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Women and Men in al-Suyūṭī's Guides to Sex and Marriage

This article examines the sexual ethics in three works by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī on marital sex (*nikāḥ*) and gender norms: *Al-Wishāḥ fī fawā'id al-nikāḥ*,¹ *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj fī raqā'iq al-ghunj*,² and *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil wa-murshid al-muta'ahhil*.³ *Wishāḥ* is al-Suyūṭī's main contribution to the genre of Arabic-Islamic sex manuals, a genre that originated in the fourth/tenth century in Baghdad, and was influenced by translations of Greek, Persian, and Indian medicine and erotology.⁴ In *Wishāḥ*, al-Suyūṭī attempts to reconcile the earliest erotological tradition with the Islamic sciences, something he does more consistently than his predecessors. The result is an extensive investigation of the sexual pleasures permitted for Muslims—particularly men, but also, to a certain degree, women. Women's sexual behavior and obligations are treated by al-Suyūṭī in *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj* and *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, which rely partly on the same sources as *Wishāḥ*.⁵

Al-Suyūṭī draws on an imposing number of earlier sources from different fields of knowledge, especially the hadiths, but also lexicography, historical anecdotes (*akhbār*), medicine, and erotology. In *Wishāḥ* and *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, al-Suyūṭī acts

¹There is an edition of *Al-Wishāḥ* by Ṭal'at Ḥasan 'Abd al-Qawī (Damascus, 2001). It is based on an unidentified manuscript that sometimes differs from the manuscripts I have consulted: MS Lala Ismail 577, dated 973 AH, MSS Paris, BnF Arabe 3066 and 3067, and MS King Saud University 797.

²*Shaqā'iq al-utrunj fī raqā'iq al-ghunj* has been edited several times in Damascus. I use the edition by Ḥusayn 'Umar Ḥamādah (Damascus, 2008), a scholarly edition based on five manuscripts. In addition to these, the editor lists twelve extant manuscripts in his introduction. I am aware of five additional manuscripts, but there must be many more; the book seems to have been quite popular.

³*Nuzhat al-muta'ammil wa-murshid al-muta'ahhil*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Tunjī (Beirut, 1989, 2nd printing); based on two manuscripts, one from the British Museum and one from Damascus.

⁴The definition of sex manuals as a genre is provisional, and will be explored in a future project. The term often used is “erotic literature,” which is misleading, as the manuals are meant to be edifying and include subjects like sexual health and hygiene, in addition to entertaining and titillating stories.

⁵For al-Suyūṭī's works in the erotic genre, see Aḥmad Jagham, *Al-ḥins fī a'māl al-Imām Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī* (Tunis, 2001); Haytham Sarḥān, *Khiṭāb al-jins: Muqārabāt fī al-adab al-'Arabī al-qadīm* (Beirut, 2008), 157–67; and Jaakko Hämeen Anttila, “Al-Suyūṭī and Erotic Literature,” in *Al-Suyūṭī, a Polymath of the Mamlūk Period*, ed. Antonella Ghersetti (Leiden, 2016), 227–40. For a discussion of the notion of *ghunj* and its expressions in *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, see Daniela Rodica Firanescu, “Revisiting Love and Coquetry in Medieval Arabic Islam: Al-Suyūṭī's Perspective,” in *Al-Suyūṭī*, ed. Ghersetti, 241–59.



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as a compiler and rarely adds any comments, whereas the authorial voice is somewhat more present in *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*. Nevertheless, by means of selection and arrangement of hadiths and historical anecdotes, central themes are established. In this article, I will discuss al-Suyūṭī's use of earlier sex and marriage manuals and examine some of these central themes: the prominent standing of marital sex (*faḍl al-nikāḥ*), ideal masculinity, and ideal femininity. The themes are not new, but al-Suyūṭī's consequent focus on and combination of specific parts of the erotic heritage is quite unique.

Arabic-Islamic Sex Manuals and al-Suyūṭī's Sources

Al-Suyūṭī uses two of the most important works in the sex manual tradition as the basis for different parts of *Wishāḥ: Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* and *Tuḥfat al-'arūs wa-nuzhat* (or *mut'at*) *al-nufūs*. He also quotes these, and numerous other sources, in *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj* and *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*. These two works were written at different times—there are some three centuries between them—and they convey different messages. The first, *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah*, was probably written in the fourth/tenth century by an author with Shiite inclinations, and is a quite libertine sex manual, heavily influenced by Indian erotology. The second, *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*, dates from the eighth/fourteenth century, and is a more traditional Islamic marriage manual based on hadiths and relatively wholesome historical anecdotes, poetry, and some erotology. *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* and *Tuḥfat al-'arūs* are representatives of two different—although somewhat overlapping—fields of sexual knowledge and practice: the first being *bāh* (erotology), and the second, *nikāḥ* (marital sex). By combining these contradictory sources, al-Suyūṭī makes a serious attempt to reinterpret the erotological heritage in light of the orthodox Islamic tradition.

Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah is the first extant erotic compendium in Arabic and contains extensive quotations from the literature that was available at the time. As such, it represents the Abbasid heritage, with original works in Arabic as well as translations from Greek medicine, Indian erotology, and Persian wisdom. Much of this heritage has been lost, except for occasional quotations in later literature, primarily in *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah*.⁶

The author of *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah*, 'Alī ibn Naṣr, explicitly addresses the cosmopolitan elite of his time and, characteristically, quotes both Shiite and Sunnite

⁶For some stories with female protagonists in *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* mentioned in Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist* see Pernilla Myrne, "Of Ladies and Lesbians and Books on Women from the Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries," *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 4, no. 2 (2017): 187–210; and idem, "Words of Advice: Women as Erotic Experts and Advisors in Premodern Arabic Erotica," in *Les mots du désir: La langue de l'érotisme arabe et ses traductions*, ed. Frédéric Lagrange and Claire Savina (Paris, 2018).



authorities.⁷ Several chapters are devoted to sexual technique, some of it translations from Indian and Persian erotology, with classifications of sex positions and sex couples, as well as different kinds of women.⁸ Mutual pleasure is the ideal for amorous relationships, according to *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, which also adopts a relatively tolerant attitude towards male and female same-sex relationships and extramarital relations.

When al-Suyūṭī refers to the knowledge conveyed by *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, he uses the term *bāh*, meaning “Abbasid erotology.” Initially, the term was reserved for sexual medicine (*ʿilm al-bāh*), and books on sexual health and aphrodisiacs were often called *kutub al-bāh*.⁹ In *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, the term denotes sexology in general, that is, a combination of erotology and sexual medicine. Several later works in this tradition were devoted to sexual hygiene, medicine, and pharmacology, or retained parts of the erotological material in *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah* and added new anecdotes and erotic stories.¹⁰ Al-Suyūṭī occasionally quotes a later, relatively unique contribution to this tradition, *Rushd al-labīb ilā muʿāsharat al-ḥabīb*, written in the eighth/fourteenth century by the Yemenite author Aḥmad ibn Falītah.¹¹

⁷The identity of the author is not entirely established. For a discussion of its possible origin and its vision of love relationships, see Pernilla Myrne, “Pleasing the Beloved: Sex and True Love in a Medieval Arabic Erotic Compendium,” in *The Beloved in Middle Eastern Literatures: The Culture of Love and Languishing*, ed. Michael Beard, Alireza Korangy, and Hanadi al-Samman (London, 2018).

