



---

Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women

Author(s): SAHAR AMER

Source: *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, MAY 2009, Vol. 18, No. 2 (MAY 2009), pp. 215-236

Published by: University of Texas Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40663351>

**REFERENCES**

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/40663351?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/40663351?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Texas Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the History of Sexuality*

JSTOR

# Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women

SAHAR AMER

*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

IF THE ABSENCE OF A SPECIFIC terminology to denote lesbianism in medieval Europe seems to have compromised the production of scholarship about same-sex love and desire among women, the existence of the label *sahq* and *sibaqa*, *musahaqat al-nisa'*, or *sahiqā* (Arabic words for “lesbianism” and “lesbian,” respectively) in medieval Arabic writings did not result in a richer critical production. In fact, if relatively little research has been conducted on female same-sex desire in medieval Europe, even less has been produced on homosexuality in the medieval Arabic literary or Islamicate tradition, and almost no research at all has been done on medieval Arab Islamicate lesbianism.<sup>1</sup> This state of scholarship into alternative sexual practices in the Arab Islamicate world is especially astonishing considering the survival of a noteworthy body of primary texts dealing precisely with this topic. Furthermore, if one broadens the category of medieval Arab lesbian to include women who were “lesbian-like,” as Judith Bennett has invited us to do in our construction of the history of Western female homosexuality, we uncover additional expressions of medieval Arab lesbian

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* who made countless helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> There have been to my knowledge only two colloquia directly addressing the topic of medieval homosexuality in the Islamicate tradition, both resulting in the publication of the conference papers: Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, ed., *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam* (Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1979), and Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, eds., *Islamicate Sexualities Studies: Translations across Temporal and Geographical Zones of Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008). In the latter collection only two papers (by Kathryn Babayan and Sahar Amer) address the question of lesbianism. The most important work conducted on medieval Islamicate male homosexuality by scholars is that of Everett Rowson, Franz Rosenthal, Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, Malek Chebel, Stephen O. Murray, and Will Roscoe, all cited below. In Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, eds., *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) only one essay deals with lesbianism; see Murray, “Woman-Woman Love in Islamic Societies,” 97–104. Unfortunately, Murray collapses medieval representations of lesbian practices with Orientalist and modern perspectives.

The term *Islamicate* (in contrast to *Islamic*), which I will use throughout this article, has the advantage of highlighting social and cultural dimensions over religious ones; it was coined by Marshall G. S. Hodgson, who defines it thus: “‘Islamicate’ would refer not directly

*Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 18, No. 2, May 2009

© 2009 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

presence.<sup>2</sup> For indeed, the cultural and social life of some women in certain medieval Arab courts, including their work and lifestyle, may well unveil unsuspected spaces in which same-sex activities might have occurred. If it is not always clear that these practices could be dubbed lesbian, they may well be considered lesbian-like.

#### MEDIEVAL ARAB LESBIANS

One might argue that the Arabic terms for “lesbianism” (*sahq*, *sibaq*, and *sibaqa*) and “lesbian” (*sahiqqa*, *sabhaga*, and *musahiqqa*) refer primarily to a behavior, an action, rather than an emotional attachment or an identity. The root of these words (*s-h-q*) means “to pound” (as in spices) or “to rub,” so that lesbians (*sahiqat*), like the Greek tribades, are literally those who engage in a pounding or rubbing behavior or who make love by pounding or rubbing. In fact, some medieval medical views of lesbianism, reported in the Arabic sexological tradition, point to rubbing as an essential cause of the practice. Galen, the second-century Greek physician whose own daughter was a lesbian, according to medieval Arabic writers, is supposed to have examined his daughter’s labia and surrounding veins and to have concluded that her lesbianism was due to “an itch between the major and minor labia” that could be soothed only by rubbing them against another woman’s labia.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, according to the famous ninth-century Muslim philosopher al-Kindi:

Lesbianism is due to a vapor which, condensed, generates in the labia heat and an itch which only dissolve and become cold through friction and orgasm. When friction and orgasm take place, the heat turns into coldness because the liquid that a woman ejaculates in lesbian intercourse is cold whereas the same liquid that results from sexual

---

to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (*The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 1:59).

<sup>2</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, nos. 1–2 (2000): 1–24.

