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Between Function and Fiction: The Representation of Women in al-Ibshīhī's *Mustaṭraf*

Premise: Methodological Considerations

In the section carrying the title "Performative Power" in the book *Bodies that Matter,* Judith Butler dwells on performative acts, defining them as forms of authoritative speech. They are, indeed, statements that, once made, confer a binding power on the action performed. This is equivalent to saying that performativity is an area in which power acts as discourse.[1] The concept of performative, thus articulated by Butler, moves in truth from the notion, already expressed by Derrida, of "iterability:" every act, even a word act, is configured as a repetition, a sedimentation, even a re-quotation.[2]

In my opinion, the concepts of performativity and iterability, considered in relation to the social construct of gender identity, can prove useful in approaching the representations of women that al-Ibshīhī (d. ca. 1446)—also known as al-Abshīhī or al-Ibshayhī from the name of the village of Fayyūm in which he was born[3]—transmitted in the seventy-third chapter of his encyclopedic work *Al-Mustaṭraf fī kull fann mustaẓraf*[4] ("The Exquisite elements from every art con-

[1]Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York, 1993), 225. (Italian trans., *Corpi che contano: I limiti discorsivi del sesso* [Milan, 1996].)

[2]See Jacques Derrida, *La scrittura e la differenza: Firma, evento, contesto*, trans. N. Perullo (Turin, 1971), 27.

[3]See J.-C. Vadet, "al-Ibshīhī," *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* 2nd ed., consulted online on 15 December 2017; Timo Paajanen, *Scribal Treatment of the Literary and Vernacular Proverbs of al-Mustaṭraf in 15th–17th Century Manuscripts with Special Reference to Diglossic Variation* (Helsinki, 1995), 16–18; K. Tuttle, "al-Ibshīhī (1388–ca. 1446)," in *Essays in Arabic Literary Biography, 1350–1850,* ed. J. E. Lowry and D. J. Stewart (Wiesbaden, 2009), 236–42.

[4]The work has a rich and complex manuscript tradition and I direct readers in this regard to the cited work of Paanjanen, *Scribal Treatment.* Among the various editions I limit myself here to citing the classic one published in Būlāq, 1851, and the three most recent, respectively edited by ʿAbd Allāh Anīs al-Ṭabbāʿ (Beirut, 1981), by Darwīsh Juwaydī (Beirut, 1999), and by Muṣṭafá Muḥammad al-Dhahabī (Cairo, 2000). The edition I cite here is the one edited by Muḥammad Khayr Ṭaʿamih al-Ḥalabī (Beirut, fifth edition 2008). The work has been totally edited and translated into French by Gustave Rat as *Al-Mostaṭraf: Recueil de morceaux choisis çà et là dans toutes les branches de connaissances réputées et attrayantes par Sihâb ad-Dîn Ahmad al-Abshîhî: Ouvrage philologique, anecdotique, littéraire et philosophique* (Paris, 1899–1902). For a more recent study on the work and on its position in the Arabic literary canon, see Ulrich Marzolph, "Medieval Knowledge in Modern Reading: A Fifteenth Century Arabic Encyclopaedia of *Omni re scibili*," in

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sidered elegant"). The chapter in question, which sits in the context of *adab al-nikāḥ,* carries the title "On women and the qualities that distinguish them; on marriage and repudiation; on what is praised and blamed in relationships." It is not superfluous as a caption to my work here to mention the author's traditional background: he studied theology, law, and grammar. He lived most of his life in a provincial environment, at Maḥallah al-Kubrá or in the neighboring small town of Nahrarīr. In Cairo he was a pupil of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Bulqīnī (d. 1421) and attended some Sufi groups. Despite belonging to the Shafiʿi school, he was sympathetic to the Maliki school and was particularly close to the master al-Ṭarīnī.[5] In the *Mustaṭraf,* consistent with predecessors, including Ibn ʿAbd Rabbih (d. 940) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143), explicitly indicated as his primary sources,[6] he presents himself as an anthologist desirous of making known the literary features, edifying discourses, and maxims of wisdom regarding the most diverse sectors of that knowledge necessary in the education and formation of the cultural background of a good Muslim.[7] Given the environment he came from, it is a general opinion among scholars that his work reflects more or less a provincial culture that may perhaps be defined as "middle," according to the associations attributed to this term by Aboubakr Chraïbi.[8] The chosen expressive mode is, therefore, that of *adab* that is translated, in concrete terms, into respect for the hierarchical order of edifying discourse: quotation of Quranic verses and prophetic traditions, references to the *sunnah* and to maxims of knowledge and philosophy, and the use of many forms of short narration, full of verses, dialogues, and elements both edifying and amusing, in which it is difficult to discern reality from fiction.

This narrative mode, as Ulrich Marzolph has written regarding the modern reception of the work, had authoritative precedents:

Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second Comers Congress, ed. P. Binkley (Leiden, 1997), 407–20.

[5] See Tuttle, "al-Ibshīhī, "237.

[6] *Mustaṭraf,* 7.

[7] The work has been defined by Hilary Kilpatrick as "a short work for a wider public," in reference to its popularity over the centuries, probably due to the simplicity of its organization and the particular choices made by the author that made the subject easily accessible to a wider public. See H. Kilpatrick, "Encyclopedias, medieval," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature,* ed. J. Scott Meisami and P. Starkey (London, 1998), 208.

[8] See Aboubakr Chraïbi, *Les* Mille et une nuits: *Histoire du texte et classification de contes* (Paris, 2008), and Thomas Herzog, "Social Milieus and Worldviews in Mamluk *adab*-Encyclopedias: The example of Poverty and Wealth," in *History and Society during the Mamluk Era (1250–1517),* ed. S. Conermann, Studies of the Annemarie Schimmel Institute for Advanced Study 2 (Bonn, 2016), 1–18.

