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Medieval Arabic Islam and the Culture of Gender: Feminine Voices in al-Suyūṭī's Literature on Sex and Marriage

Introduction

This article examines the feminine voices perceptible in works attributed to the renowned polymath of the Mamluk period, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), pertaining to the field of *adab al-nikāḥ*, literature on sex and marriage, or, more generally, erotic literature. As much of the early Arabic erotic literature—produced in the ninth and tenth centuries—was “lost without a trace,”¹ it is fortunate that later authors, such as al-Suyūṭī, preserved some of this early production in their compilations and the (sometimes ample) quotations from earlier authors that they inserted in their own works.

It is worth noting that while in Europe the woman's voice had to wait until the eleventh century to be heard in literature—as “before [the eleventh century] almost all texts were written by men for a male audience and primarily dealt with male issues, apart from theological topics, disregarding some, certainly remarkable exceptions”²—female Arab poets had an ancient heritage, dating from pre-Islam through the first Islamic eras, counting hundreds of female poets from al-Khansā' (seventh century) to Wallādah bint al-Mustkafī (eleventh century), according to some sources.³ However, despite the early feminine presence in Arabic literature, according to Rapoport “for most of the Mamluk period we have no female authors who speak to us in their own voice; nearly the entire corpus of surviving Mamluk texts has been written by men.”⁴

Elucidating the cause of the absence of female authors in the Mamluk period would represent, per se, the subject of a laborious—though certainly necessary—study. Nevertheless, we can consider here a related, fundamental question: is the voice of women completely absent from Mamluk texts in general, and from al-

¹Cf. E. K. Rowson, “Arabic Erotic Literature: Middle Ages to Nineteenth Century,” in *Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, ed. G. Brulotte and J. Phillips (New York, 2006), 1:41–61.

²Albrecht Classen, “Introduction,” in *The Power of a Woman's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literatures: New Approaches to German and European Women Writers and to Violence Against Women in Premodern Times* (Berlin-New York, 2007), 1.

³Radwa Ashour, Mohammed Berrada, Ferial J. Ghazoul, and Amina Rachid, “Introduction,” in *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide 1873–1999*, ed. Ashour, Ghazoul, and H. Reda-Mekdashī (Cairo, 2008), 1.

⁴Yossef Rapoport, “Women and Gender in Mamluk Society: An Overview,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 38, <https://doi.org/10.6082/m1x34vm5> (accessed October 10, 2017).



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Suyūṭī's texts in particular? Or can we identify feminine voices? If so, what is the purpose of feminine speech inserted in men's speech and what are the topics to which the feminine speech is related? We confine the scope of this investigation to a part of al-Suyūṭī's "erotic" literature, a domain in which the presence of feminine voices is, presumably, to be expected.

Our purpose is to detect women's verbalized reactions presented as "direct speech" or ascribed by the author to women and quoted as such. While analyzing women's statements related to the parts they play in sex and marriage relations, we aim to observe the discursive and ideological functions of the feminine speech inserted in the male-oriented general frame of the texts.

The corpus examined includes the entire small erotic treatise *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj fī raqā'iq al-ghunuj*⁵ (ʿĀdil al-ʿĀmil's edition, hereafter abbreviated *Shaqā'iq*), known in translation as *The Citron's Halves* or, as we have proposed,⁶ *The Citrons' Sisters: on Women of Sensitive Coquetry*. As we have approached this text in detail in previous articles,⁷ here we focus on the feminine voices detectable in the text. Other examples are excerpted from *Fann al-nikāḥ fī turāth shaykh al-islām Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*,⁸ the first of the three tomes devoted by the editor George Kadar to the compiled texts of al-Suyūṭī on this topic, namely from two chapters (pp. 67–104) that approach the topic of sex and marriage as reflected in the Prophetic tradition, the Quran, and its exegesis.

The translation of the excerpts from both parts of the corpus is ours.

Contextualization of the Corpus

In al-Suyūṭī's time, *nikāḥ* was already a well-established term; to give only one illustrious example, the imam al-Ghazālī (450–505/1058–1111), about four centuries earlier, used it in *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*⁹ (the second chapter of the section devoted to customs, *ādāt*, in his magnum opus *Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn* [The Revival of religious

⁵Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Shaqā'iq al-utrunj fī raqā'iq al-ghunuj*, ed. ʿĀdil al-ʿĀmil (Damascus, 1988).

⁶Daniela R. Firanescu, "Revisiting Love and Coquetry in Medieval Arabic Islam: al-Suyūṭī's Perspective," in *Al-Suyūṭī: A Polymath of the Mamlūk Period: Proceedings of the Themed Day of the First Conference of the School of Mamlūk Studies (Ca' Foscari University, Venice, June 23, 2014)*, ed. Antonella Ghersetti (Leiden-Boston, 2016), 243.

⁷Ibid. Also see D. R. Firanescu, "De l'amour et la coquetterie en islam arabe médiéval: la perspective d'as-Suyuti," *Romano-Arabica*, New Series, II (Discourses on Love in the Orient), ed. N. Angheliescu and G. Grigore (Bucharest, 2002), 55–62.

⁸*Fann al-nikāḥ fī turāth shaykh al-islām Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*, in *Al-a'māl al-kāmilah*, ed. George Kadar (Beirut, 2011), 3 vols.