<sup>3</sup> This medical view, attributed to Galen, comes from Abul Hasan Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, ed. Salah Addin Khawwam, trans. Adnan Jarkas and Salah Addin Khawwam (Toronto: Aleppo, 1977), 189. This information cannot be corroborated by the surviving evidence from the medieval European medical tradition. In a search for the roots “hetairist-,” “dihetairist-,” “tribad-,” and “lesbia-” in the electronic version of Galen’s surviving Greek works held by the Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de Paris 5 I found no instance of any of those roots being used by him except “lesbia-.” His use of the word *lesbiazonton* appears only once and is cited as an example of a practice he found disgusting. See Galen, *De simplicibus medicinis* 10.1, in *Claudi Galeni opera omnia*, ed. C. G. Kuhn, 20 vols. (Leipzig: Car. Cnoblochii, 1821–33), 12:249, also available online at <http://194.254.96.21/livanc/?cote=45674x12&p=247&do=page>. I would like to thank Michael McVaugh for helping me with this information concerning the medical tradition on Galen.

union with men is hot. Heat, however, cannot be extinguished by heat; rather, it will increase since it needs to be treated by its opposite. As coldness is repelled by heat, so heat is also repelled by coldness.<sup>4</sup>

In al-Kindi's view, then, the cause of lesbianism is the heat that is generated in the labia and that can be reduced only through friction and orgasm with another woman. Interestingly, it is only friction between two labia that can cure this condition, since it permits the ejaculation of a cold liquid that calms the original heat; the reduction in heat cannot be achieved through intercourse with a man, since the man's liquid is hot and, as al-Kindi points out, "heat . . . cannot be extinguished by heat."

Foreshadowing the medicalization of homosexuality in nineteenth-century Europe, lesbianism in the medieval Islamicate medical tradition seems to have already been regarded as a medical category (though not a deviant one) requiring specific treatment, namely, rubbing. In the ninth century some physicians from the Islamicate world thought of lesbianism as an inborn state caused by the mother's consumption of certain foods that, when passed through the milk during nursing, led to labial itching and lifelong lesbianism. Hence, according to the ninth-century physician Yuhanna ibn Masawayh, known in the medieval European history of science as John Mesué (d. 857), "lesbianism results when a nursing woman eats celery, rocket, melilot leaves and the flowers of a bitter orange tree. When she eats these plants and suckles her child, they will affect the labia of her suckling and generate an itch which the suckling will carry through her future life."<sup>5</sup> Rubbing is here presented as capable only of relieving, not of curing, the woman; female homosexuality is thus clearly depicted as both innate and lifelong. Such views were standard and were repeated from one century to the next and from one medical treatise on sexualities to the other.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This quotation by al-Kindi also appears in Ibn Nasr, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 188. Al-Kindi's best-known works focus on the physical sciences—mathematics, optics, meteorology—and not on biology or physiology. According to al-Nadim's *Fihrist*, al-Kindi wrote 270 items, of which about two dozen are medical titles, but none of al-Nadim's titles seem very likely to contain the information found in the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, and most of them are known to be no longer extant. See al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Rida Tajaddud (Tehran: Yutlabu min Maktabat al-Asadi wa-Maktabat al-Ja'fari al-Tabrizi, 1971), esp. 315.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Nasr, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 189. The titles of Yuhanna ibn Masawayh's (John Mesué) works suggest an interest in women's physiology. Al-Nadim attributed to him the following works, among others: "Why Physicians Have Abstained from Treating Pregnant Women during Certain Months of Their Pregnancy" and "Treatment of Women Who Do Not Become Pregnant" (*al-Fihrist*, 354).

<sup>6</sup> One finds exactly the same references to the medical origin of lesbianism in Ahmad al-Tifashi's thirteenth-century *Nuzhat al-albab fi ma la yujad fi kitab*, ed. Jamal Juma'a (London: Riad el-Rayyis, 1992), chap. 11, which is devoted to lesbianism. While this chapter is available in a French translation by René R. Khawam, *Les délices des coeurs ou ce que l'on ne trouve en aucun livre* (Paris: Phébus, 1981), it has been omitted from the English translation of this work, *The Delight of Hearts, or What You Will Not Find in Any Book*, trans. Edward A. Lacey