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> As for the *literary dimension,* the *Mustaṭraf* belongs to the genre of *adab*-literature, a genre which aims at combining instruction and entertainment conveying knowledge in a diverting manner and employing entertaining topics in order to present and discuss serious moral and ethical matters. Moreover, the *Mustaṭraf* belongs to the category of the encyclopaedia, or more specifically, the *adab*-encyclopaedia, a category which had already been established by a number of basic works in the ninth and tenth centuries, and to which the *Mustaṭraf* represents the last major contribution. So the *Mustaṭraf*'s genesis is to be seen against the specific background of a literary product summing up previous knowledge in a period of cultural decline.[9]

In this context, the words and the discourses repeated by subjects granted recognized authority within an environment regulated by shared norms have ended up determining representations of male and female.[10] Indeed, performativity was expressed, as Butler affirms, in the words proffered in daily life by men and women, in the repetition, in the temporal continuum of the social and cultural representation of their behavior. In this theoretical framework, the theme of the body—as word and deed, described and put into action in various moments and places of experience—and of its representations has become an integral part in the process of social construction of gender. In the *Mustaṭraf,* the chapter relating to women is organized in five sections. The first is dedicated to the conjugal union and its advantages, and to the desires that lead to union in matrimony *(Fī nikāḥ wa-faḍlihi wa-al-targhīb fīhi).*[11] The second is centered on the praiseworthy qualities of women *(Fī ṣifāt al-nisāʾ al-maḥmūdah).*[12] The third, in oppositional terms with respect to the previous section, regards the description of bad woman *(Fī ṣifāt al-nisāʾ al-sūʾi bi-Allāh taʿālá minhā),*[13] while the fourth deals with women's cunning,

[9] See Marzolph, "Medieval Knowledge," 408. On encyclopaedism among the Arabs, see: Ch. Pellat, "Les encyclopédies dans le Monde Arabe," *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale* 9 (1966): 631–58; R. Blachère, "Quelques reflections sur les forms de l'encyclopédisme en Egypte et en Syrie du VIIIe/XIVe siècle à la fin du IXe/XVe siècle," *Bulletin d'études orientales* 23 (1970): 7–19; M. al-Shakʿah, *Manāhij al-taʾlīf ʿinda al-ʿulamāʾ al-ʿarab* (Beirut, 1979), 729–60; H. Kilpatrick, "A genre in classical Arabic literature: The adab encyclopedia," *in Proceedings [of the] 10th Congress of the UEAI, Edinburgh, 9–16 September 1980,* 34–42.

[10] The concept of performativity has been described by J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford, 1962); idem and K. Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31.

[11] *Mustaṭraf,* 663–71.

[12] Ibid., 671–72.

[13] Ibid., 672–73.

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their perfidy, the feeling of disapproval that they inspire, and their rebellious nature *(Fī makr al-nisāʾ wa-ʿadhrihinna wa-dhammihinna wa-mukhālafatihinna).*[14] The last section is dedicated to divorce and what is cited in this regard *(Fī ṭalāq wa-mā jāʾa fīhi).*[15]

In the pages that follow, the themes dealt with by the author will not be examined in the order in which they are expounded, but will emerge through a transversal reading that takes into account the dichotomic male/female model that they underpin, the processes of reification of the female body brought into being by the author's referential literary tradition, and the social, religious, and juridical norms that, in the repetition of words and gestures, have led to representations of stereotyped women, historically and culturally determined, often considered to be an instrument of social destabilization. The man-woman power relations that emerge from examination of the relation between law and literary fiction in *adab* also end up, as we shall see in the last part of this article, corroborating and consolidating such representations.[16]

The Dichotomic Model of the Roles: Male/Female

In the *Mustae hot* the most obvious role to which the author seems to conform is the basic dichotomic one of the woman in her archetypical and absolute positivity or negativity. The picture presented, in many respects disturbing, is that of a series of female figures traceable to primary stereotypical images built from Islamic morals[17] and from previous and coeval literature[18] on nature, on expec-

[14]Ibid., 673–75.

[15]Ibid., 675–77.

[16]On the dynamics of power and on the debate sparked by this theme, I limit myself here to citing Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. L. Nicholson (New York and London, 1991), 157–75.

[17]See Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan, Traditions and Interpretations* (New York and Oxford, 1994).

[18]Despite the discovery of new sources and the diversity of approaches in terms of form, the overall picture of women that emerges from *adab* works is rather static. Indeed, Everett Rowson has written: "In the case of anecdotal literature, such traditionalism must be understood quite literally: an anecdote which first appears in a ninth-century collection will reappear, unchanged, in subsequent collections for a millennium." See "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. J. Epstein and K. Straub (New York, 1991), 50–79. Naturally, as has come about in all literatures, a more accurate, diversified, and nuanced vision of man–woman relations and further, of the relative representations and questions of gender, can emerge from non-canonical texts, or texts ascribable to other typologies of writing, such as treatises of erotology. I make reference, in this regard, to the above-cited contribution from Rowson and to Pernilla Myrne's research. Among the works of the latter, I limit myself here to referencing the article published in this same issue

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tations, and on the roles assigned to women in a society that was essentially patriarchal and made for men.[19] Configured as a product of fiction, the literature was therefore a resonance chamber for a question that is above all social, a place for propositions and comparisons of ways of reading and conforming woman in relation to the needs of society.[20] The theory of the fixed "separate spheres," as we see in the work of al-Ibshīhī, presupposes a drastic distinction between male and female fields of action. Already from the first part of the chapter, dedicated to the conjugal union and its advantages and clearly addressed to men, through the Quranic verses, traditions, and stories cited, we see the exclusion of woman from the public sphere and her location in the strictly domestic and family context. It seems opportune to recall furthermore how, in the educational praxis that the *adab* anthologies such as the *Mustaolog* convey, the control of sexuality, understood as a result of political, social, economic, and cultural processes, has considerable weight also with regard to men. Only for women, however, does it acquire the form of a metaphoric privation, of a true and proper negation of the self and of the sexual impulse.[21] This translates in concrete terms into the definition of a ghettoized and ghettoizing space in which woman reigns on condition of a full and total adhesion to the mission that society and the Islamic axiology attribute to her. This mission is identified, in substance, with a negation of female subjectivity and with the appearance of roles lived in relation to the men of the family. It is advisable for whoever has to take a wife to choose a pious and good willed one (life seems short if shared with a good, virtuous woman, while it seems full of torment if spent alongside a nasty woman whose company is revolting to the heart and the sight of whom is never a joy to the eyes);[22] obviously she should be a virgin (her mouth the sweetest, her breasts the most fecund),[23] fertile

