

## Representations of Women in the Mamluk Period

In the pre-modern Arab-Islamic world the act of writing significantly contributed to establishing and perpetuating a culture of gender, especially perspicuous in images and representations of women and men found in texts where stereotyped physical and moral features are portrayed. Gender relationships find their place particularly in what we could define as normative literature on sex and marriage (*adab al-nikāḥ*), but also in works of a wider scope (e.g., *adab* anthologies) that directly or indirectly describe interpersonal relationships. From idealization of the perfect wife to demonization of the cunning and ugly woman, passing through images of women being at the service of men's pleasure, women's representations in the literary production generally seem to be the result of a dominant, masculine voice and the expression of men's interests, mainly focused on the feminine body and personality as serviceable commodities. The panel "Representations of Women in the Mamluk period," presented at the Second Conference of the School of Mamlūk Studies (Liège, June 25–27, 2015), was conceived as a way of investigating representations of women in the textual production of the Mamluk period, aiming at better understanding gender relations in Mamluk society.

The four papers of the panel are now published in this themed issue of *MSR*; the addition of a fifth article, stretching to the early Ottoman period, nicely complements the original group and shows transitional processes and the persistence of Mamluk elements in that time.

The contributions published here, some considerably enlarged in comparison with the original papers, are based on different textual genres (literary, normative, religious, and so-called scientific texts) and take different approaches. In spite of this, they meaningfully converge in presenting a compact and coherent array of themes and approaches connected with the feminine and representations of women in the Mamluk period. To begin with, all of them agree on the fact that women's images are constantly constructed through men's eyes. Texts were penned by men for men, thus transmitting only men's patterns of thought and stereotypes; even when feminine voices are perceptible in the texts and express (or, better, are *supposed* to express) women's statements, reactions, acts, and reflections, they do it through manly discourse. Feminine voices are thus transmitted through men's words and validated by men's authority; what is more, women's speech—when detectable—is often addressed to women to instruct them to obey and satisfy men. In short: women are spoken of by men in the interest of men. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the scope of textual images of women is limited to the boundaries of their sexual life and their physicality as a commodity for men, be they masters or husbands (the analogy of slavery and marriage is often



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referred to in the sources). It is not by chance that the concentration of passages related to images of women is impressive in works (or chapters) of an erotological nature, often with a normative intent.

A real obsession with women's bodies also emerges from almost all the sources explored: secluding the body and making it invisible is the first concern, interestingly paralleled by a marked tendency to an almost lecherous display of the most intimate parts of women's bodies. On one hand, the female body—it is repeatedly explained and emphasized—is considered shameful (*'awrah*) and must be hidden. On the other hand, there are minute descriptions with such a verbose emphasis on details that they verge on pornography, which seem to be using words to compensate for the absence of opportunities to see what must be hidden. As a result, women's individuality is denied through partial and skewed representations of the feminine body often attaining reification, sexual objectification, or even dehumanization. The female body can thus become a complex of body parts producing a fixed canon of beauty and ugliness, or a sexual commodity.

Not unrelated to reification and the anxiety to cover women's bodies, misogyny is also a pervasive trend in the texts under consideration. The evil nature of women, their cunning, perfidy, and anarchical and subversive potential (mostly residing in their sexuality and aspects of their biology) are depicted in telling terms (e.g., women are accused of being *fitnah*), an element that is emphasized with the utmost clarity in these articles. The feminine body, and even women's voices, are also repeatedly associated with the notion of shame (*'awrah*).

An interesting feature, emphasized to different degrees in the five essays, is the re-use made by (male) authors of authoritative, reliable references in order to reinforce their narratives and the construction of their discourse on the subordinate role of women and their limited function in society. This effectively contributes to shape a gender identity that frames women in the private sphere as a function of men's interests, thus adhering to the mission dictated by Islamic axiology. The recourse to authoritative sources also underlines a remarkable continuity with earlier periods of Islamic intellectual history, pointing out its consistency as well as its repetitiveness.

If the five articles of this themed volume converge in depicting a consistent representation of women in the Mamluk period, or—better yet—in exemplifying male patterns of thought about women, each contribution offers deep insights into specific issues and has recourse to different textual approaches.

Mirella Cassarino's article focuses on the seventy-third chapter, entirely dedicated to women and *adab al-nikāḥ*, of *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaṭraf* of al-Ibshīhī, an *adab* anthology. The paper aims at investigating, through the authoritative speech found in al-Ibshīhī's text, the dichotomic model of roles (man/woman) and stereotypes regarding women. Literary, imaginary, and social real-



ity are thus put in conversation to single out themes related to the representation of women in their archetypal positivity or negativity, the division of spheres of influence (public/private), the negation of the individual nature of women, and the reification of their bodies through a process of disassembly. These themes, all ascribable to male imaginary and with misogyny remaining a constant, aptly demonstrate how men used words to describe, condemn, or even demonize women. The thorough reading of the text also shows the purely instrumental conception of the feminine body, seen as functional for procreation and/or satisfaction of men's needs.