If *sahq* denotes a behavior both etymologically and medically, *culturally speaking* and in the context of medieval Arabic *literary* writings, *sahiqat* (lesbians) were associated rather with love and devotion, and at times they were even known to form an exclusive and supportive subculture. As a matter of fact, the origin of lesbianism, according to popular anecdotes in the Arabic literary tradition, is regularly traced back forty years before the emergence of male homosexuality to an intercultural, interfaith love affair between an Arab woman and a Christian woman in pre-Islamic Iraq. The earliest extant erotic treatise in Arabic, *Jawami' al-ladhdha* (*Encyclopedia of Pleasure*), dates to about the end of the tenth century and was written by a certain Abul Hasan Ali ibn Nasr al-Katib.<sup>7</sup> It tells us the story of the first lesbian couple, the enduring love between Hind Bint al-Nu'man, the Christian daughter of the last Lakhmid king of Hira in the seventh century, and Hind Bint al-Khuss al-Iyadiyyah from Yamama in Arabia, known as al-Zarqa' and reportedly the first lesbian in Arab history:

She [Hind] was so loyal to al-Zarqa' that when the latter died, she cropped her hair, wore black clothes, rejected worldly pleasures, vowed to God that she would lead an ascetic life until she passed away and, as a result, she built a monastery which was named after her, on the outskirts of Kufa. When she died, she was buried at the monastery gate. Her loyalty was then an example for poets to write about. There are also other women who continued to shed tears on their beloved ones' graves until they passed away.<sup>8</sup>

---

(San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1988). Other medical views on the causes of lesbianism included speculations about the size of the vagina, the desire to avoid adultery, and the fear of begetting illegitimate children.

<sup>7</sup> If the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* is indeed the first extant erotic treatise in Arabic, it is not the first one in the Arabic tradition. Two of the best-known titles that predate ibn Nasr's work but that have not survived are, first, *Sihag al-nisa' zinan baynahunna* (Women's Tribadism Constitutes Fornication between Them), which technically is a legal opinion rather than an erotic treatise (it is ascribed to the Syrian jurist [faqih] Makhul [d. ca. 733]), and, second, Abul-'Anbas al-Saymari, *Kitab al-sahagat* (Book on Lesbians), which dates from the end of the ninth century. See al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, 376, and *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Liwat" and "Sihak."

<sup>8</sup> The Lakhmid dynasty evolved from a pre-Islamic Bedouin tribe into a kingdom in the late third century C.E. and became vassals of Sassanian Persia in the seventh century. Hira is a city near Kufa in the south of present-day Iraq. The extract is taken from ibn Nasr, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 88. This anecdote already appeared in Abu al-Faraj al-Isbahani (d. ca. 972), *Kitab al-aghani* (Book of Songs), 24 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub, 1927–74), 2:31–32. It was later repeated by others, such as al-Raghib al-Isfahani (fl. ca. 1000), *Muhadarat al-udaba' wa-muhawarat al-shu'ara' wa-al-bulagha'* (The Ready Replies of Cultured Men and Poets' and Orators' Conversation), 4 vols. (Beirut: Dar Maktabat al-Hayah, 1961), cited in Everett Rowson, "The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists," in *Bodyguards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 68. As in the West, the origin of homosexuality

Even though it is impossible to ascertain the veracity of this account, the fact that it continued to circulate throughout the Islamicate world is sufficient to demonstrate that lesbianism was thought to be far more than a medical condition and a simple sexual practice. In the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* this lesbian love story is praised and presented as evidence of the greater loyalty and devotion that women have for their female partners compared to heterosexual men's attachment to women. Ibn Nasr cited the following verses written by an unnamed (presumably male) poet about the love of Hind for al-Zarqa': "O Hind, you are truer to your word than men. / Oh, the difference between your loyalty and theirs!"<sup>9</sup>

If the relationship between Hind and al-Zarqa' is the one most often cited in the Arabic erotic tradition on lesbianism, it is not the only lesbian relation in Arabic literary history. In fact, in *al-Fihrist* (The Catalog), al-Nadim (d. ca. 995) listed the names of twelve lesbian couples who were known in the tenth century but about whom nothing else has been preserved. Because al-Nadim lists every Arabic book of which he was aware, we know from his inventory about the existence of twelve books dating before the end of the tenth century devoted to named lesbian couples. (All the titles given are named after characters, presumably the lesbian couples whose story each book tells. Since all Arabic names have specific meanings, I provide in parentheses a translation of some of the more intriguing ones.) These works are the Book of Rihana and Qoronfel (literally, the Book of Basil and Clove); the Book of Ruqayya and Khadija; the Book of Mo'ees and Zakiyya; the Book of Sakina and al-Rabab (of Calm and the Mistress of the Household); the Book of al-Ghatrifa and al-Dhulafa'; the Book of Hind and Bint al-Nu'man (of India and the Daughter of al-Nu'man, undoubtedly the couple described above); the Book of 'Abda al-'Aqila and 'Abda al-Ghaddara (of the Wise Slave Girl and the Treacherous Slave Girl); the Book of Lu'lu'a and Shatira; the Book of Najda and Zu'um; the Book of Salma and Su'ad; the Book of Sawab and Surur (of Justice and Happiness); the Book of al-Dahma' and Ni'ma (of the Dark One and the Gift from God).<sup>10</sup>

