayn al-Khallāl (before 400/1000), which al-Nābulusī summarizes in his dream text *Ta'fīr*, 355. On al-Khallāl, see Fahd, "The Dream in Medieval Islamic Society," 359. Al-Khallāl's biographical text of dream interpreters comprises fifteen categories (*ṭabaqah*), bestowing top ranking to monotheistic prophets, such as Abraham, Joseph, and Muḥammad. The Medina Companions of the Prophet and their followers occupy the second and third categories. Interpreters from the earliest generations of pious Muslim scholars (*al-fuqahā'*) and ascetics (*al-zuhhād*) follow these, then Arab-speaking master interpreters, authoring the earliest written texts of dreams. In this category, the ancient Greek interpreter Artimedorous and the Arab speaking Ibn Sīrīn rank the highest. Philosophers and physicians versed in the Hellenistic tradition come next in importance, followed by famous interpreters from the Jewish, Christian, and Magian religious traditions. Lastly, Arab pagan interpreters, soothsayers (*al-kahanah*) and specialists in physiognomy (*al-firāsah*) are ranked in the lowest categories. A special status seems to be bestowed on Greek interpreters in this hierarchy, for they are ranked above their Jewish, Christian, and Magian counterparts, and honored with a category separate from other pagan interpreters. This is an implicit recognition on the part of Arab interpreters of the importance





While Ibn Sīrīn's and Ibn Shāhīn's dream texts demonstrate that pre-Islamic Arab, Greek, and Persian master interpreters were incorporated as authoritative sources, a monotheistic, and more particularly, an Arab-Islamic preference is to be noted. Understandably, Arab Muslim interpreters used their own cultural iconography as the primary source for interpreting dreams encoded in the Arabic language. This may be readily seen in the primacy given to the Quran and hadith, to classical Arabic poetry, and to popular sayings (*al-amthāl al-sā'idah*, *al-amthāl al-mubtadhalah*).<sup>20</sup> Yet this did not preclude dream interpreters from freely using the wisdom and knowledge of ancient masters, such as Artemidorous, for they continued to believe that these classical traditions conveyed universal truths about human dreams and experiences. This is evident not only from the numerous bibliographical references to be found in our dream texts, but also from what dream specialists say about the ancient principles of interpretation. Ibn Sīrīn tells us that "the ancient principles of dream interpretation (*uṣūl al-ru'yā al-qadīmah*) have not changed, but it is people's conditions that constantly change with regard to their daily worries, manners, and their preference for the mundane as opposed to the sacred."<sup>21</sup> Likewise, but much later, al-Nābulusī modestly states that his work is simply a synthesis of earlier texts, to which he added little.<sup>22</sup> Despite this respect for early authority, interpreters seem to have been equally aware that interpreting dream symbols was not a fixed or mechanical exercise. For we are told that "dream interpreters invented innumerable ways of interpretation which are always subject to new additions, depending on the knowledge of the interpreter, his sharp perception and intuition."<sup>23</sup> Two complementary views may be seen here, one respectful of the ancient tradition, the other giving more leeway to the creativity of the individual interpreter. To come up with the best interpretation possible, the interpreter was probably expected to combine both, his creative intuition and his thorough knowledge of interpretive principles.

Not all dreams possess a predictive value, for many were classified as muddled dreams unworthy of the interpretive endeavor. Dreams of predictive value were classified into two categories: the non-allegorical dream, which is straightforward and does not need interpretation, and the allegorical dream which makes use of ambiguous symbols to convey its message. It is the latter type of dream that demanded the attention of the interpreter. But this was no simple matter, for symbols often conveyed rich and contradictory meanings. The interpreter's awareness of the elusive nature of a symbol, one that defies precise and simple

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of Greek influence on their tradition.

<sup>20</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 3–4.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>22</sup>Al-Nābulusī, *Ta'fīr*, 351.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 8; see also Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 6.



definitions, explains the relative flexibility adopted in decoding it, and thus it was agreed that more than one interpretation could always be possible. While interpreters assumed the principle that a symbol must in some way be related to the meaning, as connoisseurs of culture, they also recognized that symbols did not possess fixed intrinsic meanings, and therefore they perceived them as culturally specific constructs. The interpreter came to understand this to be an important working principle. Thus in his discussion on how to interpret dream symbols, al-Nābulusī stresses the significance of the cultural factor, which in turn is defined by such variables as geographical location and climate:

Know that the soil of each country is different from others, due to the differences in water, wind, and geographical location. This explains why the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of every group of interpreters from the community of unbelievers and Muslims differs according to variations in character and geography. For example, if a dreamer living in a hot country dreams of snow or ice, this signifies famine and high prices, but in a cold country, it may signify prosperity and wealth.<sup>24</sup>

In another passage al-Nābulusī stresses the significance of cultural difference, pointing to variations in religious morality and people's customs (*'ādāt al-nās*) as important principles to be considered in interpreting symbols:

For example, if one dreams of wine, it is interpreted as illegal wealth for those who consider it a forbidden object, but as a blessing for those who do not. Similarly, if a woman dreams that she is committing adultery in the mosque, this would signify a great evil or misfortune in Muslim culture. In contrast, the same image in Indian religious culture would signify worship and virtue. This is because the sexual act in Indian culture is linked to the sacred, and hence receives approval.<sup>25</sup>

Here al-Nābulusī aptly demonstrates how symbols are culturally constructed, confirming the presence of a dynamic, interactive relationship between symbolic language and the social ground which informs it.

The idiosyncratic factor is another important principle in interpreting dream symbols. Relevant personal details relating to the dreamer's life must be revealed

<sup>24</sup>Al-Nābulusī, *Ta'fīr*, 5'

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 360–61.



in order for the dream to be aptly interpreted. As with culture, the meaning of a symbol may also differ along idiosyncratic or personal lines. The pomegranate, for instance, may signify multiple meanings. Round and impregnated with seeds, the fruit is readily used as a symbol of femininity. Thus for the sultan, the pomegranate in his dream signifies a city to rule; for the single man, it is a wife or concubine; while for the pregnant woman, it is a female baby.<sup>26</sup> Sultan to city, man to wife or concubine, mother to baby, are all pairs in which the first party dominates the second, revealing the constructed power dynamics in play.

Interpreters also resorted to interpreting the linguistic signifier (*al-ta'wīl bi-al-asmā'*) as a way of understanding dream symbols; thus we are told that if one dreams of a bird with a feminine name like *al-ansīyah*, a derivative from the Arabic root *uns* (intimacy), it is interpreted as a symbol of a friendly woman.<sup>27</sup> However, interpreting the signified meaning (*al-ta'wīl bi-al-ma'ná*)<sup>28</sup> seems to have been the most commonly-used method, primarily mediated through the logic of analogy (*al-qiyās*).<sup>29</sup> A mountain in a dream may thus be likened to the erect phallus, not because of its lexical root, but because of the shared attribute of erectness.

In addition, dream interpreters adopted an overall system of taxonomy which proved quite useful in examining dream symbols, and which further informs us of their methodological principles of interpretation. Such taxonomy is made up of three differentiating categories: genus (*al-jins*); type (*al-ṣinf*); and behavioral nature (*al-ṭab'*).<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, trees, animals, and birds may be classified under different genus categories. The latter is further sub-divided into two more categories: type and nature. What follows is an example of how the palm tree may be interpreted. Given their erectness, all trees (as genus) are constructed as masculine symbols, and since the palm tree grows in the territory of the Arabs, it is used to signify an Arab male. To define the behavioral traits of the palm tree, interpreters refer to Quranic iconography, which describes the tree as noble and giving. Hence the palm tree in a dream is said to signify a generous and pleasant-natured Arab man. In Table 1, I would like to demonstrate the rationale of this taxonomy and its significance in relation to the classification of birds, which will be examined later in greater detail.

<sup>26</sup>For more details on the multiple meanings of the pomegranate, see Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 298.

<sup>28</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 8.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 10–11.



**Table 1: Bird Taxonomy**

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<b>Genus:</b>	<b>Bird</b>	
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<b>Type:</b>	<b>Predatory</b>	<b>Non-predatory</b>
	Falcon	Dove
<b>Nature:</b>	swift	slow
	aggressive	peaceful
	powerful	domesticated

Here we see how the bird as a genus is classified according to two different main types, predatory and non-predatory. Perceived as swift, aggressive, and powerful, the falcon is classified as predatory, while perceived as peaceful, slow, and domesticated, the dove is classified as non-predatory. What is more relevant to our analysis is to explore how the text uses such behavioral patterns in constructing the gender of birds. In defining docility as a feminine trait, our interpreters consistently construct the dove as feminine. Conversely, constructing aggressiveness as a masculine trait, the falcon is assigned masculinity. Clearly, such an interpretation reflects the interpreter's cultural assumptions with regard to gender roles, and confirms the close connection between symbols and the cultural ground that informs them. The examples of the falcon and the dove are also useful in demonstrating what medieval Arab-Muslim culture perceives to be the "normative" feminine and masculine behavioral traits. Moreover, the construction of such a sharp opposition between the essential feminine and masculine traits demonstrates how this culture defines the constitutive difference between femininity and masculinity.