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of *MSR* and to highlighting the essays "Pleasing the Beloved: Sex and True Love in a Medieval Arabic Erotic Compendium," in *The Beloved in Middle Eastern Literatures: The Culture of Love and Languishing*, ed. A. Korangy, H. Al-Samman, and M. Beard (London, New York, 2017), 215–36, and "Of Ladies and Lesbians and Books on Women from the Third/Ninth and Fourth/Tenth Centuries," *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 2, no. 4 (2017): 187–210. See also *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, ed. M. S. Gordon and K. A. Hain (Oxford, 2017).

[19] See P. Myrne, *Narrative, Gender, and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* (Göteborg, 2010).

[20] See H. Kilpatrick, "Some late ʿAbbāsid and Mamlūk Books about Women: A Literary Historical Approach," *Arabica* 42, no. 1 (1995): 56–78, and Y. Rapoport, "Women and Gender in Mamluk Society: An Overview," *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 1–47.

[21] For men, it would perhaps be more appropriate to talk of repression.

[22] *Mustaṭraf,* 665.

[23] Ibid., 663–64. In this case, for example, the reference is to a saying of the Prophet and an adage that goes thus: "The most attractive ride is the one that has never been mounted, just as the most precious pearl is the one that has not been punctured." (663).

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(so that she can procreate easily), young (a forty-year-old woman is a calamity),[24] of noble origin, and well-educated with regard to child-rearing (pay attention to the person to whom you entrust your children and pay attention to appearances, to the woman who is beautiful, but whose origins are bad).[25] Furthermore, social sanctions connected to the risk of bad ancestry lead the author to advise a man to look for a wife in a family other than his own.[26] Again, the work contains a reference to the social condition of the woman: "An essay has stated: I invite you to take as wives those women who have been raised in opulence and who have then had experience of the horrors of poverty; they will have been affected by the past opulence and poverty will have been for them a salutary lesson."[27]

Contrary to male power, which is manifested openly and in public, female influence, therefore, is manifested and acts in private. It gives life to every aspect of existence of the individual and of all society only if it continues to remain in shadow and invisibility. Even when advice on marriage is provided for women by other women, that is to say when male authority attributes the advice to female voices, the perspective does not change. The commandments offered by a mother to a daughter who is about to leave her home because she has been given in marriage is a clear example:

> Be unto him like a servant so that he will be unto you like a servant. In your relations with him follow painstakingly ten essential points that will be for you a treasure: the first two consist of showing yourself to be happy regarding your fate, to be obedient and submissive; the next two consist of seeking to make yourself pleasing to his sight and smell; the fifth and sixth reside in carefully respecting the times of your husband's meals and rest since excessive hunger would render him cross and lack of sleep anxious; the seventh and eighth regard the care of property and management of the servants and people of the household; the ninth and tenth consist of not disobeying him and not revealing his secrets.[28]

In essence, while the moral qualities that the woman must possess are exalted through exemplary narrations, there emerges gradually in the course of the work the need to educate individual women on the basis of a totalizing formative project that is able to channel female instincts and feelings in the right direction, or at least in the direction held to be such by a society that is seeking further affir-

[24]Ibid., 664.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., 665.

[27]Ibid., 671.

[28]Ibid., 665.

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mation; which, in a few words, makes reference to the negation of the individual nature of woman and of the specific mission assigned to her by society. As can be noted, beyond the necessary moral and character qualities, above all obedience and submission to male desires and will, what characterizes the representations offered by al-Ibshīhī for the Mamluk epoch, which are not so far from those of previous epochs, are industriousness and a whole gamut of female behaviors that are functional for the correct running of household life and which render the home that comfortable refuge to which man aspires. Keeping the house clean, knowing how to manage the servants and looking after the children, knowing how to deal with the kitchen, these are all qualities that accompany what can be considered as the essential prerogative of the model: the female capacity for abnegation and total sacrifice of the self.

The Beautiful Woman and the Ugly Woman: Reifying the Female Body

Describing woman, as is known, is an operation ascribable to the male imaginary.[29] It is men who form, judge, discuss and establish the parameters of female beauty. In the second section of the *Mustaṭraf,* dedicated to female qualities worthy of praise, physical beauty is considered to be a fundamental requisite of the good wife:

> Al-Ḥajjāj wrote to al-Ḥakam ibn Ayyūb as follows: "Seek for ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān a woman for him to marry who is pretty from a distance, beautiful from nearby, who enjoys the respect of her tribe, is of humble sentiment, and obedient to her husband." Al-Ḥakam replied: "I have found the woman you describe, but she has abundant breasts." Al-Ḥajjāj rejoined: "The beauty of woman is not perfect. She has abundant breasts so that she might warm him who shares her bed and might feed her child in abundance."[30]

And here is the portrait of ideal beauty:

> One day, ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān asked a member of the Ghaṭafān tribe to portray the most beautiful woman. The man replied: Choose one, O prince of believers, who has velvet skin on her

[29]For a reconstruction of philosophical reflection on the female body, see Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris, 1980); M. Frazer and M. Greco, *The Body. A Reader* (London, 2005); Michela Marzano, *La philosophie du corps* (Paris, 2007). More specific is the study by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, 1992).

[30] *Mustaṭraf,* 671.