In the medieval Arabic literary erotic tradition, as in the Kama-sutra, from which it may have borrowed elements, lesbians are said to have formed groups, to have held meetings, and to have led schools in which they taught other lesbians how best to achieve pleasure. The thirteenth-century Tunisian

---

in the Arab world seems to be that it was "imported" from elsewhere. In the case of the Arabs al-Jahiz popularized the idea that it spread to the Muslim world at the time of the Abbasids from the military lifestyle of the Khurasanians. According to G. E. von Grunebaum, writings about homosexuality coincided with a shift toward an urban setting and a shift of the political center of Islam toward the East; see his "Aspects of Arabic Urban Literature Mostly in the Ninth and Tenth Century," *al-Andalus* 20 (1955): 259–81.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Nasr, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, 366.

physician, philosopher, and poet Shihab al-Din Ahmad al-Tifashi in his *Nuzhat al-albab fi ma la yujad fi kitab* (literally, a Promenade of the Hearts in What Does Not Exist in Any Book), for instance, gives some fascinating information about a “lesbian community” and the same-sex teachings of Rose, the head lesbian therein.<sup>11</sup> Similar groups of lesbians are evoked by Leo Africanus, the fifteenth-century traveler from Granada, in his account of female diviners of Fez (in modern Morocco). Interestingly, in his travel narrative written in Italian Leo Africanus described these groups as *subhaqiyat*, the Arabic word for lesbians.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Tifashi also provided in his *Nuzhat al-albab* specific examples of the teachings of famous medieval lesbians, notably on the most successful sounds that ought to accompany lesbian sexual practices. He related the following advice given by an experienced lesbian mother to her daughter: “You should snort heartily while wiggling lasciviously.”<sup>13</sup> A bit later in the text al-Tifashi spoke of “wheezing, panting, purring, murmurs, heartbreaking sighs.”<sup>14</sup> The most striking depiction of lesbian sexual practices in al-Tifashi’s *Nuzhat al-albab* is perhaps his portrayal of lesbian sex, which he dubbed “the saffron massage”:

The tradition between women in the game of love necessitates that the lover places herself above and the beloved underneath—unless the former is too light or the second too developed: and in this case, the lighter one places herself underneath, and the heavier one on top, because her weight will facilitate the rubbing, and will allow the friction to be more effective. This is how they act: the one that must stay underneath lies on her back, stretches out one leg and bends the other while leaning slightly to the side, therefore offering her opening (vagina) wide open: meanwhile, the other lodges her bent leg in her groin, puts the lips of her vagina between the lips that are offered for her, and begins to rub the vagina of her companion in an up and down, and down and up, movement that jerks the whole body. This operation is

<sup>11</sup> Al-Tifashi, *Nuzhat al-albab*, 257, English translation mine; cf. Khawam, *Les délices des coeurs*, 257. Interestingly, in his colorful survey of the sexual customs of the East Allen Edwardes confirms the survival of such lesbian practices taught among harem women: “In the restricted harem, *esh-shaykkeh-el-bezzreh* (one who teaches the art of rubbing clitoris against clitoris) taught every girl in the Sapphic sciences” (*The Jewel in the Lotus: A Historical Survey of the Sexual Culture of the East* [New York: Julian Press, 1959], 255). Even though rumors of lesbianism in Oriental harems have been regularly reported by Orientalist (male) writers and travelers, they have never been observed or verified. We cannot thus entirely trust the association between harem and lesbian practices. Nevertheless, the parallel between al-Tifashi’s and Edwardes’s reports is striking.