Further examination of how the dream text genders other symbols shows that it is not always immediately clear why different symbols such as the horse, lion, mountain, tree, and predatory birds are all used to signify masculinity. Here we need to understand how the symbolic language of dreams creates relations of resemblance or association between objects that may seem far apart. Symbols such as the lion, wolf, and predatory birds share the qualities of power, swift movement, and aggressiveness, and therefore are constructed as masculine traits which constitute the cultural model of masculinity. Similarly, the horse, being closely associated with masculine martial behavior in medieval Arab culture, is used to signify masculinity. In the same vein, given that mountain, tree, spear, and dagger share the qualities of hardness and erectness, they are readily likened to the erect male sexual organ, and therefore are constructed as symbols of masculinity.



In such cases analogy is based on either resemblance or association.

Woman is also symbolized by diverse objects, such as the saddle, ship, glove, *sirwāl*, non-predatory birds, and cattle. The saddle and ship metaphors are likened to the image of the conventional female sexual posture in relation to the male, while the glove is likened to the enveloping womb of the female. The *sirwāl*, typical attire of Arab-Muslim medieval women, having become so closely associated with the female body, is metonymically used to signify woman. The symbol of the cow is commonly used as the archetypal feminine symbol, evoking the female role of the good, docile, and nurturing mother.<sup>31</sup> Dream interpreters use docility and gentleness as essential behavioral traits of the female, and thus animals that exhibit "passive" behavior are almost always used as symbols for women and occasionally for children. Interestingly, the inverse notion of the predatory woman may also be detected in the dream text, and as we shall see in the following section, the symbol of the wild and untamed female bird (signifying woman) seems to always receive negative recognition.

#### THE STRUCTURING OF THE BIRD KINGDOM

The bird often appears as a favorite topos in the medieval Arabic literary tradition.<sup>32</sup> Here, I would like to examine how our interpreters constructed the bird kingdom as a sort of metaphorical reflection of human social hierarchy, and how they constructed correspondences between behavioral patterns on the one hand, and

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>There are numerous examples of classical Arabic and Persian works which use bird or animal motifs in their literary works. *Kalīlah wa-Dimnah*, a literary fable in which animals play the role of human actors, became a classic shortly after its translation into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa'. The famous ninth-century scholar and writer al-Jāhīz also wrote another Arabic classic on animals which he entitled *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (The book of animals) and which is considered a masterpiece of both Arabic literature and zoology. Medieval Sufi writers often used animals and birds as important metaphors in their spiritual teachings. Persian Sufis such as 'Aṭṭār and Rūmī are important in this respect; the former wrote a brilliant work devoted totally to the quest of the birds to discover the Divine, which he entitled *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* (The conference of the birds). Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' also used animals as allegorical characters in their pedagogical treatises, the most famous of these being the one entitled *Tadā'ī al-Ḥayawān* (The complaint of animals), which Denys Johnson-Davies has translated into English as *The Island of Animals* (Austin, 1994). In addition there is also a rich zoological literary tradition that deals with the animal kingdom, and in which Arab-Muslim zoologists used cultural and scientific data to describe the animals. An example of such classical works is the one written by the fourteenth-century zoologist Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Qazwīnī, which he entitled *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt* (The wonders of created beings); the fifteenth-century author Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-Damīrī wrote another classical zoological work, entitled *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān* (The life of the animal). Such zoological studies contain large sections on birds, which also include an examination of the symbolic significance of birds in dreams. The works of both al-Qazwīnī and al-Damīrī are available in one edition (Cairo, 1978).



gender or social roles on the other. By way of introduction, I would like to give a brief synthesis of the principles of bird interpretation (*uṣūl ta'wīl al-ṭayr*) as expounded by both Ibn Sīrīn and Ibn Shāhīn.<sup>33</sup>

Anonymous birds (*al-ṭuyūr al-majhūlah*) are variously interpreted as the human spirit, the angel of death, or simply as human deeds. Given the taboo against usage of the figurative to signify the Divine, Muslim interpreters have censored this ancient symbolic meaning in their text.

The behavioral nature of birds, and sometimes their size, are used to determine both their gender and social status. Predatory birds in general are gendered as masculine, and predictably, the most powerful or aggressive of these birds often denote the highest social status. On the other hand, non-predatory birds may be gendered as both masculine and feminine, but some are viewed as more feminine and others as more masculine. Birds that devour dead corpses, or steal things that belong to others, signify outcasts or criminals who subvert social boundaries, and thus signify deviant masculine types. Small size birds may sometimes signify lowly or parasitic status; thus they are the lowliest (*al-arādhīl*) of the bird kingdom. They are also interpreted as female slaves, servants, or children, but more frequently as male rather than female children.

Birds that fly close to the ground, and hence are more easily domesticated, are almost always gendered as feminine. Water birds are mostly gendered as feminine, but they also signify nobility, wealth, and fertility, for they control two domains, air and water.

Movement or flying indicate acquisition or loss of status, travel, or death, depending on the bird's gender. Birds that possess the capacity of flying long distances are exclusively gendered as male birds. Conversely, a female bird flying away from home may indicate divorce or separation, or death, hence loss of status for the male.

Possession of a large numbers of birds may indicate both power and wealth. Similarly, their flesh, bones, and feathers indicate economic status.

The act of slaughtering or cutting a female bird, a common dream motif in our bird text, signifies the deflowering of a female virgin in the sexual act. The slaughtering of the female bird is understood as a masculine act of conquest of the female body. Conversely, the slaughtering or capturing of a male bird signifies the defeat of a male opponent, hence equating male sexuality with power and conquest.

Catching or hunting a female bird signifies marriage or union with a woman. But if this involves a male bird it signifies victory, power, and wealth for the victorious male hunter. A similar interpretive rationale may be detected here, however, since interpreters also interpret marriage as power and wealth for the

<sup>33</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 303–4, 356.



male. Thus, for the male hunter, catching a female or a male bird carries similar connotations in terms of social status.

Bird eggs are interpreted variously as women, children, and family; a large number of eggs may signify wealth.

Color is often used to signify social status; thus the whiteness of a dove or a duck may signify high social status.

Drawing on both dream texts, I have a sample of seventy-six different bird types, constituting what our interpreters call the bird kingdom. Bird entries differ greatly in size, and depending on the symbolic significance of the bird in question, these may vary between two words and a paragraph. The crow, though perceived as the least favored predatory bird by both Ibn Sīrīn and Ibn Shāhīn, occupies the longest entry in their bird narrative, for it is assigned the significant social role of the extreme "other," the archetypal evil male. In collating the two bird texts, I observed that Ibn Shāhīn's narrative is more systematically structured than Ibn Sīrīn's, suggesting perhaps a later textual maturity that is absent in the earlier text. But it may also be that Ibn Shāhīn's membership in the Mamluk establishment could have made him more conscious of the significance of social hierarchy, which in turn becomes reflected in his structuring of the bird kingdom narrative. Both texts, however, seem to assume, and thus reify, some sort of hierarchy in the kingdom of birds, just as would be assumed for human society.

Some difference in bird taxonomy is observed between the two texts. Whereas Ibn Sīrīn's bird text is more or less organized around three categories: wild birds (*al-waḥshīyah*), domestic birds (*al-ahlīyah*), and water-birds (*al-mā'īyah*), Ibn Shāhīn's taxonomy seems to be based more on aggressive power and its absence. The latter's entire system of bird classification appears to be based on whether birds have the power to aggress or not. Thus predatory birds (*al-ṭuyūr al-jawāriḥ*) occupy the top category, followed by non-predatory birds (*al-ṭuyūr al-khārijah 'an al-jawāriḥ*), and finally by the category of small birds (*al-'aṣāfīr*).<sup>34</sup> Bird power is primarily defined by such traits as size, physical strength, aggressiveness, and swift capacity of movement, as well as intelligence. It follows then that birds exhibiting these traits are classified as the most powerful and deserving of high status. More important for our gender analysis is the fact that the most powerful birds are almost always defined as symbols of masculinity, while those least exhibiting of such powers signify femininity, or persons of lower social status, such as servants, slaves, youth, or children, confirming that woman as a social category is perceived to be of a lower status than man. In the following statement, Ibn Sīrīn aptly demonstrates how the socially constructed informs the bird narrative:

<sup>34</sup>See Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 295.