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> feet, strong heels, smooth legs, round knees, well-turned thighs, rounded arms, delicate hands, abundant breasts, rosy cheeks, large black eyes, long, narrow eyebrows, intensely red lips, a wide and luminous forehead, a straight and proud nose, a fresh, perfumed mouth, hair black as coal, a long, slender neck, a sinuous belly.[31]

It is not by chance that such a woman is found primarily, as is affirmed immediately afterwards, among pure-blooded Arabs, or "among those Arabs who have not mixed with other peoples" and, secondarily, "among the Persians who are not of mixed race."[32] Thus it does not appear to me to be by chance that al-Ibshīhī, through a series of quotations attributable to authoritative characters, makes reference to an "anonymous," but "collective" model of female beauty that unites physical and moral qualities that traditionally belong to Arab women, albeit from different tribes: "She has the breasts of a Qurayshite, the belly of a Kindite, the feet and hands of a Kuza'ite, the mouth of a Tayite, the wisdom of Luqmān, the figure of Joseph, the harmonious voice of David, and the chastity of Mariam."[33]

The final result of this verbal portrait is a body of parts that produce a canon of ideal beauty. The rhetorical technique the author makes use of is rather conventional.[34] The depiction that comes out of it is not that of an individual beauty, but a beauty deriving from a process of assembly, or rather "disassembly" of the most beautiful parts of women, behind which is concealed a process that causes fragmentation and reification of the body. Nancy Vickers has expressed, for descriptive texts composed in other epochs and contexts, some interesting considerations on the rhetoric that characterizes the male descriptive approach to the female body:

> Description… is a gesture of display, a separating off and a signaling of particulars destined to make visible that which is described. Its object or matter is thus submitted to a double power-relation inherent in the gesture itself: on the one hand the describer controls, possesses, and uses that matter to his own end; and on the other hand, his reader or listener is extended the privilege or pleasure of "seeing."[35]

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 672.

[34] E. Zetzel Lambert, *The Face of Love: Feminism and the Beauty Question* (Boston, 1995), 23–53.

[35] N. Vickers, *The Blazon of Sweet Beauty's "Best": Shakespeare's Lucrece and the Question of Theory* (New York, 1985), 95–115.

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It seems significant to me, indeed, that the portrait, in this case, contrary to what happens in medical and physiognomy texts,[36] begins from the bottom and proceeds gradually towards the top according to an ascending order that disturbs the rigor of the description and underlines the fragmentary sense of the whole. Probably, the procedure of "disassembly" put into action in this type of description reveals, as has already been emphasized by feminist critics in relation to descriptions of Renaissance women, the male desire to appropriate the female body with the aim of exercising power over it. The description of the so-called "body of parts" is therefore not only the result of a process sanctioned by literary tradition, but is an index of the desire for control and the anxiety of male domination. The body becomes, symbolically, the place in which man can exercise his action as authority. A reading of this type is backed by the need, evidently felt by the author, to also provide a long and detailed portrait of the ugly woman, who could simply have been implied, alluding to all that is the opposite of the features of the beautiful woman, and which here is entrusted to the words of an "Arab from the countryside with great experience with women":

> The worst woman is the one with a thin body, all skin and bone, who has white discharges, is sickly, pale, sinister in her figure, quarrelsome, repelling, authoritarian, strident, moody, always ready to attack, with a tongue as sharp as the blade of a lance, who laughs and cries with no reason, who attracts enmity towards her husband, stupid and with her head in the clouds, with steel calves and her jugular swollen with anger, whose words sound like threats, with a grating voice, who hides the good and manifests the bad, who lines up against her husband in bad times rather than allying with him, who takes no pleasure in him and has no fear of him, who, when he enters, exits, and vice versa, who if he laughs, cries, and vice versa, who storms him with questions, who eats greedily and grumbles continuously, who is mean and indecent in her dress, who keeps her children in a state of want and leaves the home dirty ….[37]

So ugliness, subject of the third section of the chapter, is a typical characteristic of a bad wife. The description continues with a listing of other defects for which God is invoked so that "He might cover [a woman thus made] with opprobrium and infamy and make her undergo the hardest trials."[38] In this case too, the

[36] See Antonella Ghersetti, "Il Kitāb Arisṭāṭalis al-faylasūf fī l-firāsa nella traduzione di Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 4 (1999).

[37] *Mustaṭraf,* 672–673.

[38] *Mustaṭraf,* 673.

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portrait thus constructed defines a sort of "exemplary ugliness" that is aimed at the same time at stating a "terrible spiritual and moral condition."

Gender Norms and Stereotypes Regarding Women

Even the stereotypes, generated by gender norms and continuously conveyed in the literary imaginary of *adab,* emphasize the clear division of roles, the social stratification, with a particular regard given to the "alterity," the importance of the domestic function, and, above all, the reproductive function attributed to the woman, made into an "object" to every effect. With reference to this, the following quotations suffice:

> Female first cousins from the father's side are those whose company is the most pleasant; foreigners are those who bear children destined to become the most eminent men; and no one strikes an adversary more vigorously and energetically than the children borne by a black woman.
>
> ʿAbd Allāh, son of Marwān, has stated: "He who wants a concubine for her sensuality should choose a Berber; he who wishes a good mother should direct his choice to a Persian woman; he who wants a woman who serves him should choose a Greek."[39]
>
> A poet once said: "Do not reprove a man for having as mother a Greek, a Sudanese or a Persian. Other mothers are simply containers suitable for receiving the deposit of seminal fluid. It is always from the father that it is drawn [everything]."[40]

Obviously, the most shocking lines, clearly misogynistic, are those in the concluding part of the quotation, in which woman's body is rendered a pure "object," a "recipient" with the function of receiving the seminal fluid and generating offspring that will inherit no character trait from her. The part related to the advice given to men on the basis of their preferences is linked to an equally interesting aspect, i.e., the perception of alterity, always felt to be a central problem in the political, social, and cultural systems, which here is inevitably interwoven with a gender question. The passage quoted reflects a composite society on the ethnic level, within which the Arabs continue to affirm their own superiority in general and to consider "other" women such as Berbers, Persians, Greeks, and blacks dif-

[39] See Ibn Buṭlān, *Risālah jāmiʿah li-funūn nāfiʿah fī shirá al-raqīq wa-taqlīb al-ʿabīd*, It. trans. A. Ghersetti, *Trattato generale sull'acquisto e l'esame degli schiavi* (Catanzaro, 2001), in particular chapter IV, 74–84. For the images of the slave girls in a physiognomic text, see also the article by Antonella Ghersetti in the current issue.