⁸The classifications are highly theoretical, however, and the prospect of putting them into practice is often improbable. The aim of the book is probably not to give the readers practical tools, but rather to provide the sophisticated male elite with exclusive knowledge.

⁹Cf. Patrick Franke, “Before scientia sexualis in Islamic culture: *ʿilm al-bāh* between erotology, medicine and pornography,” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 18, no. 2 (2012):161–73. *Bāh* is the scientific term for coitus in premodern Arabic sex manuals, and so in the manuscripts of *Wishāh* consulted for this study. The edition has instead the term *bāʿah*.

¹⁰For these works and premodern Arabic erotica in general, see Everett K. Rowson, “Arabic: Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century,” in *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, vol. I, ed. Gaétan Brulotte and John Phillips (New York, 2006), 43–61.

¹¹Al-Suyūṭī quotes *Rushd al-labīb* in *Shaqāʾiq al-utrunj* and *Nuzhat al-mutaʿammil*. In the later book the quotation is unattributed and could have been taken from another source. The exact name of the author differs on the extant manuscript copies of *Rushd al-labīb*; see Carl Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* (Leiden, 1868–1956), 1:232, suppl. 1:416. The book was written in 764/1363, according to the copyist of one of the manuscripts (Sabbagh’s introduction to Ibn Falītah, *Rushd* (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1973), iv. There is a series of editions with German translations based on two manuscripts and covering most parts of the book: 1–3, ed. Ghadhban Al-Bayati (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1976); 4, ed. Adnan Husni-Pascha (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1975); 5, ed. Jalal Elias Yousif (Munich, 1977); 6.1, ed. Boulus al-Khouri (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1975); 6.2, ed. Abdul Khador Abdul Hassan (Munich, 1983); 6.3, ed. Adnan Zeni (Munich, 1978); 9–11, ed. Mohamed Zouher Djabri (Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1968); 12–14, ed. Elian Sabbagh (Erlangen-Nürnberg,



Around 700, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Tijānī, a scholar and chancellor at the Hafsid court, wrote *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs wa-nuzhat* (or *mut‘at*) *al-nufūs*, a sex manual based on hadiths.¹² Unlike other works in the genre, *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs* only treats licit sexual relations, and even though it contains some explicit sexual material, there is virtually nothing that violates orthodox Islam. According to al-Suyūṭī in his introduction to *Wishāh*, it is the best book on *nikāḥ*—a term that signifies both marriage and marital sex, including, as evident in *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, sex with slave concubines. *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs* takes up themes from hadith literature on marriage, such as the incitement to marry, spousal rights and obligations, and the marriage banquet. The main concern is piety; believers should resist their passions and keep to the right path. Sexual attraction and pleasure are allowed and encouraged, but only within marital bounds; there should be no opportunity for men and women to look at each other outside marriage and concubinage.

A major difference between the books written in the traditions of *bāh* and *nikāḥ* is their attitude to homosexuality and women’s sexual agency. *Ḥawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* and *Rushd al-labīb* devote whole chapters to female and male homosexuality, which are seen as more or less natural variants, and so do other major works in the genre: *Nuzhat al-aṣḥāb fī mu‘āsharat al-aḥbāb* by al-Samaw’al (d. 570/1175), and *Nuzhat al-albāb fīmā lā yūjad fī kitāb* by al-Tifāshī (d. 651/1253). Al-Tijānī, on the other hand, is conspicuously silent about homosexuality in *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, in line with the negative attitude towards homosexuality in hadith literature. Al-Suyūṭī also remains silent, and although he quotes *Ḥawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* and *Rushd al-labīb*, he ignores the sexual orientations described in these books. His texts on sexuality are firmly within the *nikāḥ* tradition, although he permits himself to quote more light entertainment.

Al-Suyūṭī’s reliance on *Ḥawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* is remarkable, considering its libertine content and the author’s ambiguous religious inclinations, but it is not unprecedented. Earlier Mamluk authors had apparently read *Ḥawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* and quoted it. Mughulṭāy (d. 762/1361) mentions the book, and it is quoted in *Akhhbār al-nisā’*, attributed to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah,¹³ and by Shams al-Dīn al-Dimashqī.¹⁴ Of the known extant manuscripts, two were copied in the eighth/fourteenth century. Another erotic work by al-Suyūṭī, *Nawādir al-ayk fī ma‘rifat*

1973). For the remaining chapters, I have consulted an unscholarly edition with no named editor (al-Mayah, 2002). I have not had the opportunity to consult manuscripts for this article.

¹²Plessner and Achèche, “Al-Tidjānī,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., 10:463–64.

¹³As pointed out by Hilary Kilpatrick, this attribution is almost certainly wrong. It has also been attributed to Ibn al-Jawzī, which Kilpatrick deems similarly unlikely; Kilpatrick, “Some Late ‘Abbāsīd and Mamlūk Books about Women: A Literary Historical Approach,” *Arabica* 42, no. 1 (1995): 69–70.

¹⁴See Antonella Ghersetti’s article in this volume.



al-nayk, which is more entertaining than edifying, draws heavily on *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, with both attributed and unattributed quotations.¹⁵

Conflicting Ideals for Female Sexuality in al-Suyūṭī's Sources

As in practically all premodern Islamic literature, the intended readers of sex manuals are primarily men, and the norm is male domination and female subordination. However, gender roles vary between the different manuals, especially with regard to women's agency. *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah* has a characteristically female voice and contains many female protagonists and narrators of erotic stories. The women are outspoken and voracious; they take the initiative in sexual relations, and their sexual behavior is unconstrained. Special emphasis is placed on their sounds and movements during intercourse.¹⁶ They have what we could call "erotic agency," and at the same time they are a construction that appeals to a certain male erotic fantasy—a feminine erotic archetype that appears to have been cherished by the readers of Abbasid erotica. Many of the erotic quotations are taken from lost third/ninth century stories that originated in the Abbasid court.¹⁷

A central theme in both *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah* and the later Yemenite work *Ruṣhd al-labīb* is women's sexual appetite (*shahwah*). This is, according to Ibn Naṣr, Ibn Falīṭah, and their sources, greater than that of men and must be satisfied. This is a notable contrast to *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, which is more concerned with the need to satisfy the male sexual appetite. Ibn Falīṭah quotes a hadith saying that women were given nine tenths of *shahwah* and men one tenth, but because women were also given a sense of shame (*ḥayāʾ*), they deny their desire.¹⁸ The first part of the saying is attributed to a Persian wise woman, Bunyādukht, in *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, and is illustrated by (fictional) women's erotic stories, sometimes about their own sex lives. In *Ruṣhd al-labīb*, the saying is followed by anecdotes about Arab women, such as queen Zubaydah, who suffered greatly when her spouse, Hārūn al-Raṣhīd, was travelling.¹⁹

¹⁵See Rowson, "Arabic," 56–57. It also relies on the popular *Rujūʿ al-shaykh ilā sibāh fī al-qūwah ʿalā al-bāh*; see *ibid.*

¹⁶This peculiar theme was treated from a lexicographic perspective already by al-Jāḥiẓ; see Myrne, "Who was Ḥubbā al-Madīniyya?" in *Arabic and Semitic Linguistics Contextualized: A Festschrift for Jan Retsö*, ed. Lutz Edzard (Wiesbaden, 2015), 329–30.