The bird is a man among men, whose status corresponds to a specific bird among birds, depending on his capacity, weaponry, power, feathers, and his ability to fly and soar in the sky. Known birds are therefore interpreted according to their power. Thus large and predatory birds signify the kings, the leaders, the notables, the scholars, and the wealthy. As for corpse-eaters, like the crow, the kite, and the vulture, these are trespassers, thieves, and evil. Water birds signify noble people (*ashraf*), who obtain high status through two powers, the power of water and wind. They may also signify male travelers by land or sea. . . . Birds who sing or wail signify people who sing or wail, be they masculine or feminine birds. As for small birds, such as sparrows and nightingales, these are young males.<sup>35</sup>

This allocation of gender or social roles, however, does not seem to be as rigidly defined as Ibn Sīrīn would like us to believe. For on closer analysis we can detect shifting definitions in the gendering process. And while these may not appear to be remarkable in themselves, they allow us to understand the rationale behind such flexibility. Both seem to agree on assigning masculinity to the most powerful of the predatory birds. They disagree only on three predators, which turn out to be the least significant of them. Thus, whereas Ibn Sīrīn assigns neutrality to the owl, Ibn Shāhīn assigns it masculinity. Ibn Sīrīn assigns both femininity and masculinity to the kite, Ibn Shāhīn assigns it masculinity. There is also disagreement on the vulture. Defined as neutral by Ibn Sīrīn, it is described as a stupid and useless woman by Ibn Shāhīn (*al-mar'ah al-balhā' al-qalīlat al-fā'idah*), suggesting a negativity with regard to predatory birds gendered in the feminine.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise with non-predatory birds, out of seventeen cases, five are differently gendered by our two interpreters. For instance, the gendering of the sandgrouse (*al-quṭāh*) is inverted; Ibn Sīrīn assigns it femininity, the other masculinity.<sup>37</sup> The case of the pheasant (*al-tadruj*) is also interesting for us, for Ibn Sīrīn tells us that this bird underwent transformation from a domestic to a big wild bird, hence changing from a female to a male bird.<sup>38</sup> On the whole, it may be argued that a sharp gender dichotomy is mostly reproduced with regard to the most aggressive or the most docile birds. However, when bird traits seem to be more ambiguous in

<sup>35</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 151, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 298; Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 148.

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 298.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 147, 149.





terms of defining gender construction, this bipolarity becomes less clear, permitting simultaneous gendering, flexibility, and even reversals in roles.

### **PREDATORY BIRDS**

As mentioned earlier, hierarchy is most emphasized among predatory birds, especially by Ibn Shāhīn, who carefully places the masculine-gendered falcon at the top and the feminine vulture at the bottom.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, the vulture in Ibn Sīrīn's text is not even given a specified place within the constructed hierarchy of predatory birds, for even though it is considered a predator, it is textually placed in the midst of non-predatory birds.<sup>40</sup> In total, out of sixteen predatory birds, eleven are identified as masculine, three as feminine, and two as masculine and feminine simultaneously. Both interpreters define the most powerful of the predatory birds as royal masculine archetypes. We are told that they are the kings and masters of the bird kingdom. Ranked at the top of this category are the three predatory birds: the falcon, the eagle, and the hawk. The textual language used by our interpreters is noteworthy, for the Arabic terms *mulūk wa-asyād al-tuyūr* (the kings and lords of birds) clearly reproduce the same linguistic terms that are used to refer to kingship and nobility in medieval Arab-Muslim society. A number of common traits describe these masculine-gendered predatory birds, which appear to be the very same traits constituting the male stereotype: physical power, aggressiveness, courage, swift and powerful movement, honor, respect, spirituality, and intelligence.<sup>41</sup> However, parallel to these positive traits of masculinity, there is an underside that is negatively perceived in the text. This is detected in the usage of highly negative traits to describe most of these masculine-gendered birds, such as stubbornness, injustice, oppressiveness, deceit, religiosity, and theft.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, both dream texts seem to view masculine power in suspicious terms, reflecting a strong fear of the powerful male figure whose abuse of power may violate the patriarchal norms of society. Two of the three royal birds appear to be constructed as symbols of degenerate power, whose strength is based more on oppressive physical force and usurpation than on justice. In this bird imagery, the ancient link between divinity and kingship seems to have been lost, revealing instead a low opinion of kingship. The eagle, though, deserves special attention, for it uniquely combines the attributes of power, honor, and spirituality, making it a more appropriate symbol of ideal royal masculinity. Absence of these royal birds as signifiers of the ancient goddess-queen must be noted, for these powerful

<sup>39</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 296.

<sup>40</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 148.

<sup>41</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 295–96; Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146–47.

<sup>42</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146.



bird types appear to signify exclusively masculine as opposed to feminine power, suggesting that royal power in medieval Arab-Muslim culture was ideally perceived in masculine terms only.

While the eagle is constructed as the ideal masculine prototype within the kingdom of predatory birds, the crow is depicted as the male villain par excellence. Both dream interpreters employ strong negative terms to describe the crow, for it commits the worst of social crimes: trespassing and disrupting social boundaries. It is described as a murderer, an adulterer, an unjust sultan, and a thief. Furthermore, its name (*al-ghurāb*) signifies, through its etymology, that it is the ultimate "other" or stranger (*al-gharīb*), whose presence signifies corruption in both the domestic and public spaces. Ibn Sīrīn tell us that "if a man dreams that a crow is in his house, it signifies both an attack from the sultan and a man betraying him with his wife."<sup>43</sup> Why is the crow chosen to signify the archetypal male villain? It turns out that in actuality the bird eats anything and attacks birds' nests to eat their eggs and young ones.<sup>44</sup> Though a large variety of traits are used to describe the crow, the bird is rarely assigned femininity. It represents a negative masculinity which violates social boundaries, and hence its denunciation in the two dream texts.<sup>45</sup>

Predatory birds gendered in the feminine signify the prototype of the evil or the useless woman. However, woman-as-predator makes only fleeting appearances in the bird texts under study, and when she does, she is portrayed negatively. Given that social norms equate ideal femininity with passivity, this may explain why Ibn Shāhīn establishes a direct correlation between the trait of wildness and the negative traits of evilness or stupidity in woman. As we have seen earlier, Ibn Shāhīn defines the vulture (*al-rikmah*) as a stupid and useless woman. As for the gold crest (*al-ṣafāwah*) it signifies for him a chaotic woman who commits ugly actions, particularly if the bird is wild (*mudabbirah sayyi'ah, dhāt af'āl qabīḥah khuṣūṣan in kānat barrīyah*).<sup>46</sup> If wild predatory birds are free-moving and able to fly long distances, hence uncontrollable, we can understand why they are more readily constructed as symbols signifying the feminine figure of disorder, depicted as evil, treacherous, disastrous, disorganized, useless, sinful, stupid, and finally,

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>44</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 297.

<sup>45</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 296. Other masculine-gendered predatory birds used as symbols signifying different male types are the petty prince, the irreligious scholar, the thief, and the soldier; most share the essential trait of physical aggression. Once again, adjectives describing these figures appear to be predominantly negative; they are depicted as envious, corrupt, destructive, sinful, vain, untrustworthy, and lazy. Cleverness and self-control seem to be the only two positively-constructed traits in this group of male predatory birds.

<sup>46</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 296.



predictive of misfortune.<sup>47</sup> For both interpreters, however, predatory birds generally signify human figures of power and evil, causing tyranny and brutality in the world (*al-zulmah wa-al-ghashmah*). Such acts, however, are predominantly perceived as man's rather than woman's domain of activities.<sup>48</sup>

### NON-PREDATORY BIRDS

Non-predatory birds are also gendered according to what is socially perceived as feminine or masculine, belonging to either high or low social status. Among the masculine-gendered birds, the cock, the peacock, and the griffin signify the status of petty kings and the wealthy. Similarly, among the feminine-gendered birds, the dove, duck, and goose signify women of wealth and nobility.<sup>49</sup> In between, there is a wide variety of birds, representing various urban social classes. Dream language has even invented bird symbols signifying the riffraff of society (*al-arādhil*). Tables 2 and 3 are specifically constructed to demonstrate which of these non-predatory birds are gendered as masculine or feminine.

**Table 2: Non-Predatory Masculine-Gendered Birds**

Bird Type	Signified Activity	Attributes
Cock ( <i>al-dīk</i> )	petty prince, religious scholar, muezzin, soldier, chief male slave	courageous, honest, pious, evil
Starling ( <i>al-zarzūr</i> )	male traveler, ascetic	irreligious, untrustworthy, liar, infidel, thin
Hoopoe ( <i>al-hudhud</i> )	male traveler, scholar	perceptive, knowledgeable, highly professional, irreligious
Blackbird ( <i>al-shuḥrūr</i> )	ascetic monk, captive lover	
Parrot ( <i>al-babaghā'</i> )	slave merchant, philosopher	unjust, liar

<sup>47</sup> See cases of other female birds signifying evil and misfortune in Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 296.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 298–303.