[40] *Mustaṭraf,* 670.

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ferently from Arab women. So it is that Berber concubines are more "sensual," Persians are more capable of being good mothers, the Greeks are more servile, and the blacks are those who generate stronger men.

Woman as Instrument of the Devil: The Topoi of Misogyny

As if this were not enough, al-Ibshīhī dedicates the entire fourth section to women's cunning, their perfidy, and their rebellious nature. Taken together, these moral judgments—some even attributed to the authoritative voices of the prophets David and Jesus—and the examples provided tend to criminalize women generically by virtue of their characteristics as fomenters of sin and subverters of social order, especially in relation to the fact that their good graces depend on carnal passion:

> In dealing with women, do not trust even your brother. When a woman is at stake, there is no man on whom you can really count…
>
> A wise man said: "Women are all evil and the worst thing about them is that it is difficult to do without them." The wise men said: "Do not ever trust women and do not allow yourself to be beguiled by riches, no matter how considerable they may be." We say indeed: "Women are the devil's traps."[41]

The phenomenon of woman's body being considered *instrumentum* of the devil, an uncontrollable vehicle, and therefore dangerous, through which the malign can manifest itself, is found in various cultures. One tends to see in these representations a visual translation of female sexual power, intended not only in the erotic sense, but also in the reproductive and procreational sense, the power of regeneration and transformation. The texts of Michel Foucault are now a sort of commonplace to which much previous feminist and gender criticism direct recognition, which consider sexuality as fundamentally a cultural construct. What I am interested in underlining here is how discourse on female sexuality is an integral part of the overall strategy of control and power applied in this field by a sexist and patriarchal society against groups that are potentially subversive. The strategy is applied and flourishes not only in stereotyped images,[42] but also in the representations that make reference to that dimension defined by Bakhtin as low, corporeal material, very present in Arabic literature from the eighth century, to be linked with the comic-grotesque mode that characterizes it. This dimension implicates denuding bodies, verbal banter, rude language, and obscene exhibi-

[41] *Mustaṭraf,* 673.

[42] See Antonella Ghersetti, "Fisiognomica e stereotipi femminili nella cultura araba," *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 14 (1996): 195–206.

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tion, involving laughter as stimulation.[43] A brief, but interesting example in this sense is an anecdote in which a woman reproves her husband for his rare visits and he responds with lines of poetry in *wāfir* meter:

> I am an elderly man and I have a woman who is old and who invites me to a thing that is not allowed;
>
> "Since we have grown old," she shouted, "your goods have withered!"
>
> I retorted: "Of course not! It's your hole that has widened."[44]

We are in the presence of an overturning of sense: here the female threat, as expressed through the woman's active sexuality (in the scene the desire for sexual satisfaction is attributed to the woman), is deflated and becomes ridiculous. The grotesque icon of a consumed female body, the exhibition of that which normally is hidden, and the reference to an evidently widened vulva constitute a grotesque lowering of the symbols of sexuality and fecundity. The spectacle, at the service of a policy of aversion and disgust, is obscene precisely because the laughter has desacralized it, by the circumstances in which it takes place, and by the distribution of the roles among the actants (dominating/dominated). The aged female body has lost its fearful erotic power and thus is ridiculed.

The list relating to the unreliability, perfidy, and cunning of women, as happens in other literatures, is very long and can be summarized in the following phrase: their advice leads to ruin and their decision to impotence. Here is a story produced by al-Ibshīhī as an example:

> Abū Bakr (may God hold him in glory) said: "How sad is that man who trusts a woman in his business." It is told that a fisherman brought a fish to Abraviz. The prince, enchanted by the beauty and the quality of this fish, ordered that four thousand dirhams be given to the fisherman. When his wife Sirin pointed out to him that he had just committed an error, Abraviz asked: "What should I do?" And his bride replied: "When he comes to visit you, ask him: is your fish a male or a female? If he replies that it is male, tell him that in truth you wanted a female; if, instead, he replies that it is a female, then tell him you wanted a male." And so, when the fisherman came to visit, Abraviz asked him the question and came the reply: "It is a female." "Well," said the king, "bring me a male." And the fisherman said: "May God grant long life to the king! The

[43] See Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in particular 52–53.

[44] *Mustaṭraf,* 675.

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> fish is virgin, it has never coupled." "Bravo!" exclaimed the king, who then gave orders to give the fisherman eight thousand dirhams. Then he concluded: "Write down, among the wise maxims: the cunning of women and the adoption of their advice are evils that lead to grave consequences."[45]

The misogynistic attitude therefore influences according to a scheme of clear consequentiality according to which every woman is false and evil, lustful and avid, so that it is absolutely necessary to always distrust her because she is capable of leading man to ruin. It therefore makes sense to reserve the correct dose of contempt for her because, given her incurable nature, she will betray him sooner or later. Yet again, the representation of the ugly woman, of her falsity and perfidy, is significant. She is the incarnation of evil and epitome of the threat and subversive potential that society identifies in female sexuality in particular.[46] These two contrasting images are emblematic of the peculiarities and limits of a vision of woman in which the fracture between the two poles of femaleness could not be any clearer or more unresolvable, but are also the expression of a "discourse" regarding woman that is ideologically determined and oriented. Now, at the origin of this attitude it is possible to identify motivations relating to social order that radicalize the exaltation of the good and beautiful woman on the one hand and demonize the ugly and bad woman on the other. In a word, it is fear of what woman represents as a symbol of dangerous forces that could cause anarchy and social disintegration that pre-constructs and pre-determines her image.

