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Tales of a Medieval Cairene Harem: Domestic Life in al-Biqā'ī's Autobiographical Chronicle

Among the findings of recent scholarship on medieval Arabic autobiography¹ is a reaffirmation, or redefinition, of the long-held notion that the realm of "private" life was "never the central focus of pre-modern Arabic autobiographical texts."² To address this paradoxical contradiction between the business of "self-representation" and the obvious lack of "private" material in such texts, four sets of recurring features have been identified to help in uncovering the "modes" the medieval Arabic authors used to construct their individual identities: portrayals of childhood failures, portrayals of emotion through the description of action, dream narratives as reflections of moments of authorial anxiety, and poetry as a discourse of emotion.³ Other related areas, such as domestic life, gender, and sexuality, are largely left out. The "autobiographical anxiety," after all, has perhaps more to do with the authors' motivations to pen elaborate portrayals, in various literary conventions, of themselves as guardians of religious learning and respected community members (and in some cases, to settle scores with their enemies and rivals) than self-indulgence and exhibitionist "individuating." In this regard, a good example is perhaps the universally acclaimed autobiographical travelogue, the *Riḥlah* of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 770/1368), who married and divorced over a period of thirty years of globetrotting more than twenty women and fathered, and eventually abandoned, some seventy children. However, little, if any, information is provided

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¹The term autobiography is broadly defined in this essay. It includes autobiographies proper as well as autobiographical materials found in chronicles and biographical dictionaries. The latter is particularly important with regard to the later Mamluk period, which saw a surge of autobiographical writings of all kinds. Recent studies have demonstrated that Mamluk historians, especially those who wrote in the fifteenth century, tended to insert the autobiographical materials into their chronological works, thus combining memoirs and history; see Donald Little, "Historiography of the Ayyubid and Mamluk Epochs," in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, ed. Carl Petry (Cambridge, 1998), 412–44, especially 413–14. For a comprehensive survey of medieval Arabic autobiographical writings, see *Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. Dwight Reynolds (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001).

²*Interpreting the Self*, 243.

³*Ibid.*, 242–43; also see 28–29, 30–31.



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in Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's accounts about these women and children, most of whom remain nameless.⁴

Such, however, is not the case with the Mamluk alim Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480), in whose autobiographical chronicle, entitled *Izhār al-'Aṣr li-Asrār Ahl al-'Aṣr* (Lightening the dusk with regard to the secrets of the people of the age), various aspects of his private life loom large.⁵ In this remarkable, and somewhat odd, work, the author's colorful life and eventful career, as well as the historical events in which he participated, witnessed, or otherwise learned about, are wrought in a narrative that combines conventional *tārīkh* narration, Quranic exegesis, and dream interpretation,⁶ and is constantly switching between the third person voice—that of a chronicler—and the first person—that of an autobiographer. The extraordinarily intimate nature of the text is best illustrated by the author's tell-all accounts of his own messy domestic life: failed marriages, family feuds, harem melodrama, as well as childbirth, nursing, and infant mortality. The personal nature of the material thus offers glimpses into the autobiographer's mindset and sheds light on his personality and emotions, a rarity in pre-modern Arabic autobiographical writing.

A Syrian immigrant later based in Cairo, al-Biqā'ī's life and career, as he tells it, saw highs and lows. He studied with the great masters in Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo; among his teachers was Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449). Through his connection to Ibn Ḥajar, he was appointed to serve as a scholar-in-residence to the Mamluk sultans Jaqmaq (r. 857/1453) and Īnāl (r. 857–65/1453–61). Although hailed by many as one of the best minds of his generation, al-Biqā'ī never attained in his lifetime the status of a leading figure among the intelligentsia in Cairo and Damascus, although he tried very hard to present himself as such in his writings.⁷

⁴See Ross Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1989), 39, 44, 62, 67, 176–77, 195, 207, 224–29, 233–34, 236–37, 247–48, 269.

⁵Also known as *Tārīkh al-Biqā'ī*; the first half of the work, covering 855–65/1451–61, has been published in three volumes (ed. Muḥammad Sālim ibn Shadīd al-'Awfī [Riyadh, 1992]). The remainder is still in manuscript form: MS Medina, Maktabat al-Shaykh 'Arif Ḥikmat 3789 (microfilm: Cairo, Ma'had al-Makhṭūṭāt, tārīkh 893). The folios of the original manuscript are not numbered; the pagination given in this article is therefore my own. The work is not included in "An Annotated Guide to Arabic Autobiographical Writings, Ninth to Nineteenth Centuries, C.E.," in *Interpreting the Self*, 255–88 (whereas al-Biqā'ī is mentioned as a major author of autobiography, 271).

⁶Li Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle: A Fifteenth Century Learned Man's Reflection on his Time and World," in *The Historiography of Islamic Egypt (c. 950–1800)*, ed. Hugh Kennedy (Leiden, 2001), 121–48.

⁷The situation has been improved only in recent years. Among some sixty works attributed to him, the *Naẓm al-Durar fī Tanāsub al-Āyāt wa-al-Suwar*, a Quranic commentary in 22 volumes (Hyderabad, 1969–84), is perhaps better known. Of his history works, several have been published:



His scholastic achievements were overshadowed by his highly publicized and ill-fated attacks on the saint-like Sufi poet Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 632/1235) and his resulting estrangement from the Cairene ulama establishment.⁸ He was also battling against chronic poverty and hardship, compounded with a series of disastrous turns in his personal life.

While in the *Izhār* he talks about the glories and failures of his lifetime with equal enthusiasm and attention, it is his recounting of his domestic life that will be the focal point in the following pages. Based on a close reading of the intensely personal and anecdotal accounts, I will discuss three intertwined episodes concerning the various aspects of his domestic life: his infamous divorce case, the harem politics among his concubines, and the premature deaths of his children. Through an analysis of the dynamics of various storytelling strategies, the larger question of presentation and self-presentation in Mamluk autobiographical writings will be assessed as well.

DOOMED MARRIAGE: THE CASE AGAINST SU‘ĀDĀT

By all accounts, al-Biqā‘ī married and divorced numerous times; some of these occurred prior to the time period covered by the *Izhār* and are therefore not documented. His marriage to, and eventual divorce from, Fāṭimah bint Muḥammad (d. 884/1479), the daughter of a Cairene merchant, are recounted in a brief and scathing account by his contemporary al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497), which is nothing short of the tale of a poor immigrant marrying into a “good” local family only to have second thoughts when his luck changed for the better.⁹

As his career began to take off in Cairo, al-Biqā‘ī married well, at least in appearance. On Friday, 24 Ṣafar 858/23 February 1454, al-Biqā‘ī, then forty-eight

in addition to the *Izhār*, we have the *‘Inwān al-Zamān bi-Tarājim al-Shuyūkh wa-al-Aqrān*, a biographical dictionary of the learned men al-Biqā‘ī had personal contacts with (vol. 1 ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī [Cairo, 2001]) and the *‘Unwān al-‘Unwān bi-Tajrīd Asmā’ al-Shuyūkh wa-Ba‘ḍ al-Talāmīdh wa-al-Aqrān*, an epitome of the above (ed. Ḥasan Ḥabashī [Beirut, 2002]). The interconnectedness, in both form and content, of these works is discussed in Guo, “Al-Biqā‘ī’s Chronicle,” 137–38.