Stork ( <i>al-luqluq</i> )	noble man, weak king, peasant, guardian, ascetic	harmless, respectable, wise, strange
Partridge ( <i>al-ya'qūb</i> )	man of war, soldier	
Palm dove ( <i>al-dubsī</i> )	preacher	
Swan ( <i>al-tamm</i> )	petty king	
Quail ( <i>al-summānī</i> )	male servant, male youth ( <i>ghulām</i> )	

Table 2 depicts masculine-gendered birds signifying males who represent a wide range of urban professions, such as the petty prince or king, the soldier, the scholar, the intellectual, the ascetic monk, the philosopher, the preacher, the muezzin, the traveler, the merchant, the broker, as well as the slave and servant. Only in one instance do we encounter the solitary figure of the peasant, betraying the urban bias of our texts. Male figures of high power and wealth appear less prominently here than they did among predatory bird types. Instead, we see a predominance of the intellectual and religious professions among these non-predatory birds. The gendering of the long-distance traveling bird in the masculine deserves special attention. Though delicate in size and gentle in behavior, birds such as the hoopoe and the starling are known to fly long distances, and hence are gendered in the masculine, again demonstrating how the text reflects the normative in gendering social space. Both dream interpreters appear to reinforce the notion of public space as the legitimate and primary domain of the male. With the exception of the starling that is said to signify a thin man, little interest is expressed in describing the physical attributes of the male body. More interest is reflected in attributes reflecting economic, social, and ethnic status. Thus some figures appear as rich, noble, powerful, poor, or of slave origin, and are simultaneously depicted in ethnic terms such as the Iraqi, the Arab, and the Persian.<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to note here that the appearance of such varied ethnic categories seems to be more characteristic of Ibn Sīrīn's text than Ibn Shāhīn's, reflecting perhaps the existence of a wider range of ethnicity in Ibn Sīrīn's socio-historical context.

<sup>50</sup>For more details on ethnic identities, see Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 146–51, and Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 295–305.



**Table 3: Non-Predatory Feminine-Gendered Birds**

<b>Bird</b>	<b>Profession/status</b>	<b>Attributes</b>
Dove ( <i>al-ḥamāmah</i> )	slave, noble	virtuous, good, faithful to spouse, most beloved by man
Goose ( <i>al-awz</i> )	noble, wealthy	corpulent, fertile body
Duck ( <i>al-baṭṭ</i> )	white: noble, wealthy black: slave	fertile
Chicken ( <i>al-dajājah</i> )	slave, domestic servant	beautiful, frivolous, virgin
Ring-dove ( <i>al-fākhīyah</i> )	--	evil, unfriendly, defective in religion, domineering, liar, unveiled around people
Partridge ( <i>al-ḥijlā</i> )	slave	beautiful woman, unfriendly, wild
<i>Al-ansīyah</i> (?)		friendly, sharp, coherent mind, good, harmless
Woodpecker ( <i>al-shufrūq</i> )	rich	beautiful
Sandpiper ( <i>al-ṭīṭawá</i> )	slave	virgin
<i>Al-ḥurayrah</i> (?)	slave	black
Turtledove ( <i>al-qumrīyah</i> )	--	pious
Dipper ( <i>al-ghaṭṭās</i> )	--	religious

An almost equal number of non-predatory birds are gendered as feminine by our two interpreters. These seem to be depicted more in terms of their character traits and physical attributes, rather than by their vocational activities. The few, but most typical, female activities that appear in this table are the wife, slave, servant, and the “beloved” of man, reflecting characters defined in relation to the male and



the household. The figure of the wealthy woman is signified by such birds as the goose, the duck, and the dove. Color seems to be used as a sign of status; thus in the case of the duck, white stands for the noble and wealthy woman, whereas black stands for a fertile slave. As with the masculine-gendered birds, feminine traits are described in oppositional terms: virtuous, pious, good, faithful, and friendly, as opposed to frivolous, unfriendly, evil, domineering, unveiled, and irreligious. In only one case is she described by her intellectual capacity: the *ansīyah* signifies a woman with a sharp and coherent mind. In contrast to the male birds, depictions of the body abound in this small sample, revealing an emphasis on the female body and its sexuality. Thus it is described as beautiful, fertile, corpulent, unveiled, and most importantly as virginal. Male dreams depicted in the bird narrative seem to confirm that virginity is a highly prized trait in the female. Imagery of possessing, hunting, or slaughtering the virginal slave or woman abounds in dreams of domestic birds.<sup>51</sup> And as we shall see later, this is also a common feature in the dream chapters dealing with man, woman, slaves, and sexuality.

Among the feminine-gendered birds, both the dove and the streptopelia or wild dove (*al-fākhīyah*) deserve special attention, for they are constructed as opposite feminine prototypes. The dove, archaic symbol of feminine divinity and the spirit, is perceived here as the noble, virtuous woman, and most importantly, as the good and faithful wife. The wild dove on the other hand is constructed as the evil woman par excellence. Arab zoologists depict this bird as a liar that possesses a sharp voice and is most feared by snakes.<sup>52</sup> Like the predatory bird *al-ṣafāwah* whom we have encountered earlier, *al-fākhīyah* is described in negative terms, as a woman who is untamed, irreligious, and who does not cover her body before strangers. But most importantly, she is a woman possessing an unrestrained tongue (*salīyah*). It is interesting to note that the word *salāyah* comes from the verb *tasallaḥa*, and it is also related to the noun *sulṭān*. In contrast to masculine power, primarily defined in our bird text in terms of physical force and aggression, this feminine trait of *salāyah* (absence of restraint) is linked to the power of the tongue (*salāyah al-lisān*), a trait that seems to be most feared in women. According to medieval Arabic lexicography a person who possesses *salāyah* is defined as someone who possesses a strong, firm, glib, sharp, loose, and vicious tongue.<sup>53</sup> Thus the aggressive-tongued woman is perceived as a powerful and therefore dangerous character; so threatening is she to man that elsewhere in our dream text we are told that "if a man dreams of a woman who is *salīyah* his dream signifies that he

<sup>51</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 300, 302; Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 150.

<sup>52</sup>Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān*, 2:135.

<sup>53</sup>Muḥammad ibn Ya‘qūb al-Fīrūzābādī, *Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ* (Cairo, 1911), 2:363.



will be killed.<sup>54</sup> Inasmuch as dream language seems also to establish a close correspondence between the tongue and the phallus as symbols of sexual power,<sup>55</sup> the *fākhītah* becomes most feared because her “long tongue” may be considered as a weapon that corresponds to and therefore threatens male sexual power. Both the *ṣafāwah* and the *fākhītah* signify two of the most threatening feminine traits, wildness and verbal aggressiveness, and are therefore perceived as disruptive figures that contest normative gender roles.<sup>56</sup> The *fākhītah* and the *ṣafāwah*, however, are more exceptions to the rule, for birds that are gendered as feminine typically share the common trait of gentleness, and hence are constructed as symbols of domesticity. Among these, the dove, duck, goose, and chicken represent the archetypal feminine sacrificial birds, restricted in mobility, and most ubiquitous within the domestic space.<sup>57</sup>

Non-predatory birds may also be simultaneously gendered as masculine and feminine. Understanding the rationale behind this simultaneous gendering is equally important because it may help us to find out why our interpreters no longer observe the sharp dividing lines between birds exclusively gendered as masculine or feminine. In Table 4, I would like to correlate these simultaneous traits so as to examine the blurred or gray areas in gender construction.

**Table 4: Simultaneous Gendering of Non-Predatory Birds**

Bird	Male Attributes	Female Attributes
Pheasant ( <i>al-tadruj</i> )	deceitful	beautiful
Griffin ( <i>al-‘anqā’</i> )	heretic, noble easygoing, reasonable	beautiful noble, reasonable, pleasant
Francolin ( <i>al-durrāj</i> )	mamluk, treacherous, infidel	Persian, treacherous
Ostrich ( <i>al-na‘āmah</i> )	eunuch	bedouin

<sup>54</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 129.

<sup>55</sup>See Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings*, section on the tongue, 421; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 79–80.

<sup>56</sup>Oberhelman discusses the image of the “talkative woman” and how it provokes men; see “Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power,” 92. Also, in her study *Tales of Sex and Violence*, 102, O’Flaherty discusses the threatening power of “long-tongued” women depicted in Vedic texts. We may also find a similar attitude to the “long-tongued” woman in Shaykh Nafzāwī’s classical text on sexuality, *The Perfumed Garden*, trans. Richard Burton (New Jersey, 1964), 37, 109.

<sup>57</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 302; for other examples, see *ibid.*, 300.