¹⁷See Myrne, "Of Ladies and Lesbians." Two lost "books" reoccur in *Ĵawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, both mentioned in *Fihrist* and with female protagonists; see *idem*, "Words of Desire." One of them is referred to as Persian and both are inspired by Indian erotology. In addition to these two, the legendary Ḥubbā al-Madīniyah is the protagonist in a number of narratives.

¹⁸Ibn Falīṭah, *Ruṣhd al-labīb*, ch. 3, 16 (Arabic text).

¹⁹*Ibid.*, ch. 3, 17 (Arabic text).



Admittedly, the emphasis on women's *shahwah* is part of a misogynist trope: women's agency is dictated by their own bodies, as *shahwah* is seen as a biological impulse that overshadows reason. Nonetheless, women's wishes and preferences are taken seriously by Ibn Naṣr and Ibn Falītah. The ideal for Ibn Naṣr is a harmonious relationship built on mutual love, and the best way to reach this, he claims, is simultaneous orgasm, or rather simultaneous ejaculation. This is inspired by the medical theory of his time, according to which conception takes place only if the male and the female sperm mingle. Ibn Naṣr devotes a chapter to the female orgasm, with classifications of different women and their ways of feeling pleasure. Yet, the numerous descriptions of how different women achieve orgasm, allegedly there to instruct men, are grouped into highly hypothetical and far-fetched classifications, which seem far removed from reality.

Ibn Falītah also devotes a chapter to women's sexual wishes and preferences, and describes women's different routes to orgasm in a slightly more realistic manner than Ibn Naṣr does in *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah*. The point of departure for women's desires and aversions is the same as for men: "everything women dislike in men, men dislike in women."²⁰

The representations of women and the female ideal differ considerably in *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, at least concerning the issues discussed above. Although the last part of the book makes some use of the erotological heritage, al-Tijānī avoids anecdotes and stories about women who take erotic initiative. A woman's capacity to act is strictly limited; she should not be given the chance to follow her passions to begin with. Instead, male desires and preferences are highlighted. Although the most valued characteristic in a woman is fertility, al-Tijānī dwells on a woman's ideal appearance; he goes through all parts of the female body, from the hair to the feet, including the genitals.²¹ The ideal woman is beautiful and obedient, and she reserves her beauty for her husband.

Al-Tijānī makes clear in the introduction that love should be reciprocal but hierarchical. This hierarchical structure has certainly also guided the author of *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah*, but *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs* is even more explicitly normative, and the normative gender order is consistently sustained thorough the book. The consequence of Q 2:228: "their men have a degree above them" is that a woman must obey and serve her husband.²² The author introduces some classic misogynist motifs in the introduction: women are dangerous; they cause disorder and seduction (*fitnah*); they were created from a crooked rib and are more prone to evil—the

²⁰Ibid., ch. 5, 1 (Arabic text).

²¹Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, 70–71, 271–350.

²²Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs* (London, 1992), 153. This and all translations of the Quran are from Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London and New York, 1955).



majority of the population in hell are women.²³ This characterization of women's intellectual and moral flaws, which is quite common in literature on women and often leads to the conclusion that women should be carefully guarded, gives al-Tijānī the opportunity to advise men to treat their women gently and with patience. Men should treat women well because they are inferior and fallible. A woman's position in relation to her husband is like that of a slave to his or her owner (see below). Therefore, fathers should be careful with their choice of husbands for their daughters. They should not marry their daughters to men who are much older and uglier than they are.²⁴

Nevertheless, as the book focusses on men's privileges, women's desires are on the whole considered less important. Women cannot request intercourse more than once a month, for example, whereas they should always be available for their husbands.²⁵ Even then, there is no guarantee they will be satisfied. Far from it, as a matter of fact, as men are allowed to have sex with their women the way they wish, regardless of a woman's feelings and complaints. This, according to al-Tijānī's sources, is the meaning of Q 2:223: "Your wives are a place of sowing of seed for you, so come to your place of cultivation however you wish."²⁶

Al-Suyūṭī's Erotic Literature

By using the term *nikāḥ* in the title—*Al-Wishāḥ fī fawā'id al-nikāḥ* means "The Sash on the merits of *nikāḥ*"—al-Suyūṭī clearly signals that *Wishāḥ* treats sex in the context of Islamic law and tradition, and not sexual pleasure in general, with its various manifestations. He does not, for example, mention homosexuality or explicitly illicit relationships.

Al-Suyūṭī's project was ambitious; he initially set out to write a much larger book.²⁷ What he eventually achieved is a relatively short manual, but impressive nevertheless. *Wishāḥ* is a systematic study of the central themes encompassed by the earlier sex manuals. It is divided into seven parts, each devoted to a specific branch of knowledge (*fann*). In the first part, on hadiths and legal reports (*fann al-ḥadīth wa-al-athār*), al-Suyūṭī quotes numerous exegeses and hadith collections. The second part, on language (*fann al-lughah*), consists of a list of sexual vocabulary taken from several sources. The long lists of words evoke a universe

²³For example, al-Tijānī, *Tuhfat al-'arūs*, 31–32 (*fitnah*, several hadiths, e.g., from Muslim and al-Bukhārī), 154 (the crooked rib, quoted from al-Bukhārī), 162–63 (women are the main population of hell, from al-Ghazālī).

²⁴Ibid., 145ff.

²⁵Ibid., 359.

²⁶Ibid., 385–86.

²⁷See *ibid.*, 229.



of sexual pleasures, primarily for men, but always within legal bounds. The third part, on anecdotes and historical reports (*fann al-nawādir wa-al-akhbār*), conveys the ordinary corpus of Abbasid anecdotes in addition to quotations from *Tuhfat al-ʿarūs*. The fourth, on anatomy (*fann al-tashrīḥ*), and the fifth, on medicine (*fann al-ṭibb*), would usually have been presented as one branch. The fields of medicine and anatomy in *Wishāḥ* are curiously undeveloped, considering that al-Suyūṭī had written about medicine elsewhere and should have been relatively familiar with the subject. In the anatomy section, he repeats the idea that the uterus is an inverted scrotum, an idea that had been prevalent ever since Galen's works were translated to Arabic in the third/ninth century—but the bulk of the chapter is extracted from *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, which he quotes virtually verbatim. The quotations contain some odd ideas, such as an attribution to Galen claiming that women have five wombs—two for female fetuses, two for male, and one for intersex. This bizarre idea is contradicted by another quotation from *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, and al-Suyūṭī's decision to reproduce it is curious.²⁸ The bulk of the chapter on medicine is a long, almost verbatim quotation from the book on sexual medicine (*Kitāb al-bāh*) by Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakarīyā al-Rāzī (ca. 251–313/865–925). But even here al-Suyūṭī quotes *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, in spite of its occasionally odd ideas. Al-Suyūṭī's only contribution is a summary of non-pharmacological sexual stimuli, such as reading books about coitus, and erotic stories, which he probably took from earlier texts on sexual health.