⁸For a detailed account of this debate, see Th. Emil Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fāriḍ, His Verse, and His Shrine* (Columbia, SC, 1994), 62–75; Guo, “Al-Biqā‘ī’s Chronicle,” 123–24.

⁹Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw’ al-Lāmi’ fī A’yān al-Qarn al-Tāsi’* (Cairo, 1934–36), 12:105 (no. 664). Al-Sakhāwī’s wording also seems to suggest that Fāṭimah was not the only woman who fell victim to al-Biqā‘ī’s opportunistic marriage scheme (*kānat mimman tazawwajat bi-al-Biqā‘ī fī ḥāl qillihī wa-faqrihī . . .*, “she was one of those [women] who married al-Biqā‘ī when he was a poor nobody. . .”). Al-Sakhāwī was a fellow student of al-Biqā‘ī under the tutelage of Ibn Ḥajar and later became his archrival; his negative take on al-Biqā‘ī should come as no surprise; for more details on this rivalry, see Guo, “Al-Biqā‘ī’s Chronicle,” 122–24.



years old and riding high thanks to his association with Sultan Īnāl, married Su'ādāt,¹⁰ the daughter of the late Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī al-Būshī (d. 856/1452), a prominent former head of the prestigious Nāširīyah *khānqāh* in Siryaqus on the northern outskirts of Cairo.¹¹ The engagement (*al-'aqd*), held at the *khānqāh*, was attended by the sultan (al-Biqā'ī was his personal secretary) and his son-in-law, the powerful Mamluk amir Buradabek (al-Biqā'ī was his confidant and advisor). The author tells us that this was "the first wedding ever" in this small backwater town attended by the Mamluk officials and civilian elite (*a'yān*) from Cairo. A long list of prominent guests includes the Hanbali chief judge, the leading shaykhs of nearly all the major madrasahs in Cairo, several Mamluk amirs, the Treasurer (*wakīl bayt al-māl*), the head of the State Hospital (*nāzir al-māristān*), the chief of the State Stable, the sermon-giver at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and various Sufi masters, among others.

On the night of 7 Jumādā I, three months after the engagement, the bride was brought to the groom for their first night together (*juliyat 'alayya wa-zuffat ilayya*). It is here that the author's elaborate narrative gets interesting. First, he introduces the idea of divine blessings on his marriage. Not only were the festive events marked by a "God-sent aura of dignified peace and tranquility," they were also highlighted by many "coincidences" (*al-ittifāqāt*), not least of which is the date of the engagement, which happened to be on a Friday, the day the author usually held his weekly Quran commentary sessions (*mī'ād*). The material for that day "happened" (*ittafaqa*) to be Quran 43:67–70 and 47:15: "Enter Paradise, you and your wives, walking with joy. . ."; "This is the similitude of Paradise. . . therein are rivers of water unstaling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavour, and rivers of wine. . ."¹²

The Quranic prophecy of the author's marital happiness is further recast by the bride's dream, which occurred on 5 Sha'bān, three months after the couple's first coition. The dream narration is itself a fine piece of belletristic prose:

[She said: In her dream,] a man came to her. He wore fine white garments and an exquisite turban the likes of which she had never

¹⁰Her biography is found in al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 12:62–63 (no. 377); she was still alive at the time of al-Sakhāwī's writing. A discussion of al-Biqā'ī's two marriages is found in Yossef Rapoport, "Marriage and Divorce in the Muslim Near East, 1250–1517," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2002, 273–75.

¹¹Founded by Sultan Malik al-Nāšir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn for the Sufis, the construction was completed in 725/1325; see al-Maqrīzī, *Kitāb al-Mawā'iz wa-al-I'tibār fī Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-al-Āthār* (Cairo, 1853–54), 2:422.

¹²Translations of the Quranic passages are from A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1955).



seen before; his long hair flowed over his shoulders. Although wearing a veil, his face radiated with lights and halo. He stood in front of our door and said: "Come on!" She said: "So I dressed up and went along with him, and you [i.e., al-Biqā'ī] followed behind me. He took us not far, then opened a door and said: 'Come on in (*udkhulū*)!' We entered (*dakhalnā*) a garden full of trees, apple trees, pear trees, lotus, and more. Rivers ran here and there without courses. Birds were perching on the trees, warbling the most beautiful songs. We kept walking, and all of a sudden over our heads there were fruits, and the grounds appeared yellow as the color of saffron. The grounds, the trees, and the aromatic plants all had this incredible fragrant scent I had never smelled before. We ended up in a corner; when we looked up, there was a thing that looked like a bed; then we sat in that bed, leaning on each other. The fruits were above us, and we began to pluck them, and ate." As if thinking that we were heading home, she said to me [i.e., al-Biqā'ī]: "Take these fruits with you!" Then that man said: "You should not leave this place." When we entered the garden, he [i.e., the strange man] gave us white and green garments, and told us to take our clothes off, throw them away, and put on these garments. We did so. . . . Then she woke up while we were in such a happy state. God made all this happen. Amen!¹³

This account gets a little fuzzy at the end of the narrative as it weaves the wife's narration, of *her* dream, with the author's explanatory note. But the basic elements and their symbolism are clear. The biblical reference to the Garden not only underlines the heavenly bliss of matrimony, but also alludes to pleasure-seeking sensuality. All this is done through the guidance of the strange man, who fits the descriptions, in popular religious lore, of the Prophet Muḥammad. The pun on the words derived from the root *d-kh-l*, *udkhul*, "enter!," *dukhūl al-jannah*, "entrance to Paradise," and *laylat al-dukhūl*, "the night of coition," links the spiritual enlightenment directly to the earthly pleasure of the flesh. The repeated reference to "fruits," and the Prophet's warning against "leaving this paradise," bear yet another biblical topos of the forbidden fruits and the resulting Fall of Adam and Eve. Following the biblical line, the blame rests squarely on the woman: it is Su'ādāt the bride that insisted on taking the fruits and leaving paradise. The implication of this "blame the woman" topos is fully explored later in the narrative.