Nightingale I ( <i>al-‘andalīb</i> )	singer, Quranic reciter	eloquent and pleasant
Nightingale II ( <i>al-bulbul</i> )	rich, Quranic reciter	rich woman
Nightingale III ( <i>al-hazār</i> )	boy singer, Quranic reciter, eloquent cultured scholar	good looking, good voice, slave singer
Swallow ( <i>al-sunūnū</i> )	male slave, Quranic reciter, pious man of culture, rich, stupid	slave, rich
Peacock ( <i>al-ṭāwūs</i> )	noble Persian or Persian king	beautiful noble Persian, slave girl, corrupt woman
Sparrow ( <i>al-‘usfūr</i> )	big, dangerous man, rich and of high status	beautiful
Pelican ( <i>al-baja‘ah</i> )	judge	uncouth, gluttonous
Bustard ( <i>al-ḥubārā</i> )	wealthy, generous, gluttonous	butcher, wealthy
Bat ( <i>al-khuffāsh</i> )	ascetic monk	sorceress
Parrot ( <i>al-durrah</i> )	good servant, ascetic	virgin

Table 4 shows that more activities and professions are assigned to the male as opposed to the female of the same bird type. In addition to some male figures of authority, such as the petty king, the vizier, the judge, and the soldier, we encounter a few male figures of wealth and noble status. But what is worth observing here is the prevalence of male figures of cultural, spiritual, and artistic inclinations, such as the singer, the Quranic reciter, the heretic, the eloquent scholar, the eunuch, and the ascetic.<sup>58</sup> Figures of a lower status may also be found among these male types. More female vocational activities appear in this sample. In addition to the

<sup>58</sup>See Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 148–51; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 298–303.





wife, the beloved of man, the domestic slave, and servant, we encounter for the first time the female slave singer, the female butcher (*al-laḥḥāmah*), and the sorceress, figures that may be considered of a lower social status. Table 4 also shows that beauty and other physical descriptions recur as the most common description of the female figure. The dream text establishes a close link between the trait of female physical immodesty (*lā tastatir amāma al-nās*) on the one hand, and corruption or treachery on the other, suggesting that the unveiled woman is perceived as a corrupt figure in her social surroundings. This is confirmed elsewhere in the chapter on animals in our dream texts, where the she-goat is singled out as signifying a corrupt woman who shamelessly exhibits her body.<sup>59</sup> Different social status and ethnic categories appear to closely intersect here; thus the female is depicted variously as wealthy, noble, or poor, as well as of bedouin, Arab, or Persian origins. Once again, Ibn Sīrīn's bird text makes more references to ethnicity than does Ibn Shāhīn's.

A closer examination of these simultaneously-gendered bird types help us in understanding how feminine and masculine traits correlate. Whereas the male bat is cast as an ascetic (*nāsik*), his female counterpart is cast as a sorceress (*sāḥirah*), assigning a dangerous spirituality to woman, but a more respectable one to man. Likewise, the bird text casts the male pelican as a judge, but denies this to his female counterpart; instead she is perceived as an uncouth and gluttonous woman. Equally interesting is the case of the parrot, which, as a male bird, signifies a religious or ascetic man, but as a female bird, signifies a virgin. This parallelism between female virginity and male asceticism is confirmed elsewhere in the bird text, allowing us to observe how the dream text differently perceives male and female states of purity.<sup>60</sup> Table 4 also suggests a correlation between the feminine attribute of beauty and masculine attributes such as deceit, heresy, innovation, wealth, and danger, revealing a fear and suspicion of physical beauty as an attribute of female power. In some cases, though, similar traits are assigned to both the male and female bird; thus the *hazār*, a type of nightingale, signifies both a boy singer and a female slave singer, indicating a close connection between lower social status and the profession of singing, as well as the equally low status of children and women. Equating women with children is a stereotype which is repeatedly found in our dream texts, and which is confirmed by the insistence of existing legal and social norms within medieval Arab-Muslim culture that both children and women must have male guardianship. Finally, if this bird sample generally represents men and women of less privileged social status, then it is

<sup>59</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 139.

<sup>60</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 302. For comparative purposes see *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society*, ed. Josine Blok and Peter Mason (Amsterdam, 1987).



easier to understand why such birds may be gendered either way, for the social stakes do not seem to be so high.

### SEXUALITY AND DYNAMICS OF POWER

How do men's dreams about sexuality and marital dynamics reveal their obsessions, fears, and anxieties? In the remaining sections of this article I would like to further examine the bird narrative along with those directly related to human actors, so as to explore points of convergence and divergence between them. Men's dreams relating to sexuality and marital dynamics seem to be generally centered on the male agent, and are structured around the act of penetration. A close correlation between social power and sexual posture can be clearly observed in reading sexual dreams—this is so with regard to both the heterosexual and the homosexual act. Following their own social parameters, our dream interpreters view the male partner who initiates the act of penetration as the one who is in a position of power or in a position to receive benefit. Difference or sameness of the biological sexes of the persons engaged in the sexual act does not seem to be a crucial factor in interpreting the sexual dream; what is more important here is to determine its predictive significance for the dreamer. To determine the predictive value of the dream, actors—regardless of their sex—are classified according to two basic categories, the active (*al-fā'il or al-nākih*) and the passive (*al-maf'ūl or al-mankūh*). But while the dream chapters on sexuality and marriage seem to generally assume a relationship of dominance in the heterosexual act, where the male is normally expected to be the sexually dominant partner, this is not so in the homosexual act. As will be seen, with the exception of pederasty, homosexual acts are interpreted alternately in terms of power and social benefit, receiving little negative judgment on the part of the interpreter.

Numerous passages in the bird text reflect the all-important male desire to marry, inherit, or receive wealth from a rich wife. Here, Ibn Shāhīn reminds us that water birds, primarily gendered as feminine, "are better off than any of the other birds in dreams; their flesh, feathers, and bones signify great wealth and status."<sup>61</sup> But it is the female duck that is viewed as the best signifier of wealth and prosperity in the bird text: "the white duck is wealth or a rich woman. . . . Thus if a man dreams that he slaughtered a duck or ate its flesh, he inherits from his wife a lot of money or hoards it."<sup>62</sup> This dream motif is reiterated in the case of other female birds as well.<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising therefore to find that possession of a

<sup>61</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 303.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>63</sup>For instance, "if a man dreams that he caught the children of a *fākhitah*, it signifies the birth of male children, and its flesh signifies receiving money from women" (*ibid.*, 300). For other examples of female birds, see the case of the dove, the ostrich, and the griffin, *ibid.*, 299–300.



woman reflects a major desire in men's dreams, for it ultimately signifies increase in his social status and power. This may partly explain why the bird text is replete with images of slaughtering, catching, or hunting female birds.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, if a man dreams of slaughtering, catching, winning, or possessing a male bird, it is interpreted as attaining power or success, vanquishing an enemy, or befriending a man. This seemingly variant interpretation is illustrated in the cock and chicken dream:

If a man dreams that he is fighting a cock and he gets hurt it means he will get hurt by an evil man, if he dreams that he slaughtered a cock, it means the death or sickness of his male slave, and if he dreams that he caught a cock and held it, he will achieve far reaching aims.<sup>65</sup> . . . But if a man dreams that he slaughters a chicken it means that he will marry a virgin female slave.<sup>66</sup>

One may argue, however, that the cock and chicken dreams seem to be equally inspired by the same male desire to attain power, benefit, and high social status. The close link between male sexual potency and attainment of power and status is brilliantly demonstrated by male dreams of the archetypal woman, which are best illustrated in Ibn Sīrīn's narrative of the sexual conquest of the female virgin:

As for deflowering the female virgin, this signifies confronting difficult matters such as meeting sultans, war, sword fighting, conquering the city, digging underground granaries and wells, hunting treasures, *dīwāns*, searching for difficult sciences, hidden wisdom, and entering in all tight matters (*al-umūr al-ḍayyiqah*). Thus if he performs the opening (*fataḥa*) and penetrating (*awlaja*) in his sleep, he succeeds in his quest in his state of awakening. But if his penis goes limp, or its head is hidden, or if he ejaculates without penetration, this signifies that he will receive much harm and his vigor will be weakened.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup>Thus "if a man dreams that he caught (*amsaka*) a partridge it signifies that he will get married . . . and if a man dreams that he cuts (*qaṭa'a*) her, it signifies that he penetrates a virgin female slave" and "if a man dreams that he slaughters (*dhabaḥa*) a *ḥurayrah* (?) it signifies that he will deflower a virgin female slave" (ibid., 300, 299). For other cases, see the chicken, the peacock, the female ostrich, the griffin, the hoopoe, and the starling, ibid., 298, 299, 301, 302.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 300.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>67</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 264.



Woman is perceived here as crucial in defining masculine power. Her sacrifice or conquest seems to be essential in order that man may achieve social greatness and wisdom. But this is also a dream that reflects the thing most feared by men: failure in fulfilling the sexual or sacrificial act, and hence great social harm. Moreover, this dream celebrates man as the phallic conqueror and woman as the object of his conquest. In his dreams she stands for all that he aims for: power, cities, wealth, science, knowledge, and wisdom, and most of all, she is the fulfillment of his sexual and erotic desires. For the male dreamer then, the successful act of female defloration or possession signifies the magical attainment of his desires, and conversely, the failed sexual act signifies great harm and loss of social power.