The main part of the chapter on coitus (*fann al-bāh*) also consists of verbatim quotations from *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*. However, al-Suyūṭī has put more effort into this chapter and sometimes summarizes main ideas and inserts hadiths commenting on critical issues. This indicates a greater degree of engagement in the field of erotology, and an attempt to make it relevant for his contemporaries and compatible with Islamic piety. He has left out everything that could be provocative, such as descriptions of homosexuality and extra-marital affairs. Instead, he uses hadiths to comment upon the erotological material, making an effort to present it as serviceable and respectable reading for believers.

He used these same sources for some of his other works on marriage and sex. In *Shaqāʿiq al-utrunj* and *Nuzhat al-mutaʿammil* he develops some of the themes found in *Tuhfat al-ʿarūs*, supplemented with hadiths from numerous sources, and he relies on *Rushd al-labīb* by Ibn Falītah. In *Shaqāʿiq al-utrunj*, he also quotes *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*.²⁹

²⁸Early Arabic-Islamic ideas about women's sexuality, including those in *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, will be discussed in a forthcoming monograph: *Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World*.

²⁹In one or two other books, namely *Nawādir al-ayk fī maʿrifat al-nayk* and *Al-Īdāḥ fī ʿilm al-nikāḥ*, al-Suyūṭī uses the same sources as in *Wishāḥ*, but these books are more entertaining than



Major Themes in al-Suyūṭī's Guides to Sex and Marriage

The overall theme in *Wishāh* and, to a lesser degree, in *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil* is sex as a gift from God. This theme is mentioned in practically all premodern Arab-Islamic sex manuals, but not always with the same emphasis. Furthermore, two central themes are shared in the three works analyzed here: ideal masculinity and ideal femininity. Ideal masculinity is a main theme in *Wishāh* but is also prominent in *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, and can be summed up with the hadith, "the best man is the one with most women." Ideal femininity is the main theme in both *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil* and *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj* and can be summed up with the saying, "the best woman is chaste and lustful (*'afīfah ghalimah*)."

Sex is a Gift from God

In the first chapter of *Wishāh*, al-Suyūṭī relies on Quran exegeses and hadiths in order to present sex as God's gift to humanity. This is the overall theme in *Wishāh*, and quotations set the tone for the rest of the book. According to Ibn Abī Ḥātim (d. 327/938), Q 20:50: "He said, 'Our Lord is He who gave everything its creation, then guided it'" refers to the divine supervision of the way men should have intercourse with women. Ibn Mundhir (d. 318/930) interprets "love and mercy" as sexual intercourse in Q 30:21: "He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy."³⁰ Sex is part of God's plan for his creation, and, al-Suyūṭī emphasizes, not only for procreation and the production of new believers, but to remind the believers of Paradise. The pleasure of sexual intercourse, which is great but minor in relation to heavenly bliss, will make the believer long for the greater pleasures of Paradise and consequently repent and correct his behavior so as to have a share in it.³¹ Al-Suyūṭī quotes al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, but the elevation of sexual intercourse is much more thoroughly addressed in *Wishāh*. Al-Ghazālī regarded this divine motive behind human libido as less important than the urge to marry in order to reproduce and stay chaste, and this is al-Suyūṭī's focus in *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, where the reminder of Paradise is the second and less important merit of *nikāḥ* (*fawā'id al-nikāḥ*).³² In *Wishāh*, however, sexual pleasure as a reminder of Paradise appears as the most prominent of the merits of sexual intercourse. This approach permits al-Suyūṭī to introduce the erotological tradition by means of a quotation

edifying and therefore not treated here. The attribution of the latter to al-Suyūṭī is contested. Hämeeen-Anttila is quite certain it is wrong ("Al-Suyūṭī," 234–35). He estimates that al-Suyūṭī wrote *Wishāh*, *Shaqā'iq*, and *Nawādir* by using the same sources and then divided the material into three different works (ibid., 232).

³⁰ Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 39–40.

³¹ Ibid., 41–42.

³² Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, 21–24.



from *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* in the last part of the book, which teaches the believers various sex positions, among other things. It enables believers to enjoy sex and (male believers in particular) the variety of pleasures legally available to them. The vocabulary catalogued by al-Suyūṭī in *Wishāh* is testimony to the abundance of sexual options available for men. There are, for example, specific words for initiating sexual intercourse with a slave woman and ejaculating in another, and having sex with a woman when another woman—most probably a slave concubine—is listening.³³

Ideal Masculinity

The Best Man is the One with the Most Potency

After having established the divine origin of marital sexuality in *Wishāh*, al-Suyūṭī continues with examples of the prophets and pious men. Muḥammad was the only man who was allowed to be married to more than four wives, and he also had great potency. This was given to him by God, as great potency is a sign of divine preference; an oft-quoted hadith states that the best man is the one with the most women.³⁴ One of the variants of this hadith is quoted by al-Tijānī in *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*: “The best man in this *ummah* is the one with most women.”³⁵ According to another hadith, God gave Muḥammad preferences in four things; one was great potency (*kathrat al-jimāʿ*).³⁶ Al-Suyūṭī was influenced by *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, but did not have to quote al-Tijānī directly; there are several variants of these hadiths available in numerous hadith collections. In *Wishāh* and *Nuzhat al-mutaʿammil*, al-Suyūṭī extracts hadiths on Muḥammad’s sexual potency from al-Bukhārī, Ṭabarānī, Ibn ʿAsākir, Abū Bakr al-Ismāʿīlī, Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Ibn ʿAdī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Anis, and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.³⁷

The hadith scholars did not agree on exactly how great Muḥammad’s potency was. According to a hadith retold by Ibn Saʿd, the Prophet had the potency of forty men, a number that is confirmed by Ibn ʿAdī. In one of the hadiths taken from ʿAbd al-Razzāq, the number has inflated; his potency was that of forty-five men. Ibn Abī Ḥātim, who also interpreted some of the verses in the Quran sexually, is even more generous: God’s messenger was given the potency of more than seventy young men, and the Jews envied him for that, which was the reasoning

³³ Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 93, 113 (the first example); 93, 124 (the second example).

³⁴ Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-mutaʿammil*, 16–17.

³⁵ Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, 356 (from al-Bukhārī and ʿIyāḍ). Al-Tijānī adds, quoting al-Khattābī, that women here are obviously wives, as any man could possess as many slave women as he wished, due to the former’s lower standing than that of free women; *ibid*, 356–57.

³⁶ The others were generosity, courage, and strength in war and fighting (*baʿsh*); al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, 354; from ʿIyāḍ ibn Mūsā (476–544/1088–1149).