Marriage and Divorce: Women, Law, and Literature

The first section of the *Mustaṭraf,* regarding the advantages of conjugal union and the desires that lead to union in matrimony, and the fifth and last section, dedicated to what is usually cited concerning *ṭalāq,* confirm and consolidate, with some slight variation, the traditional vision of the woman conveyed in previous Arabic belletristic production. The woman is conceived of mostly in terms of her reproductive capacity and as an object of desire, need, and even of the whims of men.[47] What I am interested in dwelling on in particular here is that most problematic and dialectic aspect that has been established in the Islamic environment over the course of the centuries: the dialectic between social reality (with the relative manifestations and deviations from the norm), the sources of law,

[45] Ibid., 674.

[46] Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *La sexualité en Islam* (Paris, 1975).

[47] Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge, 2005).

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and the expressive modes of *adab.*[48] Relations between law and literature, both based on abstract formulations and on associative models of thought, constitute an extremely fertile ground for research based on interdisciplinarity.[49] Law and literature, in the context of Arabic-Islamic culture, have always appeared to be tightly interconnected, as is demonstrated by the very biographies of many authors, including our own al-Ibshīhī, who usually have a juridical background. Both law and literature, furthermore, share an intent to structure reality through language. Add to this the fact that *adab* is a narrative mode aimed at transmitting knowledge that is also ethical and moral, thanks to its specific capacity for reformulating what has already been experienced and referred previously. Elsewhere, in a context that has nothing to do with female representations in literature, I have already dealt with the question that is now posed for the *Mustaṭraf,* i.e., that relation between ideas and language, between thought and style, that characterizes the transmission of knowledge. In a contribution on the *Sulwān al-muṭāʿ* by Ibn Ẓafar al-Ṣiqillī (d. 1172), with regard to the thematic chapters that make up the work and the narrative modes therein, I expressed myself in terms of the "hierarchical order of discourse," precisely because of the fact that on the individual themes faced by the author, the first quotations came respectively from the sacred text of Islam and from the sayings and the deeds of the prophet Muḥammad, and only later were there quotations from the moral sayings of wise men and philoso-

[48] The bibliography on the narrative modes of *adab* is quite extensive. I limit myself to indicating: S. A. Bonebakker, "Adab and the Concept of Belles-Lettres," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature,* ed. J. Ashtiyany et al. (Cambridge, 1990), 16–30; Rosita Drory, "Three Attempts to Legitimize Fiction in Classical Arabic Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994): 146–64; Antonella Ghersetti, "La *narratio brevis* nella letteratura araba classica: Tecniche discorsive e convenzioni narrative," in *Raccontare nel Mediterraneo,* ed. Maria Grazia Profeti (Florence, 2003), 9–29; Ead., "Parola parlata: convenzioni e tecniche di resa nella narrativa araba classica, Annali Ca' Foscari XXXXV (2006), 71–92; ead., "Arabic Anecdotes and Medieval *Narratio Brevis*: a Literary Analysis," in *The Classical Arabic Story: Critical views*, ed. S. Kh. Jayyusi (Leiden, forthcoming); Philip F. Kennedy, *On Fiction and* Adab *in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden, 2005); Mirella Cassarino, *Le* Notti *di Tawḥīdī: variazioni sull'*adab (Soveria Mannelli, 2017), 17–51.

[49] The approach adopted here is inspired by that of the Law and Literature movement, founded on the idea that literary works are able to testify to the fundamental values of American juridical culture of the early twentieth century and to also diffuse the idea according to which literature can contribute to forming the ethical conscience of judges and lawyers. I limit myself to citing, on this movement: Benjamin Cardozo, *Law and Literature* (New York, 1931): Julie Stone Peters, "Law, Literature and the Vanishing Real: On the Future of an Interdisciplinary Illusion," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 120, no. 2 (2005): 442–53; and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, 2004). On the validity of this interdisciplinary approach I refer to Remo Ceserani, *Convergenze: Gli strumenti letterari e le altre discipline* (Milan, 2010).

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phers and from literature.[50] The same scheme is repeated in the chapter of the *Mustaṭraf* dedicated to women.[51] The first section opens, indeed, with the quotation of the most well-known verse from the Quran regarding marriage, or more precisely, regarding polygamy: "If you fear that you will not act justly towards the orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two, three, four; but if you fear you will not be equitable, then only one, or what your right hands own; so it is likelier you will not be partial."[52]

The author also quotes the following verse, contained in the Surah of Light, on matrimony as a compulsory condition in the life of every Muslim physically and economically able to contract marriage: "Marry the spouseless among you, and your slaves and handmaidens that are righteous; if they are poor, God will enrich them of His bounty; God is All-embracing, All-knowing."[53]

Another Quranic verse quoted in the *Mustaṭraf* regards the possibility of contracting marriage with widows: "There is no fault in you touching the proposal to women you offer, or hide in your hearts; God knows that you will be mindful of them; but do not make troth with them secretly without you speak honorable words. And do not resolve on the knot of marriage until the book has reached its term; and know that God knows what is in your hearts, so be fearful of Him; and know that God is All-forgiving, All-clement."[54]

The verses quoted are directed exclusively to men. It is they who take women as brides, the slaves or the widows, according to rules and customs dictated by social norms and regulated by the texts. As is known, the Quran and prophetic traditions are at the basis of Islamic law. Therefore in al-Ibshīhī's writing there had to be reference to the words of the Prophet on the joys that marriage holds and, above all, on the importance of uniting with fertile women to ensure the growth of the community. In limiting ourselves to one single, significant example, it is enough to quote the following words attributed to Muḥammad: "A fertile black woman is better than a sterile white one."[55]

This is a quotation which introduces into the gender binarism continually repeated in the Quran and Sunnah—a binarism in the rigid form of inequality between men and women—also a racist element. The black woman is preferable to

[50] See Mirella Cassarino, "Come rivolgersi all'autorità: I Conforti politici di Ibn Ẓafar il Siciliano," in *Il potere della parola, la parola del potere, tra Europa e Mondo Arabo-Ottomano, tra Medioevo ed Età Moderna,* ed. A. Ghersetti (Venice, 2010), 26–45.