The marriage produced a son, Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad, who was born in

¹³ *Izhār*, 2:22–23.



859/1455, one year after the wedding. Al-Biqā'ī was at the time traveling in Syria where he received the news from a letter by the boy's maternal step-grandfather. The birth of Muḥammad was an important event in the author's life,¹⁴ to which a lengthy section of the text is devoted (we will come back to this point soon). However, the marriage itself was doomed. During his trip to Syria, which lasted approximately a year,¹⁵ something happened.

What happened exactly in Damascus, where al-Biqā'ī stayed to supervise the building of a *khān al-funduq* on behalf of Sultan Īnāl's son-in-law, the Mamluk amir Burdabek, is not very clear. In the *Izhār*, al-Biqā'ī only has this to say:

I arrived at al-Khānkah [on the outskirts of Cairo] on the night of Saturday, 19 [Shawwāl 859/September 1455]. I stayed the night with my in-laws. They blamed me for my marriage in Damascus. I explained to them that I was unable to endure celibacy (*ṣabr . . . 'an al-nikāh*) for such a long period, and that I had already divorced her [i.e., the woman in Damascus] prior to my return [to Egypt]. I then took off for Cairo and slept in my own house Sunday night, the end of Shawwāl. They did not treat me well at all. They did not show any hospitality for the homecoming man.¹⁶

More trouble was waiting for the returning alim. In his usual self-righteous tone, al-Biqā'ī recalls the ensuing battle over custody of his newly-born son. It is noted here that Su'ādāt's voice is never heard in the whole process. The major figure leading the fight on her behalf was al-Biqā'ī's soon-to-be ex-mother-in-law,¹⁷ who mobilized an army of relatives and supporters marching on Cairo to confront the disgraceful al-Biqā'ī. Tempers ran short while tensions rose high. "Things got so bad that its ugliness is unheard of. . . . But I stayed calm and remained patient, because I did not want to risk losing my son."¹⁸ The standoff lasted for a few days before a great number of the Cairene elite (*ghālib ru'asā'*, literally "most of the leading scholars," obviously an exaggeration) felt compelled to intervene. The matter was even brought to the attention of Sultan Īnāl himself, who, by the way,

¹⁴Al-Biqā'ī had a son named Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad, from an earlier relationship, who died in 853/1449 (*Izhār*, 3:119). Su'ādāt's son Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad would be his first boy since then.

¹⁵He left Cairo shortly after Dhū al-Qa'dah 858 and returned from Damascus in Shawwāl 859; see *Izhār*, 2:87, 141.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 2:143–44.

¹⁷Aṭlas bint 'Alī Ibn al-Bilbīsī (d. 884/1479); her biography is in al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 12:7 (no. 7).

¹⁸*Izhār*, 2:144.



was very satisfied with al-Biqā'ī's work in Damascus where all the trouble had started. It is, as the author pointedly informs us, under the direct intervention of the sultan that the divorce was finalized. The date was Friday, 19 Dhū al-Qa'dah 859/31 October 1455. The marriage made in heaven lasted exactly a year and a half on earth.

Al-Biqā'ī apparently got himself a very good deal in the settlement. We do not know much about the details of the legal maneuvers. But it is obvious that al-Biqā'ī gained what he wanted, including sole custody of his son (*asqattu haqqahā min ḥiḍānat waladī minnī lī*), and a pledge by Su'ādāt that at any time if she, or her legal representative, wanted visitation rights, "or anything else," she would have to pay al-Biqā'ī five hundred dinars up front (*ḥālātan*).

It is here that al-Biqā'ī's account differs drastically from that of al-Sakhāwī. In al-Biqā'ī's account, the harsh terms, at the expense of Su'ādāt's rights, were approved by (*wa-ḥakama lī bi-dhālika*) a local Maliki deputy (*nā'ib*) named Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Mukhallāṭah. In al-Sakhāwī's version, however, this settlement was in fact vehemently rejected (*ṣammama 'alā al-imtīnā'*) by a Maliki deputy by the name of Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Maḥallī, on the grounds that according to a famous hadith, "He who separates a mother from her son, God will separate him from his loved ones" (*man farraqa bayna wālidah wa-waladihā farraqa Allāh baynahu wa-bayna aḥibbatihi*), affirming that the rights of a child's biological mother in such a custody dispute should not be denied.¹⁹

There are two interesting things about the contradictory accounts of this settlement. First is the identity of the Maliki qadī(s) in question. It is likely that the Muḥammad Ibn al-Mukhallāṭah in al-Biqā'ī's account is the same as Muḥammad al-Maḥallī in al-Sakhāwī's version. If that proves to be the case, then the question would be: who, al-Biqā'ī or al-Sakhāwī, lied? Even if there were *two* Maliki deputies named Muḥammad whose opinions al-Biqā'ī sought, then our historian still had something to hide in that only the judgment in his favor, a claim al-Sakhāwī's account flatly rejects, is reported. And this leads to our next point: the fact that al-Biqā'ī, a Shafī'i by training and affiliation, would seek the approval of a Maliki—the least popular and influential legal branch in Mamluk Egypt—deputy judge in the first place, certainly says something about his cunning. This was most likely for practical reasons: Yossef Rapoport has speculated that al-Biqā'ī's choice of legal venues in this particular case has to do with the notion that the Maliki school in general allowed greater freedom of contract for men in custody settlements.²⁰ Furthermore, given the often hostile receptions our historian received

¹⁹Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Ḍaw'*, 9:113–14.

²⁰Rapoport, "Marriage," 274 (with bibliographical references).



from the ulama at large, and the fact that his soon-to-be ex-mother-in-law's husband was a Shafi'ī qadi,²¹ his being selective in choosing the "right" person to do the job is justifiable.

This perhaps also explains the seemingly unnecessary ranting from a man who appears to have it all. Su'ādāt's family "did not give truce a chance," al-Biqā'ī bitterly complains, "despite my efforts to settle (*al-i'tirād*). . . , leaving the matter in God's hands."²² Perhaps as a gesture of goodwill, al-Biqā'ī was willing to allow Su'ādāt to stay with her family during the entire 'iddah, or waiting period, before she could legally remarry. However, Su'ādāt's family would not cooperate: they refused to accommodate the divorced woman, but instead chose to move her around "whenever and wherever they, and she, so desired."²³ And more importantly, they did not give in under pressure, refusing to give up the family's claims of Su'ādāt's rights, including custody of the boy.