³⁷ Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, the section on potency, 42–51.



behind the revelation in Q 4:54: “are they jealous of the people for the bounty that God has given them?” The phrase “God’s bounty” refers to the great potency God gave to some people.³⁸

According to a hadith in *Wishāh* extracted from al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad slept with each of his eleven wives at one o’clock every day and night, and he had the potency of thirty men.³⁹ Al-Tijānī has a somewhat more restrained variant: the Prophet visited his wives at one o’clock every day or night, and, he points out, he had not more than nine wives at the same time.⁴⁰ Characteristically, al-Suyūṭī quotes the higher number without reservation; he does not seem to be looking for the exact truth. For him, having many women and great potency are the attributes of a prophet.⁴¹ Potency was given to all prophets, most of all to Solomon. He had an extremely large number of women—three hundred wives and seven hundred concubines—and, according to various authorities; he slept with ninety, one hundred or, even one thousand women every day.⁴²

Great potency is not reserved for prophets, however. The most devoted of Muḥammad’s relatives and followers had many wives and slave concubines.⁴³ Having sexual stamina is the same as loving women, and all members of Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib loved women.⁴⁴ The need for potency is traced by al-Suyūṭī to Arabs’ physical temperaments (*amzijah*), which are characterized by a greater sexual appetite. Al-Tijānī quotes an intriguing argument from al-Khaṭṭābī (388/998), suggesting that when God chose a messenger from among the Arabs, he choose the best man according to the qualities that were most valued by the Arabs, one of which was sexual stamina.⁴⁵

Al-Suyūṭī gives examples with reports about the sexual behavior of famous men. The companion Sa’d ibn Mālik used to have intercourse with ten slave

³⁸Ibid., 44–45.

³⁹Ibid., 42–45.

⁴⁰Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, 354–55. The hadith from al-Bukhārī seems to be more common with “and” than “or,” but it is easy to confuse these words in Arabic. Either of them may be a scribal error. I have not checked the manuscripts of *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, but as for *Wishāh*, all manuscripts available to me have the same phrase: “night and day” (MSS BnF 3066, fol. 2b; 3067, fol. 3a; King Sa’ūd 797, fol. 4b; Lala Ismail 577, fol. 3a).

⁴¹Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 48; from al-Tirmidhī.

⁴²Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 45. According to al-Tijānī, Solomon had the potency of forty men. He mentions the stories about Solomon’s potency briefly in the chapter on slave concubines (*al-sarārī*): *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, 174, and then again in the chapter on the benefits and harms of sexual intercourse, where the focus is how many concubines he had intercourse with each day, seventy, ninety, or one hundred; *ibid.*, 357–58.

⁴³Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 47; from Ibn ‘Uyaynah.

⁴⁴Ibid., 46; from Abū al-Qāsim Hamzah ibn Yūsuf al-Sahmī (d. 427/1035–36).

⁴⁵Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*, 356–57.



women every night.⁴⁶ 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib remarried seven days after the death of Fāṭimah; his son al-Ḥasan married altogether over two hundred or seven hundred women.⁴⁷ In *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, al-Suyūṭī provides more details: 'Alī had four wives and seventeen slave concubines, and al-Ḥasan used to marry and divorce four women at the same time.⁴⁸ Ibn 'Umar, one of Muḥammad's most devoted followers, claimed that he was given the potency of forty men.⁴⁹ He used to break the fast with sexual intercourse, in order to empty his heart of earthly desire. Al-Tijānī quotes al-Ghazālī in this regard, who adds that Ibn 'Umar slept with three slave girls every night during Ramadan.⁵⁰ Sexual stamina does not distinguish only Arab men. In fact, everybody who fears God has a greater sexual appetite.⁵¹ Therefore, every believing man is given the potency of ten men.⁵² In Paradise, pious believers are rewarded with the potency of one hundred men, according to hadiths from al-Tirmidhī and al-Bayhaqī.⁵³

Al-Suyūṭī does not guide the reader or offer any comments on the veracity of conflicting hadiths. Instead, by quoting from a vast number of traditions, though conflicting, and exaggerating the sexual activities of the predecessors, he develops a central claim: there is no shame for a man to enjoy sex and to have many women—he can still be pious. In this way, al-Suyūṭī not only presents potency and heterosexual hypersexuality as essential parts of masculinity, he also introduces them as Islamic ideals.

Ideal Male Behavior towards Women

The tendency to equate ideal masculinity with potency can be seen in *Tuḥfat al-'arūs* and other earlier works, but they often restricted this ideal to the Prophet, and did not consistently include ordinary believers. Instead, they often laid more emphasis on men's code of conduct. Al-Tijānī, for example, exhorted fathers to look after their daughters, as mentioned above. He also instructed men to take care of their appearance and make an effort to be handsome and clean when they approached women, just as they expected women to look beautiful for them.⁵⁴ This code of behavior is not ignored by al-Suyūṭī. For example, he quotes a com-

⁴⁶Ibid., 50 (from Ibn Abi Shaybah) and 51.

⁴⁷Ibid., 51.

⁴⁸Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, 17.

⁴⁹Ibid., 48–49.

⁵⁰Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*, 363.

⁵¹Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 49; from Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī's commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

⁵²Ibid., 49.

⁵³Ibid., 86.

⁵⁴Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*, 145–46.



mon hadith on the importance of kissing and talking before intercourse, and hints at men's responsibility for women's wellbeing. He also, in line with the erotological tradition, points to the importance of women's sexual satisfaction.

In the chapter on *bāh* in *Wishāh*, al-Suyūṭī quotes and summarizes sections from *Ḥawāmi' al-ladhdhah*'s descriptions of the female orgasm, and how women can be stimulated. To this he adds his own thoughts and quotations from legal literature. The chapter contains, for example, advice to men on how to delay or hasten their ejaculation so as to reach simultaneous orgasm. In order to hasten the process, the author of *Ḥawāmi' al-ladhdhah* suggests that the man imagine that his female partner is exceedingly attractive and beautiful. Al-Suyūṭī changed the sentence slightly, so that the man is advised to imagine that he is having sex with another woman, "who is exceedingly beautiful and pleasurable."⁵⁵ This was apparently controversial among hadith scholars, and al-Suyūṭī therefore quotes hadiths discussing whether imagining another partner is *zinā* or not (al-Suyūṭī is quite certain it is not). Another question for hadith scholars was female ejaculation, which was influenced by medical theory. After a synopsis of the views of "Indian philosophers" taken from *Ḥawāmi' al-ladhdhah*, on whether women ejaculate or not, al-Suyūṭī continues with hadiths on women's sperm, the difference between female and male sperm, and whether women can experience nocturnal ejaculation—and if so, whether they have to perform the full-body ablution (*ghusl*), which men must do (the answer is yes).

In addition, al-Suyūṭī quotes some prophetic hadiths advising men to see to the needs of their wives and create a good atmosphere.⁵⁶ They should not cover their women like animals, but kiss and talk to them first. According to one hadith taken from Ibn 'Adī (d. 365/975–76), God loves and rewards men who play with their wives.⁵⁷ In a couple of similar hadiths, one from al-Ghazālī's *Ihyā'*, the Prophet advises men to ensure that their women get sexual satisfaction, as it is good behavior (*adab*). Al-Ghazālī is obviously influenced by the medical tradition when he claims that withholding ejaculation (i.e., orgasm) is dangerous for women.⁵⁸

Yet, neither al-Tijānī nor al-Suyūṭī hesitate to relate and give advice about male behavior that disregards women's feelings. Al-Tijānī describes early Muslims whose potency was so extraordinary that it caused suffering to their women.⁵⁹ The women's complaints are recorded, but only as testimonies to their husbands' manliness. Otherwise, women's feelings are irrelevant for al-Tijānī, al-Suyūṭī,

⁵⁵Ibid., 376–77.