Linguistic terms denoting the masculine act of conquest or sacrifice in the bird text are also revealing, for the dreamer frequently appears in the act of catching (*amsaka*), killing (*qatala*), slaughtering (*dhabaha*), or hitting (*aṣāba*), an imagery that is reminiscent of the language of the male hunter who masters the act of sacrifice through "slaughtering" or "killing" the female in the sexual act.<sup>68</sup> An equally revealing vocabulary is used in the dream text on the sexual act between man and woman. Here the term commonly used for the heterosexual act is *al-waṭ'* (intercourse) which we are told is analogous to the act of killing (*al-waṭ' ka-al-qatl*); the tool used in such an act is the phallus (*al-dhakar*), likened in dream language to the dagger and the arrow.<sup>69</sup> We are also reminded that sexual intercourse is analogous to man's achievement of desired goals (*al-waṭ' bulūgh al-murād*), because as Ibn Sīrīn states, "it is pleasure and benefit achieved as a result of man's hard work."<sup>70</sup> Moreover, if the erect penis is used as a symbol of male power, the flaccid one is often used as a symbol of powerlessness.<sup>71</sup> One might also add that the significance of the male phallus as an important tool of masculine power is corroborated in other dream texts by the lengthy attention it receives there.<sup>72</sup> The metaphor of deflowering or marrying the virgin appears to take pride of place in man's sexual dream imagery. Here, the virginal slave seems to be more favored than her free-born sister, suggesting perhaps a male preference for the more submissive of the two. The virginal body is assumed to be still intact and therefore uncontaminated, hence, the male who lets its blood can take full possession of it, assuming the uncontested position of master. Not surprisingly, the dove, faithful wife par excellence in the bird text, is used to signify the archetypal metaphor of

<sup>68</sup>On the significance of sacrifice, see O'Flaherty, *Tales of Sex and Violence*, 15–28.

<sup>69</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 263.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>71</sup>See Oberhelman, "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power," 61.

<sup>72</sup>Drawing upon the content of several Arabic classical dream texts, Gouda assigns the longest coverage to the symbol of the phallus. See *Dreams and Their Meanings*, 311–15.



the sacrificial virgin.<sup>73</sup>

The close link between the sexual or marital act and achievement of male social power may be further observed in the dream narrative on marriage. Marriage is perceived as a significant achievement of power (*sultān*), depending on the social status of the woman, her beauty, and her virtue. On this Ibn Sīrīn tells us that if the man dreams that he marries ten wives, then all the more power to him. Similarly, if a woman dreams that she takes a second husband, this would also signify more benefit for her.<sup>74</sup> Marriage to a close relative is viewed with much favor, for it signifies that the dreamer will dominate his household, a situation that is highly favorable in a society where kinship relations determine much of male social power.<sup>75</sup> On the whole, marriage is perceived according to the expected husband-wife roles: for the man it signifies power, for the woman benefit. But not all marriages signify power or benefit; again this depends on the woman in question. Accordingly, Ibn Shāhīn tells us that if a man dreams that he marries a Jewish, a Christian, or a Mazdian woman, these signify acts of abomination, futility, confusion, and distraction from religion. Such reservations, though, seem to be more of a worry to Ibn Shāhīn than Ibn Sīrīn, for in the latter's text, marriage simply signifies both power and social benefit. This difference between our two interpreters may demonstrate that Ibn Sīrīn's social context allowed more openness to mixed marriages than Ibn Shāhīn's.<sup>76</sup>

#### MALE ANXIETIES OVER DOMESTIC BOUNDARIES

Dreams expressing male anxieties about marriage, seduction, promiscuity, adultery, divorce, and restriction of female movement abound in the bird text. Once again the dove, as archetypal wife, occupies a prominent place in domestic and sexual dynamics. Fear surrounding wife seduction or betrayal naturally produces images of anxiety in male dreams: "if a man dreams that he is using tricks to catch domestic doves (*al-ḥamām al-ahlī*), this means that he is seducing women of the household."<sup>77</sup> Ibn Shāhīn also tells us "that if a man dreams that he caught a dove, he will commit a forbidden act with a woman if she is a domestic dove (*ḥamāmah ahlīyah*). However, if she happens to be a wild one, then there is no harm."<sup>78</sup> Unlike hunting or catching wild birds, which is considered fair game, catching domesticated birds, which stand for women of the family, is interpreted as a taboo (*ḥarām*), hence reflecting a close parallelism between the text and the existing

<sup>73</sup> Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 300; see other cases as well, 299–305.

<sup>74</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 265.

<sup>75</sup> Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 129.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



social values of domestic integrity. Moreover, if a man dreams that a peacock and a dove, or a peacock and a francolin, are intimate with one another, this denotes corruption (*fasād*) in the family, or encouraging corrupt sexual behavior between women and men.<sup>79</sup> The rationale behind such an interpretation may not be immediately clear, but I have observed in other cases as well that dreams of cross-intimacy of different types of birds are almost always interpreted as transgression of social boundaries or classes, and hence perceived negatively in our texts, just as they would be in the interpreters' social setting.

Dream imagery also reflects male anxieties about divorce, death, and movement of the wife outside domestic boundaries. Imagery of flying birds is of particular significance, and, as we have already seen, is interpreted differently depending on the gender of the bird. Thus, "dreaming of doves flying away from the house signifies divorce of the woman."<sup>80</sup> Moreover, "if a man dreams that he saw a female peacock fly away from his house, it signifies that he will divorce his wife or she will die."<sup>81</sup> On the other hand "if a man dreams that a griffin carried him and flew into the sky, it signifies that he will meet a noble man in his traveling."<sup>82</sup> Similarly "if he dreams that a parrot flew from his hands, it signifies travel of his male slave or his servant."<sup>83</sup> Traveling, or free movement in the public space, is repeatedly viewed in our texts as a male prerogative, reifying the moral values of the urban middle and upper middle classes to which our interpreters belonged. Such concerns do not necessarily reflect the reality of everyday life of working or middle class women in the urban context, for as I have shown in an earlier study of Mamluk Cairo, women appear to have been moving in a relatively free manner outside their domestic boundaries.<sup>84</sup> Male anxiety over women's movement outside the domestic space is nonetheless detected in the following dream depicted by Ibn Shāhīn. Thus "if a man dreams that he cuts the wings of the dove, it signifies restricting his wife from going outside the house."<sup>85</sup> This imagined act of physical aggression against the female body perhaps allows us to sense the vulnerability of

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 301. See other examples of what the text views as family corruption, for instance the case of the francolin and the peacock, *ibid.*, 301.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 300.

<sup>81</sup>See the case of the francolin in *ibid.*, 301.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 303.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>84</sup>See Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'ī Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History, Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, 1991). In this article I showed that, much to the discontent of some religious scholars, women from the lower and middle classes in medieval Cairo were moving with relative freedom in the public space.

<sup>85</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 300.



male power over the female, one that may burst into acts of physical aggression in his dreams.

Male anxiety over separation or divorce in the domestic space is also reflected in dreams relating to marital and sexual acts. Here also, divorce signifies a decrease in male honor and power. This is because—as both dream interpreters keep reminding us—“women, like kings, possess the feared power of *kayd*”—an Arabic term which denotes multiple meanings signifying ruse, artifice, and subtle cunning, practiced by both women and kings alike.<sup>86</sup> Like *salāṭah* (aggressive tongue), *kayd* is another feminine power trait feared by men. Most important for us is the parallelism drawn between woman and power; thus we are told that if a governor or a king has a divorce dream, this signifies loss of their power or office. Worse still is the case of the monogamous dreamer, for his divorce dream signifies his pending death.<sup>87</sup> Given such a negative charge in divorce imagery in our dream texts, we may get a sense of the degree of cultural anxiety over matters concerning domestic rupture. The dream text clearly reflects the significance with which the culture in question views the crucial role that women play in upholding or disrupting the integrity of the basic social structure.

#### CHILDREN IN MALE DREAMS

Dreams about children receive much attention in the dream texts, reflecting a major recurrent concern of the male dreamer—sometimes joy, other times intense anxiety and worry: “Dreams about children in general signify worry (*hamm*), because they are brought up through pain and suffering.”<sup>88</sup> But the child’s gender is important in determining the joy or sorrow to which the dream points. In the bird text, the male child (*al-walad*) is signified by the young or small bird,<sup>89</sup> while the female child (*al-bint*) is signified by the bird nest or egg.<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere in Ibn Shāhīn’s text, “the testicles of a man signify his power or his male children (*bayḍ al-insān quwwatuhu aw wilduhu*).”<sup>91</sup> Here we can see the close link between male power and the possession of male children, and since the desire to possess power is often accompanied by emotions of anxiety, this might explain why dreams about male children in particular evoke contradictory feelings of extreme tension or joy. Conversely, dreams about female children appear to signify release of tension and absolute joy. On this Ibn Shāhīn tells us that while dreaming about a

<sup>86</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 265. On the notion of *kayd* see also Oberhelman, “Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power,” 89.

<sup>87</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 130.

<sup>88</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 57.