This whole affair, al-Biqā'ī assures us, like many others in his life, could not have taken place without divine intervention. Around the time when the divorce was finalized, the triumphant alim, in his regular *mī'ād* session, began to teach the surah the title of which happened to be *al-mumtaḥanah*, "The Woman Tested."²⁴ The relevance of the themes of this surah, chief among them how to handle marriages between the "true believers" and those "unbelieving women" (60:10–12), is evident. In addition, the mention herein of Abraham's example in "justice," "love," and "virtue" also alludes to a parallel between Abraham's domestic situation, seen in a wife (Sarah) vs. concubine (Hagar) conflict, and that of al-Biqā'ī, the details of which will be discussed below. Here again, al-Biqā'ī is using hermeneutic tools in an attempt to interpret the events taking place in his own life and to justify these less-than-holy developments.

Al-Biqā'ī's insistence on using this technique, which at times seems far-fetched, did not come from a vacuum. In this regard, one should bear in mind that the combative alim perhaps had to fend off the attacks launched by the likes of al-Sakhāwī. In his account, al-Sakhāwī insisted that Su'ādāt, the "virgin daughter" of a highly respected shaykh "could not take it any more" and *asked* for a divorce,²⁵ and that the marriage was just one means used by the opportunistic Syrian immigrant

²¹For more details of his troubled relationship with the Cairene establishment, see Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle." Al-Biqā'ī's ex-mother-in-law married Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Wannā'ī after the death of Su'ādāt's father al-Būshī; see al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 12:7.

²²*Izhār*, 2:144.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 2:144–45; al-Biqā'ī cited Quran 60:1–9.

²⁵Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Ḍaw'*, 12:62; Rapoport, "Marriage," 274.



to consolidate his status among the Cairene elite.²⁶ It is perhaps against this backdrop that al-Biqā'ī's elaborate narrative strategy, which is rich in scriptural allegories, makes more sense. If al-Sakhāwī's emphasis on the innocence and frailty of Su'ādāt was meant to make the groom look bad, then al-Biqā'ī would assure us: it was not the marriage itself that went wrong, but rather that the "woman tested" turned out to be the wrong one; and, consequently, all the "love" and "affection" underlined by divine bliss and lavished on her were largely wasted. It follows that the son should stay with the right person, that is, his father, who is the true guardian of his children, just like Abraham was. The case against Su'ādāt is, al-Biqā'ī would like us to believe, closed. Or is it?

HAREM POLITICS: THE PLOTS OF ḤASBIYA ALLĀH THE CONCUBINE

Al-Biqā'ī maintained a modestly-sized harem. A number of women, whom he calls *fatātī*, literally "my slave girl," *amatī*, "my house maid," and *surrīyatī*, "my concubine," are named in the *Izhār*. It should be pointed out here that the distinction among these terms is not always clear-cut, in that a woman could be mentioned as a *fatāh* in one place, an *amah* in another, and a *surrīyah* yet elsewhere. In addition, the term *fatāh*, in al-Biqā'ī's usage, also denotes wives of his male slaves (*fatá*).²⁷ We have reason to believe, as the text hints, that al-Biqā'ī the master enjoyed sexual rights to many, if not all, of these *fatāhs* in his harem.

These maids/concubines were of various ethnic stocks. There was, for example, an Indian woman, Thurayyā, "Stellar," to whom our author variously refers to as *surrīyah*, *fatāh*, and *amah*.²⁸ She died during the Black Death. "For an Indian woman," al-Biqā'ī reflects in her obituary, "she was obedient (*rayyīdah*), pious, quiet, and soft-mannered."²⁹ There was an Ethiopian woman named Ḥulwah, "Sweetie," who is mentioned as *jārah* (for *jāriyah*?), *amah*, and *fatāh*.³⁰ This concubine sometimes also served as an informant for our historian; for example, she saw the locusts that struck the village in the year 861/1456 and reported it to al-Biqā'ī, who recorded the event in his chronicle.³¹

Among the many women in the household, none seem to have generated as much attention and fuss as one Ḥasbiya Allāh, who was, it seems, constantly in the thick of harem intrigue. An African princess of sorts (she was the daughter of

²⁶Al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 12:62–63.

²⁷For example, Shahīdah, the wife of 'Amr, a male servant (*fatá*) of the family; see *Izhār*, 3:117.

²⁸Ibid., 2:367; 3:120, 127.

²⁹Ibid., 3:120.

³⁰Ibid., 2:235, 299; 3:118.

³¹Ibid., 2:235.



Khaliṣṣah, the king [*sulṭān*] of the land of al-Masalāt),³² Ḥasbiya Allāh al-Zanjīyah, "The Black Girl," was purchased by al-Biqā'ī in Rajab 853/1449 under unknown circumstances. There are two peculiar events that put this African concubine at the center of controversies. First is her bizarre story of a multi-year pregnancy, which is recounted in detail by al-Biqā'ī, an aficionado of medicine.³³ The story goes something like this: when al-Biqā'ī first purchased the young woman, she was menstruating (*ḥā'id*), but one month later stopped having periods. Everyone thought she was pregnant, presumably by her new master. Nothing happened, though. Then the woman developed a series of strange symptoms the details of which are recorded meticulously by al-Biqā'ī. The symptoms—irregular menstrual cycles, chronic fatigue, lack of appetite, and persistent stomach pains—convinced al-Biqā'ī and a local physician that she suffered from a condition called, in the Avicennian terminology, *al-rajā'*, that is, false (literally "wishful") pregnancy. But Ḥasbiya Allāh insisted that she was *actually* pregnant and that the baby was in her womb. The unsettling situation continued to baffle and trouble everyone involved until years later, in the month of Jumādā I 863/1459, Ḥasbiya Allāh finally gave birth to a son, to be named Abū al-Luṭf Aḥmad.

The story did not stop here. The woman claimed that this was the same boy conceived nearly ten years earlier shortly after she was purchased by al-Biqā'ī. What concerns us here, of course, is not the truth of such a fable, but rather the extraordinary attention paid to its documentation. If one bears in mind that al-Biqā'ī's narrative is based on observations made over a period of more than nine years, the sheer tenacity, on the part of both the concubine and the master, to hold the miraculous story together is incredible:

Then she developed what one might call pregnant woman's "craving" for food (*waḥam al-nisā'*) . . . to the extent that she could not observe the rituals of fasting during Ramaḍān. She lacked the resolve (*futūr al-quwwah*) to fast in the year [8]54. She would force herself to keep the fast until noon for a couple of days, then she would feel dizzy and nauseous (*dawkhah wa-qay'*) and would break the fast; after eating, she would feel fine. The same happened in Ramaḍān 855. She was able, however, to fast in the year 866 and [the year] after that, and everything was fine. . . . And then all of a sudden, she began to have periods [again], all the while her womb remaining lean. . . . Her menstrual cycle was irregular: sometimes it occurred

³²Bilād al-Masalāt, on the Mediterranean shore, is thirty-five miles from Tripoli in present-day Libya; see *Izhār*, 3:42 (note 2).