⁵⁶Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 71–73.

⁵⁷Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 73.

⁵⁸See the forthcoming *Female Sexuality in the Early Medieval Islamic World*.

⁵⁹Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*, 362–63.



and their sources. Moreover, despite their belief in men's potency, al-Tijānī and al-Suyūṭī realized that satisfying multiple wives could be difficult for men, especially if they also had slave concubines. Al-Tijānī notes that women cannot legally demand intercourse more than once a month, and al-Suyūṭī quotes hadiths stating that men do not have to divide their sexual attention fairly between their wives.⁶⁰ According to al-Suyūṭī's sources, this is the meaning of Q 4:129: "You will not be able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager."

Ideal Femininity

The Best Woman is Chaste and Lustful

Ideal femininity is the main theme in both *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil* and *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, and a minor theme in *Wishāh*. Al-Suyūṭī has attempted to combine the conflicting representations of femininity in the erotological and hadith literature—what I have labelled the *bāh* and the *nikāh* traditions—and the result is interesting. In short, whereas erotology often portrays voracious women who openly express their desire, hadiths are more concerned about female chastity and marital obedience. The objectives of these two literary forms are obviously different: erotic stories about voracious women are meant to be arousing and possibly entertaining, whereas hadiths are normative. Yet, the eroticization of women in al-Suyūṭī's sources has apparently inspired him, most visibly in the short treatise *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj fī raqā'iq al-ghunj*, where he sets out to defend female sensuality and even teach women how to express it.

In *Wishāh*, al-Suyūṭī supplies a rich vocabulary for sexual activities that enhance pleasure for both parties, some of them performed by women.⁶¹ There are, among other words, several synonyms for women's sounds during intercourse—words that were amply used by the author of *Jawāmi' al-ladhdhah* when presenting female protagonists of erotic stories.⁶² In *Shaqā'iq*, al-Suyūṭī also describes female sexual behavior, but is careful to point out that it has to be confined to legal intercourse; it has to be directed to the husband or legal owner. The notion of female lustfulness is connected to the assumption that women have a greater sexual appetite than men have. Al-Suyūṭī quotes a hadith in *Wishāh* and *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil* claiming that women were given ninety-nine percent of all *shahwah* and men only one percent.⁶³ This saying is also mentioned in *Jawāmi' al-lad-*

⁶⁰Ibid., 359; al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 61.

⁶¹Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 189–96.

⁶²See Myrne, "Words of Advice."

⁶³Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, 25; *Wishāh*, 78. In the latter, he quotes two hadiths, one taken from al-Bayhaqī and one from al-Ṭabarānī. The printed edition has *ladhdhah* (pleasure) in both these hadiths, implying that women feel much more pleasure than men during intercourse. This reading is supported by MSS BnF arabe 3067, fol. 8b; Lala Ismail 577, fol. 13a; and King Sa'ūd 797,



hdhah and *Rushd al-labīb*, where it is more in keeping with the rest of the content, as female desire is the focus in these books. There, women are given somewhat less of all *shahwah*—ninety percent rather than ninety-nine—and in *Ĵawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* the saying is attributed to the female protagonist and narrator of erotic stories, not to the Prophet.⁶⁴

The central word is *ghunj*—amorous, sensual behavior—a word that is only used for women. Daniela Firanescu identifies its “semantic core” as “women’s verbal expression of sensuality,” but it also includes female attractiveness and sexual behavior in general, including sounds and movements before and during intercourse.⁶⁵ The meaning of *ghunj* is ambiguous. On the one hand, it may be an expression of real desire, as, after all, women have so much more *shahwah* than men have. On the other hand, it must be expressed in certain ways in order to please the husband. Al-Suyūṭī quotes a section from *Rushd al-labīb* by Ibn Falītah, where he describes women’s different ways of expressing their desire. The short excerpt chosen by al-Suyūṭī presents different types of *ghunj*, to the effect that there is good and bad *ghunj*, and good *ghunj* is a performance enacted by the woman to arouse her husband.⁶⁶ A woman who can perform well is soft and submissive—shy at the beginning, but then unable to hide the lust her husband arouses in her. She sighs and moves excitedly during intercourse, but not too loud and not too much. Women who perform badly, whose *ghunj* is not exciting, are too loud and ugly and move too much.

By combining *ghunj*, the sensual behavior described in the *bāh* tradition, with the female chastity advocated by the *nikāh* tradition, al-Suyūṭī endorses *ghunj* as an Islamic behavior. This combination is far from new. A saying stating that the best woman is chaste (*‘afīfah*) but lustful (*ghalimah*) towards her husband can

fol. 17a. MS BnF arabe 3067, fol. 11a, has *shahwah* in al-Bayhaqī’s hadith and *ladhdhah* in the one from al-Ṭabarānī.

⁶⁴See Myrne, “Words of Advice.”

⁶⁵Firanescu, “Revisiting Love,” 244.

⁶⁶Al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā‘iq al-utrunj*, 87–92. The quotation in *Shaqā‘iq* differs somewhat from *Rushd al-labīb* and is abbreviated. Firanescu, who wrongly attributes parts of the extract to al-Suyūṭī and al-Bayhaqī, uses fragments of it as examples of *ghunj* signifying women’s “vocal erotic behaviour”: Firanescu, “Revisiting Love,” 245, 247–50. While I agree that vocal expression was considered an important part of *ghunj*, Ibn Falītah begins with describing behavior and makes clear that vocal expression is only one part of it (*ghunj huwa al-taraffuq wa-al-tadhallul wa-al-dhubul wa-taftir al-‘uyun wa-tamrid al-jufun wa-irkhā’ al-mafasil min ghayr ḥarakah; Shaqā‘iq al-utrunj*, 87). Women can even express their sexual desire in a sensuous way without sounds (ibid., 91). In erotic stories in *Ĵawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah*, however, *ghunj* is more or less equivalent with women’s lustful sounds; see Myrne, “Words of advice.”



be traced back at least to Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), who attributes it to 'Alī.⁶⁷ In *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, the saying is a prophetic hadith, with some variants extracted from Ibn 'Adī, al-Daylamī, and al-Zamakhsharī.⁶⁸ The demand for chastity is essentially gender-neutral, and dominates many writings on *nikāḥ*. The combination of chastity and “lustfulness,” however, is principally a female characteristic, which is discussed in *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj* with the help of Quran exegeses and hadiths. For example, 'uruban in Q 56:37, a description of the women in Paradise, are, according to al-Suyūṭī's sources, women who manifest love for their husbands. They are, according to al-Ṭabarī, *al-mutaḥabbibāt al-mutawaddidāt ilá azwājihinna*, loving towards their husbands.⁶⁹ Their love includes sexual attraction. They are *'awāshiq li-azwājihinna*—passionately in love with their husbands—according to the exegetics of al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Ḥātim, Hannād ibn al-Sarī, and 'Abd al-Ḥumayd. Others use similar epithets for women who love their husbands and express it.⁷⁰