[51] *Mustaṭraf,* 663.

[52] Quran 4:3. The English translation here and in notes 53 and 54 is from Arberry, 1955. See https://www.islamawakened.com/quran/4/st10.htm

[53] Quran 24:32.

[54] Quran 2:235.

[55] *Mustaṭraf,* 663.

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the white woman, if the latter is not able to bring children into the world. At the center of attention, once again, is the woman as object or, more precisely, woman's capacity for procreation: if and when this fails, then one can make do even with a black woman. We are here facing a further demonstration of how gender norms are reinforced not only by the ideals and the canons of binarism, but also by the racial codes of purity and taboos on crossbreeding between races.[56] These are norms that also contribute to the determination of the ontological area in which legitimate expression can be given to bodies.

The words of the Prophet are then followed by those of other authoritative personages, together with lines of verse on the themes dealt with and already considered in the previous sections. The fifth and last section, in contrast, is for the most part made up of stories that have as their purpose warning men of the dangers to which they expose themselves when they divorce in a superficial manner. The weave of the narrative is thus developed and recounted with its point of departure being a law on repudiation that in some cases is not respected: here too, despite the fact that woman may be victim of male abuse, it is the man who is the true addressee of the discourse. *Adab,* due to its intrinsic stylistic and rhetorical force, is thus functional to the knowledge, the transmission and the direct application of some juridical norms founded on an ideal dimorphism and the heterosexual complementarity of bodies. In al-Ibshīhī's pages, the ethical dimension legitimately occupies its own specific space and represents the foundation of the normative and deontological aspect. There is no trace at all of any critical reflection on the author's part that might highlight the limited and partial nature of the binarism that governs relational practices.

The anecdotes and the stories recounted, dedicated prevalently to the risks arising from a superficial use of the formula to be pronounced for the *ṭalāq,* should make reference to questions of responsibility and to the defence of women in an inevitably oppressive juridical system. I limit myself to quoting the following anecdote, attributed to the authoritative testimony of several personages and permeated by the dialectic between *jidd* and *hazl* that characterizes *adab:*

> It is told, on the basis of what was transmitted by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, son of Muḥammad, son of the brother of al-Aṣmaʿī, as follows: "One day," he said, "my uncle, who was in the company of al-Rashīd, said to him: 'Prince of believers, I have heard it said that an Arab repudiated five women in one single day.' Al-Rashīd replied, 'How is this possible, since one man may only marry four?' 'Prince of believers,' he rejoined, 'this man had married four women. One day, he went to them and found them arguing. He was a very bad man and

[56] See Butler, *Bodies that Matter,* xiv.

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> shouted, "So you're not going to stop fighting among yourselves? I am certain," he said turning to one of them, "that it is all your fault: go away! You are repudiated!" "You have been a little too impulsive, in repudiating her," observed another of the women, "perhaps it would have been more appropriate to reprove her in another way." "Well, you too are repudiated!" said the man. "May God curse you (confound you)," exclaimed the third woman, "how can you behave in this way when—by God!—we have always been respectful towards you?!" "Good: you too, who bring in good behavior, you too, just like them, are repudiated!" And the fourth woman, belonging to the Banū Hilāl tribe, exclaimed on her part, "You really must have a heavy heart that drives you to punish all your women in this way, repudiating them!" "Well," replied the man, "I repudiate you too!" A woman neighbor, who had listened to everything the man had said, put her head out of the window and said loudly, "By God! Among all the Arabs only you and your tribe are so weak of spirit because of the travesties you have undergone and because of how you have acted in consequence: you have found no other solution than to repudiate, in just one hour, all of your wives!" "You who interfere in what does not regard you," shouted the man, "you too are repudiated, if your husband ratifies my sentence!" "I ratify it!" exclaimed the woman's husband.' That anecdote was of great interest to al-Rashīd."

As we can see, the first reference regards the Islamic juridical norm concerning the number of women—four—that it is possible to marry. With this element as point of departure, which manifests and transmits a true fact, it is possible to highlight the anomaly in the anecdote (which probably derives from the imaginary): the repudiation of the five women. An interesting aspect of the story relates to the wives speaking up: if on the one hand this reflects the women's capacity for judgement, their courage in expressing their own opinions, and their sense of solidarity, on the other it functions to emphasize both the consequences that can arise from such an act, and the abuses of men in exercising power.[57] As a consequence of the women speaking up,[58] the man will repudiate all four and will go beyond that, carrying out the same act with regard to his neighbor's wife, and with the consent of his neighbor. In my opinion, the story may be classi-

[57]On the value of women speaking up in literary texts, see the article by Daniela Rodica Firanescu in this same issue.

[58]For a panoramic view, in chronological order, of instructions on divorce see: Quran 4:20; 2:228–32; 65:1–7; 33:49; 2:236–37; 4:35; 33:28; 66:5.

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fied among that long series of humorous anecdotes, present in various Muslim literatures, that aim to reveal (and distort) a complex reality in which women are subaltern subjects, often victims of male abuse also connected with the restitution of the dowry.

It is not by chance, for example, that al-Ibshīhī should include, in the concluding part of the chapter, some anecdotes that regard the suffering that the absence of the repudiated woman can generate in their souls, especially when she has remarried. This probably had the purpose of continuing to "educate" by example to effect a regulation of practices connected to the *ṭalāq*. Men, indeed, end up regretting the often hastily taken action. Bear in mind that in the Quran (2:229–30) there is a significant instruction that aims to impede a man from taking his wife back before the four-month term envisaged by the law only to repudiate her once again immediately afterwards.