³³For al-Biqā'ī's interests in medicine, see Guo, "Al-Biqā'ī's Chronicle," 132.



earlier than expected, and sometimes it was late; sometimes it was cut short by a few days, and sometimes it lingered for a few more days; sometimes she would menstruate once a month on a regular basis, and sometimes every two months, making it hard to calculate and predict. This continued until the year 859 when a bit of milk was found in her breasts. The milk was not white, but of a dusty color, and this continued until she gave birth [in the year 863]. When Ramaḍān 862 came, her periods stopped totally, and her belly began to swell, exceeding the normal size. I thought it would at least be twins!³⁴

If Ḥasbiya Allāh's motive was to attract attention and lay the grounds for bettering her position in the harem, al-Biqā'ī's attitude towards, and treatment of, the incident is quite revealing. Alongside his year-to-year account of the physical condition of his concubine are citations from Avicenna and Ibn al-Nafīs, an obvious attempt to reconcile the inexplicable phenomenon with mainstream medical literature.³⁵ Worth notice also is his note that in recording the story, he consulted with other women in the harem. The result is a "paraphrased" account (*ḥarrartuhu*) based on claims by the protagonist, i.e., Ḥasbiya Allāh, as well as confirmation from witnesses. If the excessive details of his concubine's menstrual cycle, eating habits, changing belly, and even the color of her milk, sound a bit "kinky" for an alim, he keeps a straight face throughout.

Women have always played a central role in folklore and popular traditions, such as medical care and superstitious beliefs and practices, in the Islamic Near East.³⁶ Viewed from this perspective, al-Biqā'ī's acceptance of, and respect for, tales of marvels and miracles perhaps should not be seen as out of place. As the text shows, the high-minded alim was in fact taking sides in this debate by openly challenging those "[ignorant] people who have yet to put their feet in the field of knowledge (*al-'ilm*) and let their minds wander in the garden of learning (*al-jawalān fī fayāfī al-ma'ārif*)."³⁷ By "knowledge" and "learning" he meant not only a recognition of the works by the likes of Avicenna and Ibn al-Nafīs, but also an acknowledgment of miracles and wonders (*'ajā'ib wa-gharā'ib*) and their role in worldly affairs

³⁴*Izhār*, 3:42–45.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 3:43–44.

³⁶See, for example, Huda Lutfi, "Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shari'a Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven and London, 1991), 99–121. A contemporary description of the phenomenon is to be found in Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge, MA, 1994).

³⁷*Izhār*, 3:45.



and the human condition, a major topos in medieval Arabic historiography.

As is usually the case, miracles and wondrous stories are substantiated by visions. Ḥasbiya Allāh's dreams about her miraculous marathon-pregnancy are cited, with an interesting note stating that our historian was in the habit of writing down his and others' dreams in "large notebooks" for future reference.³⁸

Next time we hear from Ḥasbiya Allāh, she is once again in the center of harem politics. This time, she offered an apocalyptic vision supporting al-Biqā'ī's case against his wife Su'ādāt, which we discussed earlier in this essay. In the dream, Ḥasbiya Allāh claimed she saw a female sheep give birth to a strange creature, in the shape of a fish, that was barely alive. The next thing she knew, a group of "strange women" approached her, asking, "What do you think? Do you want the baby dead or do you want us to bring life to him?" Those strange women, Ḥasbiya Allāh recalls, "looked very vicious (*laysa fihim khayr*). I turned to them, and suddenly realized that they were none other than your wife and mother-in-law! I cried out, 'Please save the baby, and do whatever you want with the sheep!'" The dream concluded with a series of allegorical images—among them a dying fish, a big jar (*zīr*) filled with a mixture of milk and greenish paste, some holy smoke—and then Ḥasbiya Allāh woke up to realize that "there is no fish, no sheep, no Su'ādāt, and no other harem women at all."³⁹

What grudges this concubine harbored against her mistresses we do not know. If a person's dream reveals some truth, then we are certain that no love was lost between the two women. Here one may be surprised by such poisonous assaults coming from the mouth of a concubine, but bearing in mind that childbirth has always been a source of tension among the jealous and competitive wives and concubines in the harem, Ḥasbiya Allāh's tales are by no means beyond reason. In this regard, one may place all of her dream-related stories in a context: the plot was, first, to allude to the notion that Ḥasbiya Allāh's son somehow had more seniority than Su'ādāt's (although the former was born after the latter, he was "conceived" earlier in Ḥasbiya Allāh's account); and next is a crafty allegory aimed at damaging Su'ādāt's and her family's credibility. Al-Biqā'ī's ulterior motive in penning such tales, on the other hand, stems from his own overall strategy: it all has to do with a continuous spin on his divorce and child custody case against Su'ādāt, whom, for some reason, our author seems to have been unable to let go.

³⁸Ibid. For the use of wives' dreams to verify dates and events in medieval Arabic autobiographical writings, see, for example, Nicholas Heer, "Some Biographical and Bibliographical Notes on al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhi," in *The World of Islam: Studies in Honour of Philip K. Hitti*, ed. James Kritzeck et al. (London, 1959), 121–22.

³⁹*Izhār*, 2:89.



In this connection, it is also evident from the narrative that al-Biqā'ī's principal motive for keeping records about his harem women derives largely from his concerns about their, and his, children. We hear about Ḥasbiya Allāh a few years later, in the year 865/1461, when she gave birth to a second son, Abū al-Luṭf Aḥmad II, this time after a "mere" fourteen-month pregnancy, according to her own count. The birth, "an extremely easy one," as our author happily informs us, is described with repeated elaborate textual devices aimed again at showing divine intervention in his personal affairs. The scriptural quote this time is from Quran 12:43–57, the story of Joseph and his brothers. The significance of this newborn is underlined by the fact that his birth came after the death of Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad I, Su'ādāt's only son, and after the outbreak of plague, in 863–64/1459–60, that killed his older brother Abū al-Luṭf Aḥmad, Ḥasbiya Allāh's first-born. Detailed descriptions of the birth of the boy and the ensuing celebration of his circumcision and other related activities are given. The proud father was so overwhelmed with joy that he took upon himself the task of cutting the baby's hair for the *'aqīqah* ceremony, and decided to shower all the neighbors with free bread and watermelons in celebration, twice. That must have been extra sweet for Ḥasbiya Allāh, the African concubine: not only was her rival Su'ādāt now long gone, but more importantly, the *tafriqah*, or giving gifts to celebrate the birth of a son, was offered on the occasion of the birth of Muḥammad I, the precious son of the formal wife Su'ādāt, only once.⁴⁰

ABOUT A BOY: BIRTH, REARING, AND DEATH OF CHILDREN

The accounts of childbirth, rearing, and infant mortality in the household constitute a considerable part of the *Izhār*. The birth of a child is always celebrated and accorded rhetorical notice. The reason for this intense attention perhaps lies in the fact that, as the narrative shows, none of al-Biqā'ī's sons survived. Was it a curse, or God's plan? Our historian certainly had some explaining to do.