⁹Al-Ghazālī, "Kitāb Ādāb al-nikāḥ," in *Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn* (Cairo, n.d.), 2:32–89. Also Arabic text, <http://www.Ghazālī.org/ihya/ihya.htm> external link j2-k02.doc. (accessed May 10, 2017).



sciences]), a work that al-Suyūṭī knew very well.¹⁰ The fact that al-Ghazālī’s text refers to “marital” sexual relations is obvious to the reader of the Arabic original; it is emphasized, as well, by the fact that the word *nikāḥ* is rendered in translations of the title as “marriage.”¹¹ Unfortunately, in the transliteration of the word *ādāb* (manners, etiquette; sometimes translated as “proper conduct”¹²) into Roman characters, the omission (sometimes) of the diacritics obscures the difference (that we highlight below) between the singular *adab* and its plural *ādāb*.¹³

The fact that the term *nikāḥ* was, at an early stage, a technical term for “marriage” (besides its other related sense, “coitus”) is obvious as well in the way it is defined, for instance—approximately two centuries before al-Suyūṭī—in Ibn Manẓūr’s (630–711/1233–1312) *Lisān al-‘Arab*¹⁴ as: (1) marriage (legal marriage; contract of legal marriage); (2) conjugal life; (3) conjugal sexuality; (4) sexual intercourse (in general, not necessarily “conjugal”—the completion is ours).

In *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*, al-Ghazālī was mainly preoccupied with the religious point of view on the sexual behavior of spouses or couples acting within the conjugal frame; *nikāḥ*, for him, seems to have the meaning that some contemporary authors still confer on this term, when noting that “marriage is the act that gives a concrete form to the order of existence and gives sexuality a new significance. *Nikāḥ* is coitus transcended.”¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī had always in mind the intention to indicate the merits, but also the disadvantages, of marriage, and to formulate Islamic prescriptions to be followed by Muslims in every detail. A more accurate translation of the syntagm *ādāb* (plural!) *al-nikāḥ* would be: “manners of conjugal erotic behavior,” stressing what was precisely, in our view, al-Ghazālī’s topic and purpose in *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*.

Authors after al-Ghazālī who wrote in the field of what had become, in their times, *adab* (singular!) *al-nikāḥ* kept in mind the foundation created by their master predecessor in the field of *ādāb* (plural!) *al-nikāḥ*, but only to a certain extent. *Nikāḥ* still meant marriage, in some contexts; but, beyond this, later authors brought significant developments and innovations that turned “manners of conjugal erotic behavior” (*ādāb al-nikāḥ*) into a type of “literature on sex and

¹⁰There are numerous citations from al-Ghazālī’s *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ* in al-Suyūṭī’s works, even if their number is not notable in the corpus examined here (ex.: one citation in *Shaqā’iq*, 36; three in the examined part of *Fann*, 73–74).

¹¹See, for instance, the translation by Muhtar Holland of *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*, under the title *Ādāb al-nikāḥ: The Proper Conduct of Marriage in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, 2012).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Both words are frequently transliterated in the same way: *adab*.

¹⁴Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Cairo, n.d.), 6 vols.

¹⁵Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *La Sexualité en islam* (Paris, 1975). English translation quoted here: *Sexuality in Islam* (Routledge, 2008), 15.



marriage” or even—using a wider term corresponding to these later authors’ libertine views—“erotic literature,” *adab* (singular) *al-nikāḥ*, i.e., anecdotic, entertaining literature, focusing on aspects of purely “sexual” intimacy (not necessarily matrimonial) and pure sexual desire and pleasure, often considered outside (or without specific reference to) the religious, contractual, and legal aspects of marriage. What al-Ghazālī treats in terms of moral and legal duties incumbent on spouses, according to the contractual conjugal relationship, appears in later texts pertaining to *adab al-nikāḥ* as matters of behavioral traits and actions that may increase or decrease the sexual appetite, and are thus liable to attract or repel the sexual partner that is only sometimes referred to as “the spouse.” Al-Suyūṭī’s *Shaqāʾiq* and *Fann al-nikāḥ* are illustrations *par excellence* of this type of anecdotic literature characterized by a vivid spirit of licentiousness, known in Arabic literature as *mujūn*.¹⁶ In this type of later Arabic erotica, exalting the hedonistic way of life, the words “man” (*rajul*) and “woman” (*imraʾah*) often replace the words meaning “spouse” (*zawj*, feminine *zawjah*, used by al-Ghazālī in his *Kitāb ādāb al-nikāḥ*), and *nikāḥ* often means just intercourse, coitus. The titles of chapters included in this type of book give us a glimpse of this trend of dealing with sexual relations beyond or even outside the marital context. In *Rushd al-labīb ilā muʿāsharat al-ḥabīb*,¹⁷ attributed to Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Yamanī (Ibn Falītah) (d. fourteenth century), we find “What women love from men and what they dislike” (*Mā tuḥibbu al-nisāʾ min al-rijāl wa-mā yakrahnahū*) and “What men love from women and what they dislike” (*Mā yuḥibbu al-rijāl min al-nisāʾ wa-mā yakrahūnahū*). Similarly, we find “On the laudable/endearing women” (*fī al-maḥmūd min al-nisāʾ*) and “On the laudable/endearing men” (*fī al-maḥmūd min al-rijāl*)—as well as on “repellent” (*makrūh*) men and, respectively, women (as we read in other titles of symmetrical chapters that seem to be more concise versions of those from *Rushd al-labīb*)—in a famous fifteenth-century book, *Al-Rawḍ al-ʿāṭir fī nuzhat al-khāṭir* (The Perfumed garden of sensual desire).¹⁸

The excerpts from al-Suyūṭī’s texts examined herein need to be read in the light cast by these brief notes on their contextualization.

¹⁶Literary trend manifested in Arabic literature starting, probably, with the Abbasid period, displaying “roughly, libertinism, licentiousness, frivolity, indecency, profligacy, shamelessness, impertinence, etc.,” as defined by Zoltan Szombathy, *Mujun: Libertinism in Medieval Muslim Society and Literature* (Exeter, 2013). Electronic book, Introduction, <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/mujun-libertinism-in-medieval-muslim-society-and-literature> (accessed November 14, 2017).

¹⁷Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Falītah al-Yamanī, *Rushd al-labīb ilā muʿāsharat al-ḥabīb* (Al-Māyah, Libya, 2006). [Editor’s note: On al-Suyūṭī’s use of this source see also Myrne’s article in this issue.]