<sup>89</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 297.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 300, 305.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 305.



male child may be variously interpreted as good fortune, worry, an enemy, or a bad omen, dreaming of a female child simply signifies release (*faraj*) from worry and restraint.<sup>92</sup>

The desire to beget a male child occurs more frequently in dreams of the royal masculine-gendered bird. Here, there is hardly any mention of the female baby. Thus young predatory birds are almost always interpreted as male children: "If a man dreams of a wild hawk, it signifies a stubborn son, and if he dreams that he caught a hawk, but did not use him in hunting, he receives a son, and if he dreams that he eats the flesh of the hawk, he receives a son, who will cause him pain and difficulty when he grows older."<sup>93</sup> As for the young of the eagle, it is interpreted as a son who will become famous; similarly with the falcon, he will become a great and courageous son.<sup>94</sup> It may be argued here that such anxiety over begetting the male child may be said to reflect the obsessive desire on the part of the noble and the wealthy to produce male heirs, who will bring an extended increase in social power. Generally, female children appear less frequently in the bird texts. This may be readily observed from a simple statistical count—the son appears thirty times, the daughter only three times.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, fear of death, poverty, difficulties, or misfortunes appear to revolve more around the son than the daughter;<sup>96</sup> for instance "if a man dreams that he is holding a sparrow in his arms, which flew away and did not return, it signifies the death of his son."<sup>97</sup> Desire for a son who will bring benefit to the father also seems to be strongly reflected in male dreams; thus "if he sees that a young bird comes out of an egg, it signifies benefit from male children."<sup>98</sup> And "as for the nightingale, it signifies an eloquent son, of pleasant voice and speech, or a boy who will become a Quranic reciter."<sup>99</sup>

Anxiety over the sexuality of the child is another important theme in dreams about children. In both dream texts sexual penetration of a male child (*tifl*) signifies sorrow and difficulties. Textual references to the act of molesting boys are more explicit than those referring to girls: "If a man dreams that he is stitching shut the eyelids of sparrows, it signifies that he is deceiving boys (*yakhda'u al-ṣibyān*)," and once again, "if he dreams that he is fondling (*ya'bathu*) sparrows or their young ones, it means that he is fondling boys."<sup>100</sup> Reference to pederasty appears

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 296.

<sup>94</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 147.

<sup>95</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 295–305.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 296, 298, 300.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 303.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 304.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 301.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 303.





more frequently in Ibn Shāhīn's bird text than in Ibn Sīrīn's, and more than any other sexual act, it seems to demand his moralizing intervention:

Some interpreters say that if a man dreams that he is playing with doves (*al-ḥamām*) and he belonged to the people of corruption (*min ahl al-fasād*), it signifies that he is a homosexual (*lūṭī*), because this was part of the rituals of the people of Lūṭ. And nowadays, there are many who take a great liking (*yaghwī*) to this art of playing with doves. They should fear God!<sup>101</sup>

In this passage there is a double play on the meaning of the term *ḥamāmah* (dove), which we have come to know in the bird text as the good wife. In this context, however, Ibn Shāhīn may be using the term *ḥamām* as a metonym for boy. The terms used to describe dreams of child molesting call for some attention, for they denote that serious harm, deceit, or corruption is done to the child. Pederasty here is perceived as a form of sexual transgression socially harmful to the family and society at large, and therefore is negatively depicted by the dream interpreter. Moreover, Ibn Shāhīn's remark that "nowadays there are many who take a great liking to this art" coupled with his admonition that "they should fear God" suggest his disapproval of the prevalence of pederasty in his society.<sup>102</sup>

In contrast, when it comes to dreams about the sexuality of the female child, the text seems to be more ambivalent. Thus "if a man dreams that a francolin is sleeping beside him, it signifies that someone is trying to mislead his children (*yakhda'u 'iyālahu*).<sup>103</sup> Here, it is unclear whether the Arabic term *'iyāl* refers to sons or daughters, or both, for it simply refers to dependent children of the family. But nowhere else in the bird text or in the other examined texts is there explicit mention of the sexual molesting of young girls. Textual ambivalence, or perhaps one should say silence, over the sexuality of young girls may reveal an even greater male anxiety over the sexual chastity of the female child.

#### THE ARCHETYPAL WOMAN, THE ARCHETYPAL MAN

Equally important for our gender analysis are the symbolic notions of man, woman, and their reversed or inverted models in the dream text. Here, I would like to further explore how the dream text on human actors reflects gender relations. In male dreams about the archetypal woman, she appears to occupy a special centrality,

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 300.

<sup>102</sup>On pederasty in the Mamluk period, see Everett Rowson, "Two Homoerotic Narratives from Mamluk Literature," in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, 158–91.

<sup>103</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 301.



appearing as an awesome figure, unfamiliar in the bird text where she is depicted more in a subordinate relationship to the male. In this narrative the archetypal woman is perceived as the earth with all its earthly things and concerns. She is the source of fertility and movement in life because "she adorns herself, brings forth children, and pours milk."<sup>104</sup> She has tremendous power over man, leading him either to temptation (*fitnah*) or salvation. As in the bird text, woman is also depicted in oppositional terms: she is either good or evil, the force behind the world of material pleasure, as well as the world of the spirit. She is described as beautiful, virginal, smiling, corpulent, clean, and adorned as opposed to old, ugly, emaciated, dirty, hairy, unkempt, and nude. As we have seen in the bird text, physical attributes seem to be crucial in defining the female body, and once again feminine beauty appears to be the most important attribute of female power. Conversely, male repugnance at female ugliness is reflected in the way it is used, signifying reversal of matters (*inqilāb al-umūr*).<sup>105</sup> Thus the old, ugly, or defective woman is used as a metaphor of the deceptive material world, the source of all temptation and evil. On the other hand, the good, beautiful, and clean woman signifies the spiritual world and the hereafter.<sup>106</sup> We are repeatedly reminded that the good accruing from woman is determined by the degree of her beauty, adornment, and perfume, for we are told that in the ugly one there is no benefit, but only harm.<sup>107</sup> Male fear of the threatening power of woman may also be seen in dreams about the frowning, or the quarrelsome, woman. Here, Ibn Shāhīn warns the dreamer that if "he dreams that he saw many women quarreling, this is predictive of strange events, resulting in social confusion."<sup>108</sup>

Male dreams of the archetypal man occupy a shorter narrative space than that on woman. One could even argue that man, as a dream symbol, does not seem to evoke the strong emotions of fear, desire, admiration, hate, and love that are reserved for woman in male dreams. In this text, he is depicted in a straightforward manner, for he appears primarily in the role of bestowing wealth, benefit, and security. Age is significant, for the old man seems to be a more positive masculine symbol, signifying at once benefit, grace, wisdom, knowledge, fulfillment of needs, and security.<sup>109</sup> Unlike the bird text, physical looks seem to be an important attribute of the male in this narrative. Hence terms indicating both beauty (*jamāl*)

<sup>104</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 259.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–57. The female slave is often used as a feminine symbol, but what has been said of the free-born woman may apply to her as well.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 259, 57. See also Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 62, who states that a beautiful and smiling woman signifies joy, benefit, and a fertile year.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.



and good looks (*ḥusn*) are used to describe the male figure. And while ugliness is equally disliked in men, signifying the male enemy, the language used here does not betray the same intense fear and anxiety reserved for the ugly woman. In addition to physical appearance, other attributes seem to constitute the male image; thus traits such as social or cultural refinement (*al-adab*) seem to be more typically masculine.<sup>110</sup> To sum up, while this dream narrative seems to betray the typical gender construct of woman as nature versus man as culture, it strongly reflects a male anxiety regarding woman's awesome power.

### THE DYNAMICS OF GENDER INVERSION

Earlier, we have seen how the bird text negatively constructs the images of the wild dove and the crow, reinforcing their otherness or marginality as social actors. The notion of social or gender inversion will be further examined here, for it allows us to examine gender relations beyond the simple dichotomy of the "ideal" or "evil" man or woman. What happens when gender roles are reversed or undergo transformation? More imagery of gender reversals appear in dreams relating to man, woman, marriage, and sexual acts than in the bird dreams: women in male dress, women with a beard or penis, menstruating men, or men giving birth to children, bisexuals, homosexuals, eunuchs, and hermaphrodites.

Unable to cast the latter in either role, interpreters do not know what to do with the figure of the hermaphrodite.<sup>111</sup> And whereas Ibn Shāhīn is ready to entertain several interpretations in relation to the hermaphrodite, Ibn Sīrīn gives a gloomy image of this socially ambivalent figure, for he tells us that "if a man becomes a hermaphrodite it is predictive of a great catastrophe and grief."<sup>112</sup> Ibn Shāhīn's interpretation, though less gloomy, still points to a lack, for he asserts that "dreaming of becoming a hermaphrodite may be interpreted in several ways: absence of sexual intercourse and progeny, lowering of status (*ta' khīr manzilatīhi*), weak power, but also affection and sympathy."<sup>113</sup> Predictably, low status here is juxtaposed to two defective attributes: lack of sexual potency and of children. Hence, the hermaphrodite is a symbol of a low social status, lacking in what our interpreters consider to be two of the most important ingredients of male social power. This reminds us of what we already know from the bird text: the close connection constructed between male power and sexual potency, and between male social status and male children. Attributing other positive traits to the hermaphrodite, however, compensates for this lack of social status and social

<sup>110</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 56.