<sup>12</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth-Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 201.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Tifashi, *Nuzhat al-albab*, 238 (English translation mine); cf. Khawam, *Les délices des coeurs*, 252–53.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Tifashi, *Nuzhat al-albab*, 243 (English translation mine); cf. Khawam, *Les délices des coeurs*, 258.

dubbed “the saffron massage” because this is precisely how one grinds saffron on the cloth when dyeing it. The operation must focus each time on one lip in particular, the right one for example, and then the other: the woman will then slightly change position in order to apply better friction to the left lip . . . and she does not stop acting in this manner until her desires and those of her partner are fulfilled. I assure you that it is absolutely useless to try to press the two lips together at the same time, because the area from which pleasure comes would then not be exposed. Finally, let us note that in this game the two partners may be aided by a little willow oil, scented with musk.<sup>15</sup>

Needless to say, stories and descriptions such as these are significant for the history of lesbianism, not least because they have few equivalents in medieval European literature.<sup>16</sup> Arab lesbians were both named and visible in medieval Arabic literature. Moreover, and in contrast to their status in the medieval West in the same period, for example, Arab lesbians were not considered guilty of a “silent sin,” and there is no clear evidence that their “crime” was punished by death.<sup>17</sup> In fact, lesbianism in the medieval Islamic literary world was a topic deemed worthy of discussion and a lifestyle worthy of emulation. I do not wish to imply here that medieval Arabic literature on sexuality was either prolesbian or profeminist—far from it. The Arabic writings that have survived focus on men much more than on women; they remain for the most part phallogocentric and ultimately reflect a male perspective. Whenever they are mentioned in the erotic literary tradition, lesbians occupy only one chapter. Even the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* spoke much more loudly about men and male homosexuality. Nevertheless, the material on lesbianism in the Arabic literary Middle Ages, while undoubtedly a smaller proportion in the

<sup>15</sup> Al-Tifashi, *Nuzbat al-albab*, 237–38 (English translation mine); cf. Khawam, *Les délices des coeurs*, 251–52.

<sup>16</sup> See Sahar Amer, *Crossing Borders: Love between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> In the late medieval West Jean Gerson, the fifteenth-century rector of the University of Paris, described lesbians’ lustful act as one in which “women have each other by detestable and horrible means which *should not be named or written*.” One hundred years later, in his gloss of Spain’s medieval law code, the *Siete partidas*, Gregory Lopez alluded to the sin “against nature” as “the silent sin [*peccatum mutum*].” See Jean Gerson, *Confessional ou directoire des confesseurs* (n.d., late fifteenth century), in *Oeuvres complètes de Jean Gerson*, ed. Palémon Glorieux, 10 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1960), 1:85, cited in Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 19, emphasis mine; and Gregorio Lopez, *Las siete partidas del sabio rey don Alonso el Nono, nuevamente glosadas por el licenciado Gregorio Lopez*, 4 vols. (1565; repr. Salamanca, 1829–31), 3:178, cited in Brown, *Immodest Acts*, 19, emphasis mine. There is a very large body of scholarship discussing the death penalty as punishment for lesbianism in the medieval West. For an overview see Derrick S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (1955; Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1975); Pierre J. Payer, *Sex and the Penitentials: The Development of a Sexual Code, 550–1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); and Louis Crompton, “The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 6, nos. 1–2 (1980–81): 11–25.

overall economy of medieval Arabic sexological writings and at times even contradictory, is significant and merits investigation.