¹⁸English translation by Jim Colville of *Al-Rawḍ al-ʿāṭir* by Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Nafzawi (London-New York, 1999).



Is a Woman's Voice Shameful (*Hal Ṣawt al-Mar'ah 'Awrah*)?

It would be difficult to determine when exactly this question was asked for the first time in Islam, but there is evidence that it has preoccupied Islamic scholars since early times. We agree with Denise Spellberg's statement:

I propose, as a historian of the medieval period, that the most contested issues of the modern era are, in fact, an extension of previously exclusively male-defined male directives about the definition of the female and the feminine in Islamic society.¹⁹

Nowadays, this is a recurrent question on many Islamic web pages and sites, and numerous shaykhs and imams formulate answers to it on their internet pages, the more moderate among them denying that a woman's voice is shameful, and others, more radical, stating that it is. As a reaction to this statement (which has become a saying, *maqūlah*) largely spread among Muslims, social media is full of postings on the matter (young Muslim women have created a Facebook account called "A woman's voice is revolution," *ṣawt al-mar'ah thawrah*).

We adopt the translation "shameful" for the Arabic word *'awrah* as being metaphorically convenient and linguistically versatile, but other possible translations (semantic values of this substantive) are nakedness; (private) parts of the body that must be covered; faultiness; sin; and even "woman," among others. The term does not refer uniquely to women, but it is related to them more frequently than to men, as P. Sanders notes:

Many prescriptions for dress, demeanor, and segregation are based on this concept of modesty, called in Arabic *sitr al-aura*, literally, "covering [one's] nakedness." The exhortation to preserve modesty applies equally to men and women in Islam, but the various law schools have diverging definitions of what constitutes the *'aura* for men and women, and they usually emphasize women's responsibility.²⁰

The expression *ṣawt al-mar'ah 'awrah* seems to us to convey a "meaning beyond the meaning" (borrowing from the Arabic grammatical tradition the term *ma'ná al-ma'ná*, used in rhetoric, *balāghah*) that, as she must cover not only the corporeal intimate parts of her body, as well as all the parts (like the hair) that

¹⁹Denise A. Spellberg, "History Then, History Now: The Role of Medieval Islamic Religio-Political Sources in Shaping the Modern Debate on Gender" in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, 2005), 3.

²⁰Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven, 1991), 89–90.



may be tempting to men, a woman should also “cover,” in a figurative sense, this impalpable feature of hers that is her voice, by speaking to men in an appropriate way, without softening or undulating her voice. This is because the voice may carry sexually suggestive inflections that may cause a man temptation, expressed by the commonly used term *ighrāʾ* (incitement, temptation, seduction) or its more technical synonym, *fitnah*.

The Quran and the Prophetic hadith are commonly invoked by those who maintain the idea that listening to a woman’s voice is not a sin or shameful in itself. The Quranic excerpt frequently quoted is verse 32 from the chapter *al-Aḥzāb* (given here in two translations):

O wives of the Prophet, you are not like anyone among women. If you fear Allah, then do not be soft in speech [to men], lest he in whose heart is disease should covet, but speak with appropriate speech.²¹

Wives of the Prophet, you are not as other women. If you are god-fearing, be not abject in your speech, so that he in whose heart is sickness may be lustful; but speak honourable words.²²

The Arabic expression translated by “do not be soft in speech” (in the first example) and “be not abject in your speech” (in the second) is *lā takhḍāʿna bi-al-qawli*. The notion of “being soft in speech” (*al-khudūʿ bi-al-qawl*) is sometimes rendered explicit by Quran commentators using as a synonym the notion of *al-takassur fī al-kalām*, a notion that appears with al-Suyūṭī, that we have translated²³—based on its contextual meaning in al-Suyūṭī’s *Shaqāʾiq*—as “the babied, pampered, coddled, rhythmic way of speaking.” Another recurring synonym used by commentators is *tarkhīm al-kalām*, which we have translated with reference to al-Suyūṭī’s *Shaqāʾiq* as “waving in speaking, modulating the voice with grace/harmoniously, undulating the voice.”²⁴

While the Quranic text clearly implies—in the verse quoted above—that a woman’s voice may be tempting for men, it also clearly states that temptation is felt by “he in whose heart is disease” (or “sickness,” considering both translations of the word *marāḍ*). In our understanding, the verse logically implies that not all men are tempted by a woman’s voice and that feeling tempted by a wom-

²¹Sahih International translation of the Quran, <https://quran.com/33> (accessed November 10, 2017).

²²Arthur J. Arberry’s translation of the Quran, http://www.theonlyquran.com/quran/Al-Ahzab/english_arthur_john_arberry/?ayat=31 (accessed November 10, 2017).

²³Firanesu, “Revisiting Love,” 244.

²⁴Ibid.



an's voice is a state of sickness. Consequently, the recommendation that women speak to men "with appropriate speech" or "honorable words" is meant to prevent situations when a sick man who listens to a woman's voice may "covet" or feel "lustful." Interestingly, this logical inference does not seem to have drawn the commentators' and jurists' special attention; they rather seem to apply general restrictions to manifestations of a woman's voice out of an excess of caution and care for men's vulnerability.

Researching early hadith sources, we find, for instance, that in his commentary²⁵ on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, the imam al-Nawawī (631–76/1234–78) refers to a hadith—the transmission chain (*sanad*) of which goes back to 'Ā'ishah, the Prophet's wife—relating that the Prophet used to receive women searching for advice and guidance in religious matters and that he talked to them in order to reach an agreement, without touching their hands. In the case of a commercial transaction with a woman, 'Ā'ishah attests (in the same hadith) that he touched a woman's hand only in order to conclude a contract, but, immediately after, he dismissed her. Usually, 'Ā'ishah continues, he said to women: "I reached an agreement with you through speech/I concluded with you a verbal agreement (*qad bāya'tukunna kalāman*)."²⁵ Al-Nawawī interprets therefore:

(...) فيه إنَّ كلام الأجنبيَّة يباح سماعه عند الحاجة وإنَّ صوتها ليس بعورة وإنه لا يلمس بشرة الأجنبيَّة من غير ضرورة كالطب و فصد و حمامة و قلع ضرس و كحل العين ونحوها.