In the same vein, but from a different perspective, Antonella Ghersetti's paper revolves around the fragmentary and skewed description of female slaves (*jawārin*) contained in the *Kitāb al-Siyāsah fi 'ilm al-firāsah* of Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī. The translation of the passage on *jawārin* is accompanied by a map of its intertextual connections and read in conversation with materials of a legal nature on female slaves, like normative texts and purchase deeds. The article demonstrates that this description is a skillful construct in which the *jāriyah* is described, through men's eyes, as an instrument of pleasure and the female body is represented as a function of male desire. The skewed deconstruction of the *jāriyah*'s body in *Kitāb al-Siyāsah* thus functions as a vehicle of sexual objectification well in tune with the legal discourse and general assumptions revealed by historical sources of the Mamluk period. The study also suggests that texts of a "scientific" nature can be an interesting complement for apprehension of the representation of slave girls in the Mamluk period.

The articles of Pernilla Myrne and Daniela Rodica Firanesco both deal, though from different perspectives, with Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī's treatises on *adab al-nikāh*. Myrne's contribution is about sexual ethics as presented in three works by al-Suyūṭī on marital sex. It begins by carrying out a careful comparison of the sources used by al-Suyūṭī, including erotological works like *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* by 'Alī ibn Naṣr al-Kātib, a well-known treatise of the tenth century, and other important texts of the subsequent tradition, which are surveyed and scrutinized. These works, transmitting different and sometimes conflicting ideals on women's sexuality, are then compared with the contents of al-Suyūṭī's production and put in relation with his authorial intents, showing that al-Suyūṭī attempted to combine different erotological traditions and to harmonize them in the light of Islamic tradition. The survey of key concepts found in his treatises, like ideal femininity and masculinity or the ideal male behavior towards women and women's obedience and total submission, substantiate the thesis that in the eyes of al-Suyūṭī and his audience, the role of women is restricted to satisfying their husbands' needs and obeying them, to the exclusion of their own wishes and desires. This highly gendered message thus assigns to women the primary role of enhancing men's



sexual experience, while—meaningfully enough—men have no similar obligation towards women.

Firanesu's piece is focused on the presence and the function of women's voice in male-authored texts. After a preliminary section expounding on the scope and context of *adab/ādāb al-nikāḥ* it singles out meaningful examples of feminine speech (i.e., verbal reactions presented as direct speech or ascribed to women) in al-Suyūṭī's *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj* and other writings included in G. Kadar's *Fann al-nikāḥ fī turāth shaykh al-islām Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*. A telling, preliminary question (is woman's voice shameful, 'awrah?) is dealt with first, with interesting extensions to contemporary discussions on this point. Examples of feminine voices taken from normative texts (the Prophet's tradition, the Quran, and *tafsīr*), accurately categorized and analyzed, effectively demonstrate that feminine voices are used by men to shape a construct of the role of women conforming to religious and legal discourses. The paramount role (indeed, practically the only one) is the role of women in sex and marriage relations, best described as serving men's interests and, at the same time, acquiring and/or transmitting to other women proper education in this realm. Women's speeches, reported and validated by men, are thus utilized by al-Suyūṭī to perpetuate and reinforce the "culture of gender" during the Mamluk period.

The last article, by Paulina Lewicka, delves into male patterns of thinking and fantasizing about women through the attentive reading of the chapter on women contained in al-Munāwī's *Tadhkirat ūlī al-albāb bi-ma'rifat al-ādāb*, a "compendium of practical-spiritual knowledge" concerning diverse matters of everyday life. 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Munāwī was a high-ranking Egyptian scholar and Sufi who lived during the Mamluk-Ottoman transition. The key thoughts present in al-Munāwī's text, clearly revolving around the notion of misogyny, are easily summarized in some basic points: women are defective, deceitful, lustful, and therefore dangerous, and for this reason must be controlled by men. These concepts are read against the social background, taking into account situations and processes proper to the Arabic-Islamic aspects of that period. Interesting parallels with Christian theology and the Jewish tradition are also traced, widening the scope of the investigation. This cross-cultural approach turns out to be very productive in interrogating the complex relation of the universal mechanism of misogyny to socio-cultural reality, also investigated in normative and historical sources. The extra-cultural dimension of the text is also taken into consideration to show that misogyny interacts with culture. Al-Munāwī's text, with its marked misogynic slant spread in the Sufi milieu, is thus taken as a meaningful token of the gender-based discrimination and lack of symmetry between sexes that also marks other cultures.



I would like to conclude on a personal note and express my gratitude to the colleagues who responded to the call and generously contributed to the panel and to this themed issue; working with them, in a truly collaborative and fruitful manner, has been a privilege and a pleasure, which—I hope—was not only mine. I would also like to express my thanks to the Editor of *MSR*, Marlis Saleh, who accepted our articles for publication in the journal.

Antonella Ghersetti  
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

### Editor's note

This issue of *MSR* also contains an article which is unrelated to the volume's main theme: "Between Venice and Alexandria: Trade and the Movement of Precious Metals in the Early Mamluk Period," by David Jacoby.

Marlis Saleh  
Editor, *Mamlūk Studies Review*



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