The surprisingly positive valuation of lesbianism and homosexuality in medieval Arabic literary writings is most likely a consequence of the general commendation of eroticism and (hetero)sexual practice in Arab and Islamicate discourses. Not only is sexuality explicitly celebrated in a large number of medieval Arabic scientific and literary texts, but sexuality is positioned at the very heart of religious piety. In contrast to medieval Christianity, for example, sex is not a sin in Islam, and heterosexual desire (whether in marriage or concubinage) is viewed as both licit and desirable. The Qur'an itself describes Paradise in sexual terms and proclaims the primacy of physical sensual pleasures.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that the principal and most vehemently condemned sexual sin in the theological Islamic discourse is adultery (*zina*) and not homosexuality (*liwat*). In Islam *zina* is defined very specifically as vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman who is neither his lawful wife nor his concubine. Much more than same-sex desire, *zina* is emphatically and unambiguously condemned in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the early Islamic legal tradition) and served traditionally as the focus of Islamic jurisprudence. Interestingly, the interest in *zina* may have encouraged, at least partly, the acceptance of *liwat* in Islamicate societies. This is what ibn Falita, the fourteenth-century author of *Rushd al-labib ila mu'asharat al-habib* (*An Intelligent Man's Guide to the Art of Coition*), suggested in his chapter on lesbianism: "Know that lesbianism insures against social disgrace, while coition is forbidden except through marriage."<sup>19</sup> This perspective is so embedded in medieval Arabic writings on homosexuality that Everett Rowson, the leading scholar of medieval Islamicate homosexuality, has concluded that "because of the cult of female virginity and the dependence of a man's honor on the chastity of his female relations, heterosexual philanderers were in fact playing a more dangerous game than *lutis* [homosexual men], and an argument could be made for a shift over time in the weight of societal disapproval towards the former and away from the latter."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On the positive role that sex plays in the Qur'an see Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *La sexualité en Islam* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986); Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoel, 1983); and Abdelkebir Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre* (Paris: Denoel, 1986). In contrast, Franz Rosenthal warns that the description of Paradise as a sensual erotic Eden in Islam should not be taken to exclusively mean that unbridled sexuality was permitted on earth. He gives the example of ibn Hazm, who interprets such verses as pointing rather to "the disruptive potential of sexuality for the smooth functioning of the social order" (Rosenthal, "Fiction and Reality: Sources for the Role of Sex in Medieval Muslim Society," in Marsot, *Society and the Sexes*, 6).

<sup>19</sup> Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Falita, *An Intelligent Man's Guide to the Art of Coition*, ed. Salah Addin Khawwam, trans. Adnan Jarkas and Salah Addin Khawwam (Toronto: Aleppo, 1977), 100. The Arabic edition is *Rushd al-labib ila mu'asharat al-habib*, ed. Ahmad ben Mohamed al-Yamani (Talah, Lebanon: al-Mayah al-Jamahiriyyah al-'Uzma, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Rowson, "Categorization of Gender," 62.

Because the Qur'an did not prescribe a specific punishment for homosexuals, and despite general agreement among Islamic jurists that homosexuality was one of the major sins (*kaba'ir*), there existed no consensus regarding its punishment, which varied according to the traditional schools of Islamic legal thought (*madhahib*).<sup>21</sup> The Maliki school (which was the strictest one in this regard and followed especially in North Africa during the medieval era) considered *liwat* to be more serious than *zina* and thus deserving the harshest of *hadd* penalties (those defined in the Qur'an and the Sunnah and not left to the judge's discretion), namely, stoning to death for both partners. This school is said, however, to have permitted homosexual practices between a man and his male slaves. The Shafi'i school (followed especially in Egypt and Syria) assimilated *zina* and *liwat* and thus distinguished between married and unmarried homosexuals and between active and passive partners. It condemned partners accordingly to be stoned to death (if married) or lashed (if unmarried). The most "liberal" school, the Hanafi (the school associated with Iraq and with the Persian- and Turkish-speaking regions of the Islamic world), prescribed a *ta'zir* punishment, that is, a discretionary penalty aimed to punish, reform, and deter others and that amounted to no more than ten lashes and a term of imprisonment. It must be noted that all these punishments addressed *liwat* understood only as anal penetration by a man. Kissing, caressing, *tafkhidh* (intercrural intercourse), and the like, while considered reprehensible, were technically not *liwat* and thus were not subject to these penalties.

Though also considered a sin, *sahq* was generally deemed to be a less serious offense than *liwat* and the least serious form of *zina*, since it did not involve penetration by a man. It was hence given a lesser punishment than either *liwat* or *zina*, although its sentence varied also among different jurists. While some theologians prescribed one hundred lashes, the eleventh-century theologian from Córdoba, ibn Hazm, prescribed the *ta'zir* punishment (ten lashes, and it remains unclear whether a prison term was also required or not), and others did not penalize it at all. In most legal compendia of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) *sahq* is not even regularly addressed.