The meaning of this is that it is allowed, in case of necessity, to listen to the voice of a foreign [from outside the family] woman; that her voice is not shameful; and that touching a woman's skin is not allowed if it is not a case of necessity (like opening a vein, letting blood, scarification, tooth extraction, coloring the eyes with kohl and similar activities).

This interpretation implies that listening to a foreign woman's voice is not prohibited, but that some conditions are imposed, as hearing the feminine voice is comparable to touching a woman's skin. These are two actions that a man is allowed to perform only when it is necessary for activities such as business, contracts, medical treatment, etc., when there is no woman to perform them.

²⁵Al-Nawawī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim bi-Sharḥ al-Nawawī*, (Cairo, 1930), chapter 13, 10, <https://ia902303.us.archive.org/35/items/alhelawy05/shsm13.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2017).



A fatwa²⁶ given on the popular site Islamweb.net²⁷ invokes the Quranic chapter *Al-Aḥzāb*, verses 53 and 32, to reinforce the idea that the woman's voice is not shameful, with the condition that the woman respects the injunction of "not being soft in speech" (*'adam al-khuḍū' bi-al-qawl*; we adopt here the first translation given above), the expression being explained in the commentary as "modulating the voice and smoothing it" (*tarkhīm al-ṣawt and tarqīquhu*). The author of the fatwa continues:

وإن كان صوت المرأة يتلذذ به السامع أو يخاف على نفسه الفتنة فحرام عليه استماعه، وإن كان غير ذلك فلا يجرم، لأنه ليس بعورة.

If he who listens to the woman's voice feels lust or fears being tempted, then listening to it is prohibited; if he does not feel so, then it is not forbidden because it [the woman's voice] is not shameful [in itself].

Early jurists from the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence had to answer, among other complicated questions, whether a woman was or was not allowed to lead men in prayer, having in view her "unavoidable role as temptress."²⁸ Does the voice play a role in this? According to Jalajel,²⁹ the Maliki jurist al-Māziri (453–536/1061–1141) "also justifies not allowing a woman to lead prayer because her voice is shameful." As for a woman being a judge, the Shafi'i jurist al-Rāfi'i "states that it is inappropriate for a woman to be a judge because she will unavoidably sit among men and raise her voice in their presence."³⁰ The same author³¹ states also regarding a major Shafi'i jurist:

Al-Māwardī describes the woman as a "shameful being" and that her leading prayers will cause male worshippers to feel temptation towards her. One of the reasons it is allowed for a male slave to lead men in prayers but not a free woman is because his voice will not bring temptation to the men following him.

²⁶On the powerful role of the fatwa genre in researching gender matters in Islam, see Judith E. Tucker, "And God knows Best: The Fatwa as a Source for the History of Gender in the Arab World," in *Beyond the Exotic*, 165–79.

²⁷<http://fatwa.islamweb.net/fatwa/index.php?page=showfatwa&Option=FatwaId&Id=1524>, 3 (accessed August 8, 2017).

²⁸David Solomon Jalajel, *Women and Leadership in Islamic Law: A Critical Analysis of Classical Legal Texts* (Oxford, 2017), 133.

²⁹Ibid., 131.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 131–32.



Even from the above snapshot of the issue of a woman's voice being heard by men, it results that there are religious considerations that some take into account to credit the idea that, at least in religious and juridical contexts of action and behavior, a woman's voice may be perceived as tempting to men; the degrees of temptation may vary and be interpretable, but "the woman's unavoidable role as temptress"³² seems to be a common factor in the debate.

It would certainly be of interest to establish whether al-Suyūṭī discusses the notion of *'awrah* (shamefulness) as an attribute of a woman's voice in his purely theological work; as for his erotic literature, we have not encountered it, at least not in the examined corpus. Perhaps this is due, indeed, to the fact that al-Suyūṭī seems to have written freely on the topic of erotica; as it has been noted by Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila,³³ while referring to *Shaqā'iq*:

That he freely quotes in this serious work, as also in his other works on *nikāh*, from various erotic manuals shows that works of explicitly erotic content were considered by him and his readers to be authoritative mainstream works, suitable to be quoted side by side with lexicographical authorities....

We would add, regarding the specific topic of the woman's voice, that al-Suyūṭī has probably produced in *Shaqā'iq* a mini-treatise unique in Arabic literature, devoted to the erotic role of the woman's voice, in which he thoroughly depicts the polyphony of the many interweaving tonalities, vocalizations, inflexions, breathing tools, verbalizations, etc., all parts of the feminine vocal erotic arsenal that he places under the umbrella of *ghunj*. We have presented elsewhere³⁴ the complex notion of *ghunj* (a woman's erotic vocalization before and during intercourse) to which al-Suyūṭī devotes ample explanations and descriptions in his *Shaqā'iq*, and emphasized that a woman's voice plays, in this author's vision, an important, very useful role in the intimate life of couples, as "the man participating in the sexual intercourse is presented as the beneficiary of this facility or tenderness services offered by the female partner."³⁵ Not only is the woman's voice not shameful in al-Suyūṭī's erotica, but it is the very proof of "sensitive coquetry," to the point that the term *ghunj*, which initially was related to vocalization/verbalization during intercourse, acquires for al-Suyūṭī the extended meaning of "feminine flirtatious, seductive, and erotic behavior directed towards man/husband's pleasure and satisfaction."³⁶ One should note that women's "babied, pampered, coddled, rhyth-

³²Jalajel, *Women and Leadership*, 133.