Ḥusn al-Taba'ul and Marital Obedience

The notion of the ideal woman as chaste and lustful is not new, but through the sheer number of hadiths and *akhbār* collected on this issue, al-Suyūṭī takes this further than his predecessors. As Firanesco also points out, al-Suyūṭī advocates for the inclusion of *ghunj* as part of the notion *ḥasanat/ḥusn al-taba'ul*, which signifies a woman who is obedient to her husband.⁷¹ Marital obedience is central to the feminine ideal in the *nikāḥ* tradition, and is elaborated on in *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*. The inclusion of expressions of sensuality into the notion of *ḥusn al-taba'ul* is suggested by earlier scholars. Both al-Tijānī and al-Suyūṭī quote a lost book by al-Tifāshī (580–651/1184–1253), describing an exemplary woman who is clever (*faṭinah*) and obedient to her husband (*ḥasanat al-taba'ul*) and therefore endeavors to rouse her husband's desire and enhance his pleasure. She makes herself beautiful and attractive when he has sex with her, and lets him know that she loves and desires him.⁷²

⁶⁷Ibn Qutaybah, *Uyūn al-akhbār* (Cairo, 1930), 4:2; the report goes, “The best of your women is she who is chaste with her vagina, but lustful to her husband.”

⁶⁸Al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, 77–78. The first two attribute it to Muḥammad, but regard it as *da'if*, while al-Zamakhsharī attributes it to 'Alī, and a variant to Khālid ibn Ṣafwān; both found in Ibn Qutaybah's *Uyūn al-akhbār*.

⁶⁹Al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, 64.

⁷⁰Ibid., 64–67. Al-Suyūṭī uses the same sources in *Al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr bi-al-ma'thūr*, ed. 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī (Cairo, 1424/2003), 14:201–5.

⁷¹Al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, 68–69, 75, 83. Firanesco, “Revisiting Love,” 254.

⁷²Al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj*, 80–81; al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-'arūs*, 130.



Al-Suyūṭī mentions the notion of *ḥusn al-tabaʿul* in *Wishāh*, quoting a hadith stating that *ḥusn al-tabaʿul* is women's jihad.⁷³ As female behavior is not a major focus in this book, however, marital obedience is mentioned only in passing, while emphasizing men's right to have sexual intercourse the way they wish, regardless of their wives' objections, in accordance with the exegesis of Q 2:223, which is discussed below. The obligation for women to obey their husbands is instead forcefully established by al-Suyūṭī in *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*. It is, in fact, the main theme of this book, which is written as an appeal to women to obey their husbands, and to men to control their wives and make them obey them. Punishment and reward will be delivered to women in the hereafter on the basis of their obedience to their husbands, or lack thereof.

In *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, al-Suyūṭī quotes two hadiths containing imaginative depictions of women's position in the hierarchical gender order. Both are also quoted by al-Tijānī. According to the first hadith, attributed to 'Ā'ishah, women are men's dolls (*lu'ab*), and men decide how they want their dolls to be adorned.⁷⁴ This means that even when the wife makes herself beautiful for her husband, she has to follow his instructions. Al-Tijānī quotes several other sources with the same meaning, adding that compliance with the husband's aesthetic and other preferences is her primary route to happiness. This is, in fact, his central message to women. A harmonious marriage requires a woman's total submission to a man's commands and desires. Obedience towards the husband is more important than obedience to God, which means that if men forbid their women to fast or pray or attend their parents' funerals, they have to conform.⁷⁵ He criticizes women who do not adorn themselves, and claims that even the Prophet had something to say about women's kohl and henna, and condemned women who look like men.⁷⁶ Al-Suyūṭī also describes women's preferred appearance in detail, in line with the conviction that women's beauty is central to marital happiness.⁷⁷

The second hadith declares that wives are their husbands' slaves.⁷⁸ Al-Suyūṭī quotes one and al-Tijānī two hadiths with this meaning, one from al-Shāfi': "Marriage is a form of slavery (*riqq*). She is his slave, and must obey him completely.

⁷³ Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 82; taken from al-Bayhaqī.

⁷⁴ Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, 39; al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, 129, 156. *Lu'ab* can signify toys in general, but it is obvious from the contexts that the intention here is dolls.

⁷⁵ Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs* (from al-Ghazālī), 161–62. Similar hadiths are quoted by al-Suyūṭī elsewhere; see Manuela Marin, "Disciplining Wives: A Historical Reading of Qur'an 4:34," *Studio Islamica* 97 (2003): 36–38, who mentions a quotation in *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, implying that men can forbid their wives to do the voluntary fast; *ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁶ Al-Tijānī, *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, 131–33.

⁷⁷ Al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzhat al-muta'ammil*, 39–41.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.



She should not resist anything that he asks from her,” and one from a variant of the Prophet’s farewell speech, “women are your slaves (*‘awān*).”⁷⁹ A woman’s position as her husband’s slave should prompt fathers to be careful with their choice of husbands for their daughters, according to al-Tijānī.⁸⁰ Al-Suyūṭī instead emphasizes fathers’ responsibility to instruct their daughters to be good, obedient wives. *Nuzhat al-muta’ammil* includes Muḥammad’s alleged instruction to his daughter Fāṭimah to make herself beautiful for her husband, so that her husband enjoys looking at her. When he looks at her, she should lower her gaze and feign shyness before she looks back at him. This will increase his love for her. During intercourse, she should behave like a virgin, and when he has finished, she should be exceptionally tender towards him, which will make him love her.⁸¹

Women are a Tillage for You

Consenting to men’s wishes is part of women’s obligatory obedience to their husbands, an issue that is strongly emphasized by al-Tijānī in *Tuhfat al-‘arūs* and al-Suyūṭī in *Nuzhat al-muta’ammil*, as we have seen. There are numerous hadiths, quoted here and elsewhere, exhorting women to obey their husbands, whatever they are doing, and whatever their husbands order them to do. Al-Suyūṭī makes it clear that the divine authorizes this gender order by quoting Quran exegesis. Most significant for him was perhaps Q 2:223: “Your women are tillage for you, so come unto your tillage as you wish.”⁸² This verse was revealed, according to traditions taken from Abū Dāwūd, al-Ḥākim, al-Bayhaqī, and others, when a man from Quraysh married a woman of the *anṣār*, just after the *muhājirūn* entered Medina. The Qurayshites were used to “enjoying their women” in various ways, face-to-face or from behind, whereas the people in Medina were more conventional in their sexual behavior. Hence, when the Qurayshite attempted to have sex with his new wife the way he wanted, she rejected him and went to the Prophet, complaining. Then the verse was revealed to Muḥammad, which gave all men full authority in this matter.⁸³ The implication of this exegesis is that men can have sex with their women the way they want, without the consent of their women and despite their possible aversion. According to other hadiths about this verse, however, the Jews in Medina first complained about the sexual behavior of the *muhājirūn*. A variant quoted by al-Suyūṭī combines both these causes: first the Jews complained and tried to prevent the *anṣārī* from taking up the custom

⁷⁹Ibid., 161 (al-Shāfi‘ī) and 155 (the farewell speech, commented on by al-Tirmidhī).

⁸⁰Ibid., 145ff.

⁸¹Ibid., 46–47.

⁸²Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 62–64.