Among the several elaborate accounts of the birth of a child is that of Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad I,⁴¹ whose custody case became a bone of contention in al-Biqā'ī's divorce battle against the boy's mother Su'ādāt. There were, as al-Biqā'ī tells it, many "marvelous and spectacular things about this boy (*'ajā'ib hādihā al-walad*)." Foremost of these was his birthday, 12 Rabī' I, corresponding to that of the Prophet Muḥammad. The proud father, then in Damascus, composed a poem to celebrate the occasion. The poem is replete with the formulaic panegyric elements celebrating the *mawlid*, or birth, of the Prophet. Its motif is a confirmation of the coincidence of the birthday of his son and that of the Prophet; this is

⁴⁰Ibid., 3:355–56.

⁴¹Ibid., 2:85–89.



achieved through word-play with repeated juxtaposition, and deliberate mixing, of the *mawlid* of the Prophet Muḥammad and that of the boy, whose name is, of course, Muḥammad.

As can be expected, the wonders also have to do with dreams and "coincidences" (*ittifāqāt*) prior to, and after, the boy's birth. Al-Biqā'ī's own dream, we are told, occurred on the eve of receiving the good news from Egypt. In the dream, he was crossing a road and stumbled upon a piece of paper containing the names of God. This reminded him of the famous incident involving the Sufi Bishr Ibn al-Ḥārith, known as al-Ḥāfī, "the Barefooted" (d. 226/841?). Legend has it that Bishr, having accidentally trampled the paper underfoot, heard God saying, "If you honor my name, I will honor your name in this world and the hereafter." Following the Baghdadi saint's footsteps, our Cairene historian duly placed the paper on his forehead, honoring God's names. For al-Biqā'ī, this dream, like many others recorded in the *Izhār*, was a sure sign of divine intervention. Furthermore, by showing respect to God, he was also betting on the future, "hoping that a great deal of benefit will befall my newborn son."⁴²

The joyful father was apparently not the only one who saw this coming. On the eve of al-Biqā'ī's trip to Damascus, the Shafi'i judge Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ziftāwī⁴³ told of a similar, but more complex, dream he had: while contemplating the reading of the phrase *wa-yazīdahum* (or was it *yazīduhum*?) *min faḍlihi* (Quran 24:38), the shaykh fell asleep and had a vision that his father, the prominent Shafi'i scholar Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, was standing in front of him, chanting the correct reading of the Quranic verse in question (it is *yazīdahum*, to be sure). Surprised, Nāṣir al-Dīn asked his father, "Why are you here?" The father said, "Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn's [i.e., al-Biqā'ī's] son just went downstairs, carried by a servant; . . . I am here to watch over him lest the boy fall." "But Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn has no son!" the bewildered Nāṣir al-Dīn protested. "He surely does now," the father replied. After telling the bizarre anecdote, Nāṣir al-Dīn turned to al-Biqā'ī and inquired, "Is any one in your household pregnant?" "Yes indeed," al-Biqā'ī assured him, and then went on, "God has brought the pregnancy to term, in the form of a boy, and He is solely responsible for materializing the remainder of the Quranic verse," which reads: "God may recompense them for their fairest works and give them increase of His bounty; and God provides whomsoever He will, without reckoning."

The wonder-boy's marvelous stories never ceased to dazzle our keen-eyed historian. The baby, we are told, not only resembled his father in looks, he also acted like him: an anecdote related to al-Biqā'ī by his own mother Fāṭimah has it

⁴²Ibid., 86.

⁴³He died in 876/1471; for his biography see al-Sakhāwī, *Al-Daw'*, 9:116 (no. 302).



that when al-Biqā'ī was born, he did not cry and showed no sign of life; assuming he was dead, people left him aside, uncovered. Then some female relatives took a closer look at the baby and realized that he was still alive. They quickly poured sulfur powder around the baby's nose; after a sniff came a big sneeze and the happy sound of a baby crying. The same thing, al-Biqā'ī writes, happened to his own son. What comes next is perhaps central to the whole story:

I was told by his mother [i.e., Su'ādāt] and other women, who are experts in this matter, that the baby was delivered in the eighth month of the pregnancy—may God make all His blessings available to him and protect him from all evils! But two months after the birth, the baby still could not suckle the breasts [of his mother for milk]. So his aunt Fāṭimah, the daughter of Shaykh Nūr al-Dīn al-Būshī, would squeeze milk from her breasts and then drop the milk to his mouth. It was only after two months that he began to suckle [his mother's] breasts; but he did not like her milk at all. From her left breast, he did not drink a thing; and from her right breast, he would suck and drink with reluctance (*'alá kurh*), and then he would throw up most of what he had consumed.⁴⁴

As a result, the baby, we are told, was nursed by a group of concubines and maids in the Biqā'ī harem: among them the above-mentioned Ḥasbiya Allāh, "only in whose arms the baby would become calm and content," and 'Azīzah, the daughter of a male slave (*ghulām*) owned by the family, whose milk "was preferred by the baby boy."⁴⁵

There are, to be sure, some obvious holes in the whole story, not least of which is the availability of milk at the exact time in question from so many women other than the nursing mother, Su'ādāt. As the narrative proceeds, the underlying theme is unmistakable: that Su'ādāt is an unfit mother by any standard. It follows that al-Biqā'ī's harsh, and seemingly unfair, custody claim, discussed above, is not only legally sound but also morally right and biologically appropriate. The fact that the newborn baby was raised largely by the father, with the help of other women in the harem, "is proof," the author claims, "that what happened as a result of the evil-doings wrought by his mother, which led to the separation [of the baby and the birth mother], turned out to be God's merciful blessings. Amen!"⁴⁶

⁴⁴*Izhār*, 2:88.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* For Islamic legal discourse on the subject, see Avner Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses: Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and their Social Implications* (Leiden, 1999),