³³"Al-Suyūṭī and Erotic Literature," in *Al-Suyūṭī: A Polymath of the Mamlūk Period*, 231, n.14.

³⁴Firanesu, "Revisiting Love" and "De l'amour et la coquetterie."

³⁵Firanesu, "Revisiting Love," 246.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 254.



mic way of speaking” (*al-takassur fī al-kalām*) and “waving in speaking, modulating the voice with grace/harmoniously, undulating the voice” (*tarkhīm al-kalām*), banned as they are in other situations mentioned above, become laudable virtues in the specific context of the art of seduction.

Feminine Voices Audible in the Corpus

Excerpts from *Shaqāʿiq*

Ex. 1 (*Shaqāʿiq*, 35)

أخرج البيهقي عن أسماء بنت يزيد الأنصارية أنها قالت: يا رسول الله، إنكم، معاشر الرجال، فُضلتُم علينا بالجمعة والجماعات وعبادة المرضى وشهود الجنائز والحج بعد الحج وأفضل من ذلك الجهاد في سبيل الله، فقال رسول الله: حسن تبعل إحداكن لزوجها وطلبها مرضاته [وأتباعها موافقته] يعدل ذلك كله.

Al-Bayhaqī narrated from Asmāʾ bint Yazīd al-Anṣārīyah³⁷ that she said: “O Messenger of Allah: you, the community of men, have been given, over us [women], the privileges of the Friday prayer, the gatherings, the visit of the ill, the attendance of funerals, the pilgrimage after pilgrimage, and, above all, the sacred war/struggle on the path of Allah [*jihād*].” The Messenger of Allah replied: “A woman’s satisfying conduct towards her husband and her struggle towards his satisfaction/happiness [and seeking his consent/agreement] equal all these.”

Ex. 2 (*Shaqāʿiq*, 43)

أخرج أبو الفرج في الأغاني من طريق المدائني عن فلانة [قلاية] قالت: كنت عند عائشة بنت طلحة، فقيل: قد جاء عمر بن عبيد الله، يعني زوجها، قالت: فتتحييت ودخل فلاعبها مدة، ثم وقع عليها، فشخرت و نخرت وأتت بالعجائب من الرهز، وأنا أسمع فلما خرج، قلت لها: أنت في نسبك وشرفك وموضعك تفعلين هذا! قالت: إننا نستهب لهذه الفحول بكل ما نقدر عليه وبكل ما يجرىها فما الذي أنكرت من ذلك؟ قلت: أحب أن يكون ذلك ليلاً، قالت: ذاك هكذا وأعظم منه، ولكنه حين يراني تتحرك شهوته وتهيج، فيمد يده إلي، فأطاعه فيكون ما ترين.

Abū al-Faraj narrated in *Al-Aghānī*, reporting on al-Madāʿinī, who narrated from a woman³⁸ [or Qallābah] who said: “I was visiting ʿĀʾishah bint Ṭalḥah when it was announced that her husband,

³⁷The editor notes that her *kunya* is Umm Salamah and that she reported on the Prophet *aḥādīth ṣāliḥah* (correct/valid traditions). *Shaqāʿiq*, 35, n. 56.

³⁸The editor’s note (p. 43, n. 2) indicates that the name Qallābah appears in another manuscript instead of the impersonal *fulānah* (unspecified woman).



‘Umar ibn ‘Ubayd Allāh, arrived.” The woman said: “So I withdrew, and he came in and caressed her for a while then he jumped her and she snorted/snored and sobbed/moaned, and performed astonishing varieties of *rahz*,³⁹ while I was hearing. After he left, I told her: ‘You, with your descent, honorable position, and rank, are doing this?!’ She replied: ‘We strive to stir up the desire in these virile males in every way we can and by all means that set them in motion: so, of what did you disapprove in this?’ I said: ‘I like this to happen by night.’ She retorted: ‘That one is like this one, and even greater; but when he [the husband] sees me, his sexual appetite is stimulated, he becomes excited, so he grabs me, and I obey him, then what you’ve witnessed happens.’”

The editor mentions (p. 43, n. 4) a final reply found in *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs* by al-Tijānī:

فقلت لها: يا عائشة، لقد أوتي عمر منك ما لم يؤت أحد من أزواجك.

I told her: “O ‘Ā’ishah, indeed, ‘Umar was presented by you with what none of your [ex-]husbands had been presented.”

Ex. 3 (*Shaqā’iq*, 43)

وفي كتاب نثر الدر [للآبي]: لما زُفَّت عائشة بنت طلحة إلى زوجها مصعب بن الزبير، سمعت امرأة بينهما، وهو يجامعها، شخيرا وغطيطا في الجماع لم يُسمع مثله، فقالت لها في ذلك، فقالت لها عائشة: إن الخيل لا تشرب إلا بالصغير. (أورده صاحب تحفة العروس).

In the book “Nathr al-durr” by al-Ābī is related: when ‘Ā’ishah bint Ṭalḥah was given in marriage to her husband, Muṣ‘ab ibn al-Zubayr, a woman heard between the two of them, while he was making love to her, noises of snorting and heavy snoring never heard before. She told her this, and ‘Ā’ishah answered: truly, horses don’t drink water without snorting. (Related by the author of *Tuḥfat al-‘arūs*).

Ex. 4 (*Shaqā’iq*, 46)

و فيه [في كتاب جامع اللذة]: قيل لامرأة: أي شيء أوقع في القلوب وقت النكاح؟ قالت: موضع لا يسمع فيه إلا النخير والشهيق، ويجلب الماء من غشاء الدماغ ومخارج العظام.

³⁹A woman’s rhythmic vocalizations facilitating the man’s movements during intercourse.