<sup>111</sup>Paula Sanders "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 74–98.

<sup>112</sup>Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 266.

<sup>113</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 65.



power: the more affective, perhaps feminine, traits of affection and sympathy.

In a different vein, the eunuch, presumably a male figure without phallic power, is perceived as an angelic and spiritually virtuous being who possesses knowledge and wisdom.<sup>114</sup> But instead of the positive qualities of affection and sympathy found in the hermaphrodite, the dream text assigns the eunuch the masculine spiritual qualities of knowledge and wisdom. Like the hermaphrodite, however, he seems also to be perceived as a marginal social figure; the eunuch here corresponds to the bat, the male ascetic that we have encountered in the kingdom of birds.

As for the bisexual male, he is seen as both an outsider to the household and a trespasser of social boundaries, corresponding perhaps to the crow in the bird text, a figure who disrupts boundaries. But he is not perceived as an inherently defective social figure, for as the dream text tells us, he needs only to repent in order to return within such boundaries.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, a woman who dreams of having a lesbian relationship signifies that she will be widowed or separated from her husband, suggesting again that reversal or subversion of "normal" sexual roles leads to disruption of the domestic order.<sup>116</sup> Conversely, Ibn Sīrīn tells us that male homosexuality signifies both victory and impoverishment, depending on sexual posture and social status. Therefore, if a man dreams that he is penetrated or mounted by his male slave, this would signify a drastic decline in both power and wealth, but if the sultan or an older man penetrates him, this would signify receiving benefit or enhancement of power.<sup>117</sup>

While the dream texts allow a positive interpretation of male homosexuality, it is less so for female homosexuality. The image of the masculine woman, who grows a beard or a penis or who dresses in men's attire, inspires various interpretations. According to one, a woman turning into a man signifies a loss of her femininity and therefore the impossibility to relate in a "normal" fashion to the male. As in a lesbian relationship, this gender reversal is perceived in terms of social displacement, and hence threatening to acceptable social relations. Another interpretation of the masculine woman signifies the acquisition of masculine behavioral traits, allowing her to assume a position of dominance, but still perceived as violating the normative power relationship between man and woman.<sup>118</sup> Similarly,

<sup>114</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>115</sup>Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings*, 85.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 258.

<sup>117</sup>On homosexual acts in dreams see Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 263, 266; Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 130. See Oberhelman on homoerotic acts in dream texts in "Hierarchies of Gender, Ideology, and Power," 70.

<sup>118</sup>For instance, if a man dreams that he is "holding firm a woman's vagina with his hand, which turns into a penis, her morals will change. If it remains a penis, she will remain authoritarian,



the image of a woman who imitates men (*al-tashabbuh bi-al-rijāl*), who behaves socially like men or adopts their attire, may signify improvement in her status, but on condition that "this dress or behavioral reversal is not exercised in excess" (*ghayr mujāwiz lil-qadr*); otherwise, as Ibn Sīrīn tells us, it will bring grief and fear for the woman.<sup>119</sup> This note of warning against excess is significant because it cautions against the complete blurring of gender boundaries, which according to Ibn Sīrīn is a prescription for social disaster. Even though we could argue that these different interpretations of gender reversals may signify gain in status and power for the woman, it is power illegitimately gained, and hence its negative portrayal.

How does the man fare if he becomes more like a woman? Here also we have different and sometimes contradictory interpretations. Thus if a man dreams that he has a vulva (*farj*), it signifies freedom from social restraints. According to one interpretation, the dream interpreter is making use of the literal meaning of the Arabic term *farj*, a derivative of the root *faraj*, which carries the multiple meanings of freedom from grief, release from suffering, joy, pleasure, and relaxation. Thus the vulva, metaphor of femininity par excellence, signifies a state of freedom and joy for the male dreamer. Conversely, the same dream may also be interpreted as loss of status and humiliation; thus "a man with a vagina does not fare well and is humiliated."<sup>120</sup> The dream text also depicts men as pregnant or delivering children. Pregnancy, symbol of feminine fertility, signifies benefit for both men and women. Thus if a man dreams that he is pregnant, he receives benefit in the world.<sup>121</sup> Less accommodating of the image of the pregnant male, Ibn Shāhīn offers conflicting interpretations, for while pregnancy may signify wealth for women, it may bring grief for men. But then he quickly adds that pregnancy may also signify wealth and benefit for either man or woman, suggesting gain of status for the male as well.<sup>122</sup> Such textual uncertainties are important to note, for they always reveal moments of conflict in the interpreter's mind, where both mixed feelings and value judgments color his perceptions. Even though women may sometimes be perceived in a secondary relationship to men, feminine fertility here is viewed as an attribute of immense power in both the dream and social world of our interpreters. Imagery of gender inversions or changeability in the dream text seem to point to areas of tension in which different forms of gender transformation are depicted in conflicting terms, sometimes as experiences of grief, strife, and humiliation, but in other instances as experiences of benefit and gain. More importantly, they seem to point to experiences of social rupture: women or men who experience some

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impudent, loud, and impossible to tame." Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings*, 431.

<sup>119</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 266.

<sup>120</sup> Gouda, *Dreams and Their Meanings*, 431.

<sup>121</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 262.



sort of gender transformation or reversal are more often than not perceived as transgressors of social boundaries. And since such transgressions often result in non-procreative practices, they often seem to be judged in our texts by the potential social disorder that they may cause.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The simplistic formula of gender hierarchy, which normally portrays man in a dominant relationship to woman, does not receive consistent confirmation in our analysis, for the advantage does not seem to be completely with the male. Conflicting messages can be detected in the dream narratives that have been examined. And whereas gender hierarchy seems to privilege male power in the more structured kingdom of birds, this is not the case in dream narratives relating to marital and sexual acts, or to those relating to men, women, children, and slaves. Textual ambivalences can certainly be revealing, even if they occupy less narrative space or can only be read between the lines. Moments of textual hesitations, backtracking, or silence must be further examined in future studies of the dream text to show the plurality of practices and perceptions that may otherwise be left undetected if such textual ambiguities are ignored.

It seems to me that woman's loss in the kingdom of birds is compensated for by her gain in other dream narratives. Cryptic, almost unnoticeable references in the dream text refer to the generic term "woman" as equivalent to power. Thus in a short but significant reference in his chapter on marital relations, Ibn Sīrīn sets for us the most important principles that constitute the symbol of woman in dreams: "Woman signifies *sultān* (power) in accordance with her status, her political importance (*khaṭaruhā*), the meaning of her name, and her beauty."<sup>123</sup> Here woman is not considered in abstract terms; her power is qualified by specific attributes: economic and political status, as well as beauty. Furthermore, the notion of woman as the conquered object or sacrificial object of male power, a predominant trope in the bird text, is paradoxically reversed by Ibn Sīrīn who tells us in the following passage that it is ultimately woman who rules over man who, in turn, emerges as her slave. It is important to note here that while I found no corresponding passages or similar views on woman in Ibn Shāhīn's dream text, I found al-Nābulusī's text on *al-mar'ah* to be more in line with Ibn Sīrīn's. Can it be argued then that in the more militaristic society of the Mamluks, male dream interpretation developed an increasingly more fearful stance of, or hesitation in, recognizing woman's symbolic power and her crucial role in holding together the threads of the social order?

The perfect woman (*al-mar'ah al-kāmilah*) is simultaneously of

<sup>122</sup>Ibn Shāhīn, *Ishārāt*, 133.



this world, because she is the world (*al-dunyā*), joy and pleasure, and of the hereafter (*al-ākhirah*) because she improves spirituality. She may also signify power (*sulṭān*) because woman rules over man (*ḥākimah ‘alā al-rajul*) through love and passion. And he, in his toil and pursuit after her good, is like a slave.<sup>124</sup>

According to this interpretation, the perfect woman symbolizes both the sensual as well as the spiritual world. She stands for joy and bliss, for spiritual enlightenment, for expansion and release of tension, and also for sexual pleasure; and man is perceived as her slave working to satisfy her needs. In this short but significant narrative attributed to Ibn Sīrīn, the notion of woman as the mistress of man reverses the conventional construct of gender hierarchy in which it is always assumed that man is favored over woman, revealing instead a construct in which woman is placed in a dominant relationship to man. Following Ibn Sīrīn’s rationale, if the man is dependent on the woman for his pleasures in this world and the hereafter, he is inevitably bound to become her slave. In retrospect, this male perspective of the feminine may help us understand the background of man’s fear of woman, and hence his strong desire to possess and control her in both his social and dream worlds. She happens to be at the source of both his pleasures and his pains. Though we can argue that women’s desires and fears may also be inextricably linked to those of men, we have less to say about them here, for we have only been able to examine man’s constructed dreams about woman.

<sup>123</sup> Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 262.

<sup>124</sup> Al-Nābulusī, *Ta‘tīr*, 254; Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab*, 258–59.