Sadly, this heaven-bestowed son was not to live long. He died on 12 Sha‘bān 860/1456, at the age of “one year, four-and-a-half months, and two days,” by al-Biqā‘ī’s own count.⁴⁷ The exact cause of death is unknown. From the symptoms described in great detail (nearly two pages), one learns that the boy suffered from diarrhea, vomiting, loss of appetite, and perhaps high fever. In a poignant passage, the lamenting father recalls what happened during the final hours: when the dying boy showed signs of thirst, the father asked a slave girl to hurry to fetch some melon juice; however, the boy’s body language made it clear that he would only drink from a jar (*zīr*), a reference to the *zīr* that saved him at the time of his birth, in Ḥasbiya Allāh’s above-mentioned dream version of the event. Now the tale has come full-circle: the boy—who in the concubine’s dream was a dying fish taken out of the sea and later rescued in a big “jar” of water—then drank from the jar, on his deathbed, and stopped crying. “He remained very calm and content, till he passed away,” our historian recounts.⁴⁸ The grief-ridden father then goes on to devote a long passage to describing the final moment:

He continued in this state up until Thursday morning, . . . and every passing hour was a struggle. Despite that, he seldom complained, nor did he utter a sigh of pain. . . . Then I heard a moan from him . . . and rushed to his side as he was dying: his head became stiff up to the upper palate, and his gaze became frozen . . . , his eyes closed . . . , and he showed no sign of movement except for his lower palate and below. His chest began to clatter, with continuous moans. . . . I felt a profound sense of compassion (*al-wijd*) that no words can describe, and I sought comfort in prayers. I ordered the maids to perform the ritual ablution (*wuḍū’*), that each of them should bow two prostrations, asking God to ease the pain of death. I then washed myself and started performing the ritual. During my second prostration, I heard women’s whispers, which indicated to me that he was dead. I hastened to his bedside and he was gone.⁴⁹

This account offers one of the most poignant moments in the entire *Izhār*, the likes of which, to the best of my knowledge, is rarely seen in Mamluk historical writings. Adding to the sadness is the fact that even in the boy’s death, his mother,

especially 45–62 (maternal breastfeeding vs. wet nursing), 94–101 (parents; father’s responsibility and legal rights).

⁴⁷*Izhār*, 2:192.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 193.



Su'ādāt, was kept totally out of the picture. No word of her reaction is even mentioned.

The cycle of childbirth and infant mortality occurred again a few years later, in Ramaḍān 861, when the Ethiopian concubine Ḥulwah gave birth to a son. In celebrating the coming of the new boy, who was named after his late half-brother Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad I, and perhaps in an attempt to eradicate the memories of the tragic loss of Muḥammad I, al-Biqā'ī threw a big party on the occasion of his 'aqīqah, or hair cutting ceremony and circumcision for the newly born. More than a hundred notables, among them Sufi masters from Mecca and Medina, attended the feast. Food was distributed to all of his neighbors. Panegyrics, including the ones praising the virtues of "Ethiopian women," were presented.⁵⁰ Al-Biqā'ī once again takes pains in describing the marvels and wonders (*'ajā'ib*) of his newborn son. Among these is his account of a rift between the boy and a neighbor's naughty children, "the most evil creatures on earth," in al-Biqā'ī's characterization. When the bullying boys were about to harm the then two-year-old Muḥammad II in front of the mosque where al-Biqā'ī was teaching, the boy was miraculously rescued by his father and nanny.⁵¹

This younger Muḥammad was a lovely boy, indeed, the proud father repeatedly emphasizes. He was "smart, confident, and full of self-esteem," and had a vigorous intellectual curiosity. He began to crawl when he was eight months old, began to comprehend the world around him from the ninth month, and started walking in the next. He was weaned on 18 Ramaḍān 863, that is, two full years after his birth,⁵² by which time he had the appearance of a five-year-old toddler. "He was able to ride on horseback. He would ask for a whip, and would hold it in his hands, in the manner of a horseman." The proud father also predicates the boy's "potential for future greatness."⁵³ Unfortunately, the promising boy would soon perish, this time during a new outbreak of the Black Death in 863–64/1459–60.⁵⁴ Muḥammad II, we are told, was "martyred" by the epidemic (*shahīdan maṭ'ūnan*), the infection from which "started creeping up from his left armpit," at the age of "two years and nine days, no more and no less."⁵⁵

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 299–301.

⁵¹Ibid., 3:54.

⁵²Ḥasbiya Allāh's second son was also weaned after two full years; see *Izhār*, 3:356. This seems to follow a common medical recommendation in the Islamic Near East; see Giladi, *Infants*, 62–67.

⁵³*Izhār*, 3:118.

⁵⁴Two outbreaks of the plague hit Egypt during the period in question, first in 858–59/1454–55, and then again in 863–64/1459–60; see *Izhār*, 3:114 (years 863–64); Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1977), 217, 312.



Al-Biqā'ī's documentation of the Black Death presents a vivid firsthand personal account of the events. In the *Izhār*, aside from many obituaries of the Cairene notables who fell victim to the epidemic, we also find a long list of casualties in the author's own household. Among them was Shahīdah, a female slave (*fatāh*) who died in Jumādā II 863;⁵⁶ Ghāliyah, her daughter, and Thurayyā, the Indian concubine, both died in the same month;⁵⁷ Abū al-Luṭf Aḥmad, Ḥasbiya Allāh's first son, died five months later, in Dhū al-Qa'dah.⁵⁸ All told, in a few months, the plague claimed a handful of lives in this household alone. The dead were all buried in the family cemetery, next to the corpses of many sons, daughters, and concubines who had died earlier.⁵⁹

More births are reported in the remainder of the *Izhār*. For example, Ḥulwah, the Ethiopian concubine, gave birth to another son named, again, Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad in 866/1461.⁶⁰ All in all, infant mortality seems to have been a curse hovering over al-Biqā'ī's head. Even for those who managed to survive temporarily, destiny was never in their favor. Ḥasbiya Allāh's second son, Abū al-Luṭf Aḥmad II, for example, would later suffer from developmental problems; not only was he slow in learning to walk and talk, but was also, worst of all, always sick, "with gross sores on his face and body all the time."⁶¹ Eventually the boy died when he was three years old.⁶² Ḥulwah's son Abū al-Yusr Muḥammad III died when he, too, was merely three years old.⁶³ We don't know much about the fate of al-Biqā'ī's daughters.⁶⁴ As far as the period covered by the *Izhār* is concerned, none of al-Biqā'ī's sons survived. All told, this is, in the end, a very sad story, indeed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: PRIVATE LIFE AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The various episodes presented above form the story of an eccentric Mamluk alim's turbulent domestic life. In the category of dysfunctional families, our protagonist and narrator al-Biqā'ī was not alone, given the extremely high rate of

⁵⁵*Izhār*, 3:118.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 119, 120.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁰*Izhār*, MS, 338.

⁶¹*Izhār*, 3:356.

⁶²*Izhār*, MS, 462.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 486.