In it [the same book, *Jāmi‘ al-ladhdhah*,⁴⁰ there is also]: A woman was asked: what is the most pleasurable thing during intercourse? She said: a position in which one hears nothing but snorting and moaning/groaning/sighing that brings the water out from the brain’s membrane and the bones’ articulations.

Excerpts from Other Texts Authored by al-Suyūṭī Included in the First Volume of *Fann al-nikāḥ*

These texts⁴¹ approach the topic of sex and marriage as reflected in the Prophetic tradition, and in the Quran and its exegesis.

Most of the examples of feminine speech presented as “direct” are inserted in passages where women are depicted as advice seekers, or as “learners”—often directly from the Prophet Muhammad or from him via authoritative feminine figures—in matters of sexual behavior considered recommendable or a wife’s duty towards her husband:

Ex. 1

أخرج البزار عن ابن عباس أن امرأة قالت: يا رسول الله، أخبرني ما حق الزوج على الزوجة؟ قال: فإن حق الزوج على زوجته إن سألتها نفسها، وهي على ظهر بعير، لا تمنعه نفسها.

Al-Bazzār reported, on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, that a woman said: “O Messenger of Allah, let me know: what is a husband’s right over his wife?” He said: “A husband’s right over his wife is this: if he asks her to give herself to him while she is on the back of a camel, she shouldn’t refuse [to give] herself [to him]/obstruct him.” (Chapter: *al-Nikāḥ fī fann al-ḥadīth*, 76)

Another version:

وأخرج البيهقي في شعب الإيمان عن ابن عمر، عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم عن امرأة أتته، فقالت: ما حق الزوج على الزوجة؟ فقال: لا تمنعه نفسها، وإن كانت على ظهر قتب.

⁴⁰The editor of *Shaqā’iq* does not indicate the author of the book quoted by al-Suyūṭī as *Jāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* (*Shaqā’iq*, 45); he may be ‘Alī ibn Naṣr al-Kātib, the tenth-century author of *Jawāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* (Encyclopedia of pleasure) (whose title appears sometimes with the singular *Jāmi‘* instead of the plural *Jawāmi‘*). On this see Pernilla Myrne, “Pleasing the beloved: sex and true love in a medieval Arabic erotic compendium,” in *Beloved: Love and Languishing in Middle Eastern Literatures*, ed. Michael Beard, Alireza Korangy, and Hanadi al-Samman (London, 2017), 216–36. [Editor’s note: On al-Suyūṭī’s use of *Jāmi‘ al-ladhdhah* see also Myrne’s article in this issue.]

⁴¹*Fann al-nikāḥ*, in *Al-A‘māl al-kāmilah*, 1. The chapters’ titles follow the excerpts.



Al-Bayhaqī narrated in *Shu‘ab al-īmān* on the authority of Ibn Omar, who transmitted from the Prophet—peace be upon him—that a woman came to him and said/asked: “What is a husband’s right over his wife?” He answered: “She shouldn’t refuse [to give] herself [to him] even if she were on a [camel] hump.”
(Chapter: *al-Nikāḥ fī fann al-ḥadīth*, 76–77)

The accompanying explanation (attributed to al-Tirmidhī) of the above passage makes as clear as daylight the crucial obligation of the woman/wife to give herself to the man/husband unconditionally (even if she is “in the child delivery situation”), at any time he requests:

This means that the midwives were taking the woman, who was about to give birth, out in the desert [and lifting her] on the back of a camel/a camel’s hump to facilitate the delivery. So, he [the Prophet] said she shouldn’t refuse [to give] herself [to him] even if she was on a camel hump, meaning in the child delivery situation.
(p. 77)

Ex. 2

وأخرج عبد الرزاق و عبد بن حميد والبيهقي في الشعب من طريق صفية بنت شيبة، عن أم سلمة، قالت: لما قدم المهاجرون المدينة أرادوا أن يأتوا النساء من أديارهن في فروجهن فأنكرن ذلك، فجنن أم سلمة فذكرن ذلك لها، فسألت النبي صلى الله عليه و سلم عن ذلك فقال: {نساؤكم حرث لكم فأتوا حرثكم أنى شئتم} صماماً واحداً.

‘Abd al-Razzāq and ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd narrated, as did al-Bayhaqī in *Shu‘ab*, transmitting from Ṣafīyah bint Shaybah, who narrated from Umm Salamah [who said]: “When *al-muhājirūn* [the Meccans who emigrated to Medina accompanying the Prophet] came to Medina, they wanted to practice with their women the rear-entry position of penetration into the vagina; the women rejected this and came to Umm Salamah to tell her about this, so she asked the Prophet—peace be upon him!—who said: *Your women are a tilth for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will,*⁴² [but] one single/precise valve/orifice [vagina].⁴³

(Chapter: *al-Nikāḥ fī al-Qur’ān al-karīm wa-tafāsīrihi*, 83)

⁴²Sūrat al-Baqarah:223, Mohammed M. Pickthall’s translation, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=2&verse=223> (accessed September 23, 2017).

⁴³[Editor’s note: This episode is discussed in Myrne’s article, under the heading *Women are a tilth for you.*].



Other Examples of Feminine “Direct” Speech Included in the Same Section of *Fann al-nikāḥ* Mentioned Above

In some other chapters, such as *Al-Nikāḥ fī al-Qurʾān al-karīm wa-tafāsīrihi* (pp. 81–104; here examined: 81–90), women’s voices are heard almost exclusively in relation to one single topic: the correct spot and best positions of penetration (e.g., standing, face to face, side position, rear-entry position, etc.), according to the Islamic rules (and in comparison with the different customs and practices of the Supporters of Medina [*al-Anṣār*]).

The discourse produced by al-Suyūṭī in this section turns around the explanation of the meaning and interpretation of the Qurānic verse 223 from Sūrat al-Baqarah (mentioned above: *Your women are a tilth for you [to cultivate] so go to your tilth as ye will...*), focusing mainly on inquiring about the Prophet’s attitudes, reactions, and replies when asked about various sexual positions and penetration practices.