In some cases it is possible that what Alessandro Bausani suggests in his comment on these verses might happen, i.e., the wife, tired, "Grants him the dowry so as to be repudiated truly and thus be able to remarry. In retroactive use the jurists also held valid (though it was considered a sin) the 'triple divorce,' i.e., pronounced by the man three times in succession, perhaps even in a moment of anger. In order to be taken again the wife then had to marry first with a third person."[59]

And here, to conclude, is one of the examples put forward by the author regarding a matter in which the prince-poet al-Walīd ibn Yazīd[60] was protagonist; he was known, not surprisingly, for his libertine spirit and his religious indifference:

> Al-Walīd ibn Yazīd repudiated his wife Saʿdá and when she remarried he was profoundly saddened and regretted his action. Ashʿab came to visit and al-Walīd said to him: "In exchange for a recompense of ten thousand dirhams, will you deliver a message to Saʿdá from me? He replied: "I will." So al-Walīd gave the order for the money to be counted and to give it to him. When the man was in possession of the recompense he said: Give me the message now. Al-Walīd replied: Go to her and recite for her the following verses:
>
> Saʿdá, there is still for us a possibility
> O we can but await the day of resurrection
> Certainly it is possible that destiny may lead
> your husband to death or to separation

[59] See Alessandro Bausani, *Corano* (Italian translation, Florence, 1978), comment, 514.

[60] The bibliography on this personage is quite extensive. I limit myself to citing Regis Blachère, "Le prince umayyade al-Walîd ibn Yazîd [II] et son rôle littéraire," in idem, *Analecta* (Damascus, 1975), 379–99.

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> Ashʿab went to visit Saʿdá and asked permission to see her. She accepted. When the man was in her company, she asked him: "What good wind carries you to me, Ashʿab?"
>
> "My lady, it is al-Walīd who sends me with the following message." And he recited the verses. She said to her slaves: "Hold this man." "My lady," he replied, "al-Walīd paid me ten thousand dirhams to carry out this mission. You may have them in exchange for my freedom, I swear by God!" She replied: "I will set you free only if you will go to give him my words." "Agreed," replied Ashʿab, "but give me a recompense." "The carpet on which I sit is yours!" she said. And he said: "Well, get up." When she got up, the man took the carpet and loaded it onto his shoulders, then he said: "Give me the message." The woman recited the following verses:
>
> You cry for Saʿdá when it was you who left her
> She is now lost no matter what you do
>
> On receiving the message, al-Walīd felt his heart grow smaller and he became enormously sad. He then said to Ashʿab: "Choose how you will die by my hand: I can kill you, or have you fall from the top of this palace or, otherwise, throw you in that den of lions who will tear you apart." The man, terrified, bowed his head for a long time and then said: "My lord, I am certain that you will not have the courage to torture the eyes of one whose gaze has fallen on Saʿdá." At those words, al-Walīd smiled and let him go on his way.[61]

In this anecdote too there is an interesting aspect, as in the previous one, in the fact that the woman's voice, in conventional terms, is reported. She, repudiated, manifests her own resentment for the treatment she has received and feels it important to underline her own refusal to return to her husband. It seems, furthermore, that the anecdote recounted by al-Ibshīhī contains only references to one part of the events connected with al-Walīd ibn Yazīd's repudiation of his wife. Indeed, we know that some months after the death of his father he fell hopelessly in love with a woman called Salmá, sister of his wife Saʿdá, and that this was the real reason why he repudiated his wife.[62] He then tried in vain to win back Saʿdá,

[61] *Mustaṭraf,* 676.

[62] The events have been reconstructed by Blachère, who writes: "Durant vingt années, al-Walîd paraît avoir gardé le regret douloureux de cet amour inassouvi. Pour la poésie arabe, ce fut un bonheur. Le prince, en effet, comme c'est naturel, ne cessera de célébrer celle qui pourrait être sa joie et qui fait seulement sa peine, de chanter son chagrin, ses efforts pour s'y arracher, son désespoir de n'y point parvenir" ("Le prince umayyade," 381).

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who had already remarried. As a consequence, he dedicated himself to wine and women.

Conclusions

The aim of my article was to investigate, through al-Ibshīhī's testimony, the performative power of discourse on the conception of the female body in the Mamluk period, its presence in the literary imaginary as a reflection of reality, and its function in society. What comes out of this brief and partial analysis of chapter LXXIII of the *Mustaṭraf* is a picture characterized by an evident misogynist attitude. In the Mamluk period, in keeping with what previous authors have written, *adab al-nikāḥ* reproposes, as had come about in other cultural traditions, a drastic separation of male and female fields of action, a conception of the female body as functional to procreation and the satisfaction of male needs, and conventional portraits of beautiful and ugly women in which the procedures of disassembly conceal processes of reification of their bodies and contribute to the reproposal of the social role reserved for the two sexes: the male dominant and oriented towards the external, and the female dominated and concentrated on herself and the home. Women are represented as physically weak and morally fragile people in need of protection, both from themselves and from others. By "protection" is intended complete submission to man. These images are determined in equal measure by social norms and by religious and juridical discourse. Belletristic production, mostly written by men, continued, even in the Mamluk epoch, to transmit these less than edifying images of women. The only female figures that escape the stereotype and enjoy at least a partially positive image are virgins, widows, and married women. Through chastity they manage to get the better of their sexual instincts: the virgins completely relinquish them through a conscious choice; the widows relinquish them through the death of their consort; the married women limit their own sexuality exclusively to procreation. In the last analysis, the discourses in question, due to the strategies applied and the performative nature of *adab,* have contributed in a determinant way to conditioning knowledge and rooting within the very structure of communication itself the fundamental processes of the formation of personal and social identity.

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