⁸³Ibid., 62.



of the *muhājirūn*. Then a woman refused to obey her husband when he wanted sex with her in a way she did not like, and after that the verse was revealed.⁸⁴ The verse is discussed at length in al-Suyūṭī's *Al-Durr al-manthūr*. He quotes as many as 101 hadiths and reports on this sentence alone, which is only the first part of the verse.⁸⁵ This is to be compared with an average of two to three hadiths per verse in the sample from *Al-Durr al-manthūr* analyzed by Stephen Burge.⁸⁶ As many as 36 hadiths claim that the verse was revealed in order to oblige women to obey their husbands' sexual wishes. The crux of the matter for the jurists was whether God gave men the right to have vaginal sex with their wives the way they wished or if they were also allowed to have anal sex. In *Wishāh*, the message is summarized neatly: the verse was revealed in order to make it easy for men, regardless of women's feelings.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Al-Suyūṭī's ambition seems to have been to reinterpret the erotological heritage for the benefit of his contemporaries. *Wishāh* represents the apex of the genre of sex and marriage manuals.⁸⁸ Similar sex and marriage manuals were still written after 1500, but none drew from the Arab erotic heritage and the Islamic heritage to the extent al-Suyūṭī did. The originality of *Wishāh* lies in the way it combines the different branches of sexual knowledge, with the science of hadith as the focal point. Al-Suyūṭī provides a new and modernized version of the earlier sexual science (*ʿilm al-bāh*) and demonstrates that it is not inconsistent with an Islamic vision of sexuality, based on hadith. Whereas most earlier manuals, not least *Jawāmiʿ al-ladhdhah*, present marital intercourse as one of several possible manifestations of sexuality, *Wishāh* only deals with legal relationships. Admittedly, earlier manuals expressed the view that licit intercourse was to be preferred, and they added prophetic tradition to their arguments, but illicit sex was often not clearly condemned, and homosexuality was treated as a natural variation. In fact, several of the principal manuals have chapters devoted to same-sex desire, female and male. *Tuḥfat al-ʿarūs*, the popular marriage manual relying on hadith, on the other hand, has almost no material from the *ʿilm al-bāh* tradition and hardly mentions anything beyond licit sex, and definitely not homosexuality. By

⁸⁴Ibid., 64.

⁸⁵Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Durr al-manthūr*, 2:589–618.

⁸⁶Stephen R. Burge, "Scattered Pearls: Exploring al-Suyūṭī's Hermeneutics and Use of Sources in *al-Durr al-manthūr fi'l-tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 24, no. 2 (2013): 251–96.

⁸⁷Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 64.

⁸⁸In the same way as al-Suyūṭī contributed to mediaeval science; Geoffroy, "Al-Suyūṭī," *EI2*, 9:913–16.



incorporating the *‘ilm al-bāh* tradition, al-Suyūṭī opens up a wider range of sexual pleasures for believers, within legal bounds. In light of this, his choice not to mention homosexuality is certainly intentional.⁸⁹

In al-Suyūṭī's vision, men would be allowed to enjoy the sexual techniques and practices elaborated by his Abbasid predecessor, some inspired by Indian and Persian erotica. Together with the Islamic extension of the notion of marital bonds, which gave men the right to have sexual relations with an unlimited number of slave women, quantity became a measure of sexual quality for men. Obviously, women occupy a totally different position in this sexual universe, but al-Suyūṭī's stance on women is also quite unique. He attempted to unite the sexually voracious women who were so common in Abbasid erotica with the ideal woman in sex and marriage manuals that were built on hadiths; al-Ghazālī and al-Tijānī are major authorities in *Wishāh*. The result is an utterly complex and ambiguous vision of women, their role, and their expected contribution to matrimonial happiness.

In the introduction to *Wishāh*, al-Suyūṭī praises God for having embellished women with large buttocks, obviously for the enjoyment of men, and this sets the tone of the book.⁹⁰ In the following sections, women are primarily vehicles for men's enjoyment. Yet, they are expected to enjoy the sexual act, and their ability to achieve satisfaction is taken seriously in the last part of the book, on *bāh*, but also treated in the hadith section.

There are several conflicting notions in al-Suyūṭī's sexual ethics. For example, men should, according to some of his sources, be attentive to women's feelings and make sure that women are sexually satisfied. Yet, women should always consent to their husbands' wishes, regardless of their own feelings and objections. Conveniently, Q 4:129, which states that "You will not be able to be equitable between your wives, be you ever so eager," indicates, according to the exegesis quoted by al-Suyūṭī, that men do not have to have sex with all their wives, and they do not have to love them equally.⁹¹

One could argue that these two directives balance each other, but in the *nikāh* tradition, to which al-Suyūṭī belongs, women's obedience is an obligation, whereas men's attention to their wives is only recommended. Moreover, it is noticeable that women in this tradition are not supposed to seek their own pleasure. They focus on their husbands' needs and are, at best, satisfied by them. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to seek pleasure, and have the right to demand it, not only from their wives but also from slave concubines, whenever and however

⁸⁹A topic discussed by Hämeen-Anttila, "Al-Suyūṭī," 237–38.

⁹⁰*Zayyana al-mar'ah bi-al-ḥashafah* (*Wishāh*, 33). The word *ḥashafah* is often translated "glans of the penis," but al-Suyūṭī explains that it signifies "having large buttocks"; *Wishāh*, 188.

⁹¹Al-Suyūṭī, *Wishāh*, 61.



they want. In light of this, “whatever happens between two consenting adults is their own concern” is not a relevant summary of the message in *Shaqā’iq al-utrunj*, as suggested by Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila.⁹² Hämeen-Anttila is probably right, however, in saying that al-Suyūṭī is “able to show himself to be a man who enjoys life in all its variety,” as this is precisely the message his books have for men—but it should be noted that this message is highly gendered.⁹³ In his guides to sex and marriage, al-Suyūṭī endorses male and female ideals that are shaped by erotology and justified by hadiths. The result is an “erotic utopia” with a variety of licit sexual pleasures available for men. Women also have access to pleasure, but they are dependent on their husbands’ good will. Their role in the erotic utopia is primarily to enhance men’s sexual experience and fulfil men’s desires.

⁹²This is the meaning of *idh khalawtum fa-if’alū mā shi’tum* according to Hämeen-Anttila, “Al-Suyūṭī,” 231. However, the statement is addressed to men, who are the ones who are free to do as they wish, whereas women have to obey them. Moreover, the interpretation of *idh khalawtum fa-if’alū mā shi’tum* is not relevant, as the remark is not made by al-Suyūṭī but is a later addition. Some of the manuscripts have additions after the colophon, noted by the editor Ḥusayn ‘Umar Ḥamādah in his introduction (*Shaqā’iq al-utrunj*, 21, 22, 23), which is not uncommon in manuscripts. Hämeen-Anttila relies on al-Rifā‘ī’s (Damascus, 2001) edition, in which pages 106–8 are an addition, not noted as such by the editor, corresponding to the addition in Cairo, Dār al-Kutub MS 3490 (acc. to Ḥamādah, 16, 23). Al-Rifā‘ī’s edition is not scholarly; it is based on one single unidentified manuscript and contains a few serious corruptions and lacunas compared to the Ḥammādah edition.

⁹³Hämeen-Anttila, “Al-Suyūṭī,” 238.