Notes on Feminine Voices within the Corpus

Occurrence, Authenticity, Identity

There are few occurrences of feminine voices in the examined texts, despite the high degree of expectancy that one may have to detect such voices in texts of this nature.

Women’s speech in the corpus is in fact reported by men and only allegedly presented as “direct” and quoted as such. There is always a man (or male nodes) in the chain of transmitters, although other women transmitters may be involved; the supreme reporting authority is, finally, the author, al-Suyūṭī, whose methods of selecting and rendering the quoted speeches we have no means of validating.

As for the identity of the women whose speech is rendered, the great majority of voices belong either to illustrious female figures or to influential women in Islam. These are the categories:

(a) The Prophet’s wives Umm Salamah (it is probably Umm Salamah bint Abī Umayyah, one of the most influential wives of the Prophet and a reputed hadith transmitter, who is mentioned in the above section on other texts authored by al-Suyūṭī and in a few examples not included here) and Hafṣah Umm al-Muʾminīn (Hafṣah bint ʿUmar, in examples not included here).⁴⁴

(b) Women from the Prophet’s family such as ʿĀʾishah bint Ṭalḥah (the niece of the Prophet’s wife ʿĀʾishah bint Abū Bakr, mentioned in the above section on *Shaqāʾiq*) and Hafṣah bint ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (probably Hafṣah bint ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, who “was of the contemporaries of the *Ṣaḥabah*, and a

⁴⁴Al-Suyūṭī, *Fann al-Nikāḥ*, 84.



trustworthy narrator of *ḥadīth*. She narrated on the authority of her father, her paternal aunt ʿĀʾishah, and her maternal aunt Umm Salamah,”⁴⁵ in other examples not included here).⁴⁶

(c) Aristocratic women from important families close to the Prophet, such as Asmāʾ bint Yazīd al-Anṣārīyah (who also had the *kunyah* Umm Salamah, “known to have related 81 sayings from the prophet Muḥammad and her uncle Maḥmūd ibn ʿAmr al-Anṣārī and Abū Sufiyān and others reported and quoted her. She is also known to have been a woman of science and a defender of women’s rights”⁴⁷), mentioned in the above section on *Shaqāʾiq*, and Ṣafīyah bint Shaybah (daughter of one of the Companions, *ṣaḥabah*, listed by some scholars among the Companions and by some others among the Successors,⁴⁸ mentioned in the above section on other texts authored by al-Suyūṭī).

(d) Ordinary women, perhaps considered not important, whose names are not mentioned; they are anonymous voices belonging to *fulānah* (someone/some woman; French *une telle*) or simply *imraʾah* (a woman), in the above sections on *Shaqāʾiq* and in other texts authored by al-Suyūṭī, as well as in other examples not included here.

Topics of Feminine Speech and Women’s Roles

Given the nature of the corpus and the specific field that it belongs to (see above, Contextualization of the corpus), women’s “direct” speech is inserted in the texts in relation with the main topic and illustrates a delimited number of roles.

Topics

(a) The main framing topic is women’s adequate behavior in their relation with their husbands, as prescribed or recommended by the author, according to moral teachings that he bases on Islamic authoritative sources; al-Bayhaqī’s narration from Asmāʾ bint Yazīd al-Anṣārīyah quoted above offers the general view that a woman’s most important duty, the “satisfying conduct towards her husband [*ḥusn al-tabaʿul li-zawjihā*] and her struggle towards his satisfaction/happiness [and seeking his consent/agreement] ...,” equals all Muslim men’s duties and privileges, according to a Prophetic hadith.

(b) From the framing topic derives the sub-topic that represents in fact the author’s peculiar object of attention in the analyzed corpus: a woman’s adequate

⁴⁵<https://sijjada-bakria.com/en/blog/2017/05/17/hafsah-bint-abdel-rahman-bin-abi-bakr-al-siddiq/> (accessed December 3, 2017).

⁴⁶Al-Suyūṭī, *Fann al-Nikāḥ*, 73 and 83.

⁴⁷Bouthaina Shaaban, “The Muted Voices of Women Interpreters,” in *Faith and Freedom: Women’s Human Rights in the Muslim World*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami (Syracuse, 1995), 62.

⁴⁸Asma Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge, 2013), 74.



“sexual” behavior towards her husband. One may note that al-Suyūṭī refers elsewhere, in other writings pertaining to the literature of sex and marriage, not only to a woman’s recommended, ideal behavior towards her husband, but also, by extension, towards men, in general; thus, the fact that, within our corpus, the feminine speech reported as “direct” is inserted in contexts related to “conjugal” sexual relations becomes relevant: a woman’s voice expressing sex-related statements is to be heard only by her husband.

One example from *Shaqā’iq* cited above does not explicitly refer to the conjugal context, but simply states that “a woman” is asked “what is the most pleasurable thing during intercourse;” this may be just a matter of omission or a sign of a negligent manner of quoting. However, this example is interesting because it has a purely anecdotic character, with no (at least no transparent) moral or ethical purpose; a woman is simply asked about her own sexual taste and pleasure. This kind of woman-centered speech, delivered by a woman, seems to us to be rare within al-Suyūṭī’s erotic literature, which usually displays men’s preferences and desires. One should note as well that this unusual topic (women’s sexual preference) appears in a quotation from which the transmission chain is omitted either by al-Suyūṭī or by the author from whose text he cites. This omission reinforces the anecdotic character of the narration, depriving the woman’s opinion of the importance normally conferred by the existence of a respectable chain of transmission (or, at least, of a respectable node within the chain), presenting it as a rather weightless opinion, credited by no authority.