⁶⁴One daughter, Umm Hānī Fāṭimah, was born to Thurayyā, the Indian concubine, in 862/1457 (*Izhār*, 2:367); another daughter, Umm al-Ḥasan Zaynab, was born to Ḥulwah, the Ethiopian concubine, in 869/1464 (*Izhār*, MS, 486).



divorce in the Mamluk era.⁶⁵ However, as Leo Tolstoy's adage about unhappy families goes, everyone's story is unique. When it comes to the various factors that caused a marriage to collapse and a family to dissipate in medieval Muslim societies, little is known beyond the legal (and economic) parameters.⁶⁶ This, of course, has largely to do with the nature of our sources. While "family" occupies substantial importance in Islamic legal discourse, historians, on the whole, usually have little, if anything, to say on the subject. Even in autobiography, a presumably "ideal" genre for such a pursuit, one is confronted with the predominance of generic narratives over individual voices. In al-Biqā'ī and his *Izhār*, the subject of the present study, we find a rather special voice.

The first remarkable thing about al-Biqā'ī's *Izhār* is its blending of literary genres. This is evidenced by the at-times-confusing narrative structure, constantly switching back and forth between a chronicle and an autobiography. Very often the awkwardness of the seemingly bungled narrative is obvious. For instance, al-Biqā'ī's wedding to Su'ādāt is narrated in a strictly third person tone, as part of a larger narrative frame of the sultan's, not the author's—that is, the groom's—activities. It begins with an account of: on such-and-such day, "he [i.e., the sultan] came to" the Nāṣirīyah *khānqāh*, "to marry off his secretary (*li-tazwīj kātibihi*) [i.e., al-Biqā'ī] to Su'ādāt. . . ." The author then abruptly switches to first person narrative in the next paragraph when the groom, "he," becomes "I."⁶⁷ Another example of this oddity is seen in the obituary of al-Būshī, al-Biqā'ī's late father-in-law, who had died two years prior to al-Biqā'ī's marriage to his daughter Su'ādāt. This relationship, although posthumous, is never acknowledged.⁶⁸ This kind of inconsistency may reflect the raw condition of the unfinished autograph manuscript, a work-in-progress *musawwadah*-draft; the author was perhaps writing a chronicle on the basis of his own diary. However, the possibility that such a narrative strategy was so designed cannot be ruled out. In the case of al-Būshī, the silence on the relationship between the two may have to do with al-Biqā'ī's awareness of the accusations, by al-Sakhāwī and the like, of his opportunistic marriage schemes for career advancement. And in the case of his wedding, the interpretive tension between a heavenly matrimony and its eventual ugly reality is

⁶⁵Thirty percent of marriages in the Mamluk period ended in divorce; see Rapoport, "Marriage," 268. A quick glimpse at vol. 12 of al-Sakhāwī's *Al-Daw'*, the most extensive Mamluk biographical work covering women's lives and careers, will give the unmistakable impression of the frequency of divorce.

⁶⁶For the most up-to-date bibliography of the current scholarship on marriage and divorce in the Islamic Near East, see Rapoport, "Marriage," 300–25. The literature on women and family in Muslim societies in general is very extensive and need not be repeated here.

⁶⁷*Izhār*, 2:20–21.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 1:193.



reconciled by a multiple-narrative line with various voices and perspectives. By switching back and forth between the first person narrative and the third person commentary, as both protagonist *and* eye witness, the narrator is in total control of the narrative.

The second remarkable thing about al-Biqā'ī's *Izhār* is its rare insights into the author's personality and emotions, an element that is commonly held to have been largely missing from medieval Arabic autobiographical writings. In this respect, his poignant depictions of the births and deaths of his children come to mind immediately. Despite the common attitude of treating such disastrous events as a manifestation of God's unknowable plans for His creatures, al-Biqā'ī seeks some concrete explanations for, and human elements in, the tragedies. As the text attests, in telling the heart-wrenching stories, the author's emotions are genuine and sincere. This is in sharp contrast to his tell-alls about his sinister ex-wives and in-laws. Full of grudges, voluntary self-voyeurism, and vendetta, these flashy tales further expose, by default, the author's true character and attitudes. What we see here is a far cry from a calculated, self-righteous, stoic alim, but rather a man full of contradictions: an overzealous moralist, a caring father, a wife abuser, and finally, a big-mouthed jackass. During his entire life, there were too many battles to fight and too many scores to settle. In the *Izhār*, his many smear campaigns and personal vendettas are always in full swing, with all the trimmings of literary manipulation. You would not want to be on al-Biqā'ī's enemy list.

The third thing that sets al-Biqā'ī aside from his peers is his portrayal of his relationships with women. While women are relatively well represented in Mamluk autobiographies, the authors tend to talk more about their mothers and daughters than about their wives and concubines,⁶⁹ much less about their perspectives on their relationships with them. In al-Biqā'ī, however, we have someone who lets us into these areas of his world and psyche. His support of Ḥasbiya Allāh the concubine against Su'ādāt the wife in the baby-bearing melodrama is but one example of such personalized and overtly biased interpretive narrative. It obviously has to do with his overall plan to defame Su'ādāt; but on the other hand, it does allow the reader to appreciate his plain style in voicing his likes and dislikes of the women in his harem. Compared with his peers, this certainly marks a leap; but unfortunately it perhaps is not big enough. Al-Biqā'ī's women, in the final analysis, are like those in a Dostoevsky novel: they do not have their own personal history and voice—they enter the male heroes' lives, constitute part of their fate, and disappear.⁷⁰

For al-Biqā'ī, the "autobiographical anxiety" stems directly from his need to

⁶⁹Rapoport, "Marriage," 13–17.

⁷⁰Konstantin Mochulsky, Introduction to *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (New York, 2003), xxi.



explain many seeming downturns in his life experiences: failed marriages, messy domestic situations, and worst of all, the endless deaths of male descendents, the utmost blow to a man whose very existence was facing the danger of eternal oblivion and meaninglessness. Thus writing his autobiography perhaps became, in a sense, his way of finding salvation. Call it egocentric or self-serving, al-Biqā'ī's writing is always of, and for, himself. The depiction of his domestic life serves as part and parcel of this salvation history project. It is through his overtly subjective lens and intimate personal experiences that we are able to view the history of the time period he covered. It is true that many things are not entirely novel here: the *'ajā'ib* and *nawādir* elements, the use of dream interpretation, the apocalyptic spins, and hermeneutic manipulation, all point to a continuation of the traditions in Arabic historical writing, but it is the sheer volume of using such devices, and the way they are put together, that distinguish al-Biqā'ī from his predecessors and contemporaries. Although his story-telling is not always elegant and convincing, his story is unusual and his voice unique.



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