(c) Another topic—subordinate to the framing topic (a) and the sub-topic (b)—in connection with which the women’s “direct” speech is inserted, is that of “the husband’s right over his wife,” *ḥaqq al-zawj ‘alá al-zawjah*, illustrated in the report from al-Bazzār and its alternate version cited above (in both, the person who inquires is “a woman”), and also found repeatedly in the second part of the examined section of *Fann al-nikāḥ*.

(d) Finally, directly related to the above-mentioned topic (b), is that of correct (in the sense of allowed/recommended) penetration positions and spots, conforming with the Prophet’s teaching (reflected in the hadith), with the Quranic text, and—less frequently—according to the prescriptions of important figures in Islam. Judging by its frequency in the corpus (the narrative from Umm Salamah and other examples, not included here, from the same chapter, *Al-Nikāḥ fī al-Qur’ān al-karīm wa-tafāsīrihi*) this topic is only apparently subsidiary since, in fact, it is largely illustrated with details stressing women’s need of guidance in matters of the sexual practices of the men of Quraysh, compared to those of the male Supporters of Medina (*al-Anṣār*).



Roles

Women's roles illustrated in the corpus are:

- (a) Witness of a marital sexual encounter, described in an anecdote included above used by al-Suyūṭī as a didactic argument serving his purpose of teaching women/wives about the desirable sexual conduct that they should adopt in intimate relations with their husbands.
- (b) Sexual advice seekers and teachable “learners,” requesting guidance and knowledge in sexual matters: directly from the Prophet (in the report from al-Bazzār and its alternate version cited above); from the Prophet, via important, authoritative feminine figures (in the report from Ṣafīyah bint Shaybah via Umm Salamah); from important, respected, more experienced women (the narrative from *Al-Aghānī* given above, in which a patronizing woman—or one who is elder or in a superior social position, possibly named Qallābah—reproaches another woman for what she sees as inappropriate behavior).
- (c) Teachers⁴⁹ or mentors for other women: a woman in a position of authority (noble, learned, close to authoritative male figures of Islam) teaching or guiding other women on the right path in matters of recommended sexual behavior, such as Umm Salamah and ‘Ā’ishah bint Ṭalḥah (see above, Occurrence, Authenticity, Identity), whose social position enables her to reverse the roles and become the teacher of another woman/Qallābah, who had attempted to give her a lesson.

Final remarks

The analysis of the corpus allows for some significant remarks:

- (1) Women's voices are audible in relation to a restrained and restrictive palette of male-centred eroticist topics that consider practical, material aspects of conjugal intercourse and only very rarely refer to the core principles of intimacy. Women are represented as primarily and ultimately preoccupied by their sexual duties towards men and manifesting concern for acquiring the means to please them, with very rare exceptions when their voices express feminine interests or preferences. Their speech, in its content and spirit, follows and reinforces the manly perspective on sexual relations and intimacy in general.
- (2) The main (sometimes intertwining) roles assumed by women (seekers of sexual advice, learners from authoritative sources, and mentors of other women) are represented in the texts as means to fulfilling the needs of men and satisfying

⁴⁹On women as teachers in Mamluk sources, Yehoshua Frenkel makes the point that “women teachers and transmitters were perceived by their environment as charismatic authorities who empowered the community (*baraka*), regardless of their gender” (“Slave Girls and Learned Teachers: Women in Mamluk Sources,” in *Developing Perspectives in Mamluk History: Essays in Honor of Amalia Levanoni*, ed. Yuval Ben Bassat [Leiden-Boston, 2017], 175).



men. Providing this satisfaction is allegedly (or must be) women's own supreme satisfaction. Women's principal goals, as they are depicted in the texts, are to be perfect servants of pleasure-seeking men and to acquire (or transmit to other women) proper education enabling them to conform to rules prescribed by men in positions of religious authority, thus becoming men's efficient retainers in the realm of carnal pleasure.

(3) Ultimately, this approach enables us to remark that al-Suyūṭī, as an influential medieval Islamic figure, contributed to the perpetuation and authoritative reinforcement of the culture of gender in Arab-Islamic society during the Mamluk period and, perhaps, far beyond it. This needs to be more thoroughly substantiated; however, the glimpse that we are given through the texts examined here, as well as other of his erotic texts, seems to agree with observations made in a recent study related to al-Suyūṭī's authoritative discourse in his legal writings:

Al-Suyūṭī's story, as I tell it here, is ultimately a story about authority. I agree with Bruce Lincoln's assertion that authority can be studied not as an abstract concept, but as an aspect of discourse or speech.... Association and persuasion, for example, are two strategies that occur throughout al-Suyūṭī's legal writing (...) Al-Suyūṭī's efforts did not end with his death, but have echoes today in the discourse of modern jurists striving to respond to their own set of challenges.⁵⁰

Echoes of al-Suyūṭī's authoritative legal discourse are easily detectible in his erotica as well, while feminine voices audible in the background are employed to benefit his "performative, directive-declarative discourse"⁵¹ in the sense that this type of speech aims at instituting a model of the well-guided, exemplary, submissive woman, ideal lower-grade companion of an ideal man (ironically, shaped by the same cultural factors that consolidate his higher position, and, sometimes, his deeper unhappiness!). The institutionalizing tone emanating from the author's erotic literature, as we have previously noted,⁵² is that of "an Islamic moral law of conduct imposed to [sic] women, a law that, ultimately, al-Suyūṭī represents, serves, and promotes..." through the texts herein observed and other similar writings.

⁵⁰Rebecca Skreslet Hernandez, *The Legal Thought of Jalal al-Din al-Suyūṭī: Authority and Legacy* (Oxford, 2017), 23, referring to Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago, 1994), 2.

⁵¹Using Searle's and Vanderveken's terms, operational in linguistic pragmatics, and, on a larger scale, in discourse typology. John Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundation of Illocutionary Logic* (Cambridge, 1985), 37.

⁵²Firanesu, "Revisiting Love," 256.