#### SEXUAL CATEGORIZATION AND SEXUAL DEVIANCE IN THE EAST AND IN THE WEST

From the existence of a category of lesbianism in medieval Arabic writings and from the information gathered about Arabic (literary) lesbian

<sup>21</sup> On the punishments for *liwat* and *sahq* in Islamic jurisprudence see Camilla Adang, "Ibn Hazm on Homosexuality: A Case-Study of Zahiri Legal Methodology," *al-Qantara* 24 (2003): 5–31; Rowson, "Categorization of Gender," 59–62; Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics in the Agenda of Progressive Muslims," in *Progressive Muslims: Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 216–19; Bouhdiba, *Sexualité en Islam*, 44–45; and Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. chap. 3.

subcultures, we must not rush to equate the medieval Arabic Islamicate notions of female-female sexuality with modern Western notions of lesbianism and sexual identity, for the very categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality are modern Western concepts, as many scholars have demonstrated, and do not have parallels in the medieval Arabic tradition. Even if medieval Arabic erotic writings are obsessed with identifying and defining all forms of sexual practices and thus regularly use a rich and precise vocabulary, including the terms *sahq* (lesbianism), *sahiqat* (lesbians), *mutazarrifat* (elegant courtly ladies-lovers), *haba'ib* (beloveds), *liwat* (active male homosexuality), *luti* (active male homosexual), *ubnah* (passive male homosexuality), *ma'bun* (passive male homosexual), *qatim* (passive male homosexual in Andalusian dialect), *tafkhidh* (intercruel intercourse), *bidal* or *mubadala* (taking turns in active and passive homosexuality), as well as *nisa' mudhakkarat* (masculinized women) and *rijal mu'annathin* (feminized men) or *mukhannath* (male effeminate), no medieval Arabic word existed for the sort of bisexuality that was considered as the unmarked, most common form of sexual practice, for heterosexuality, or even for sexuality.

The contemporary Arabic word *jins*, used today to refer to sexuality, did not acquire this connotation until the early twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Up to that time, *jins* (derived from the Greek *genos*) denoted only type, kind, and ethnolinguistic origin. Its connotation of biological sex, national origin, and citizenship is a modern development, resulting from Arabic translations of Freud in the 1950s and of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in the 1990s.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, the impact of these Western medical and theoretical ideas about (homo)sexuality on the Arab world has led to the replacement of the medieval Arabic terms *liwat* and, to a lesser extent, *sahq* with *mithliyyah* (sameness) to mean homosexuality and *ghayriyyah* (differentness) to mean heterosexuality and even more recently with *al-shudhudh al-jinsi* (sexually rare, unusual, or odd) as an equivalent for the Western concept of queer. The notions of sexuality, heterosexuality, and homosexuality as sexual deviance seem thus to be part of the Western imperial legacy to the Arab world today. Ironically, and despite its promise of "modernizing" and "liberating," the hegemony of the Western cultural and intellectual capital has ended by erasing the more extensive and flexible medieval Arabic model of sexuality, declared it "deviant," and imposed instead a binary view of sexuality onto the Arab world.

<sup>22</sup> This section on the terminology of sexuality and heterosexuality in the contemporary Middle East is indebted to Joseph Massad's article "Re-orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 361–85, esp. 371–72, and Kugle, "Sexuality, Diversity, and Ethics," 199–201.

<sup>23</sup> Mustafa Safwan first translated Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* as *Tafsir al-ablam* (1958; Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1969); Jurj Tarabishi first translated Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* as *Thalathat mabahith fi nazariyyat al-jins* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'ah, 1983); and Muta al-Safadi first translated Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, as *Iradat al ma'rifah, al-juz' al-awwal min tarikh al-jinsaniyya* (Beirut: Markaz al-Inma al Qawmi, 1990).

## MEDIEVAL ARAB LESBIAN-LIKE WOMEN

Any attempt to trace the literary history of medieval Arab lesbianism must extend beyond the spaces where Arab lesbians were linguistically named and their sexual practices explicitly depicted. In parallel to the overt descriptions of lesbian sexual practices in medieval Arabic writings (erotic, theological, or medical) one also encounters numerous examples of eroticized gender bending in Arabic literature. Tales of cross-dressed heroines, including stories of female warriors and Amazons, poems describing slave girls dressed as male cupbearers, little-known *sufi* (mystical) rituals, the ambiguous use of masculine pronouns to refer to the beloved in the courtly lyric, and even the social practices of some women in Islamicate courts are some of the unrecognized spaces where expressions of homoeroticism in the medieval Arabic tradition may well have occurred. Many of the same cultural elements have been identified by modern critics as key narrative strategies for the exploration of same-sex desire in medieval European writings and, accordingly, have been dubbed “second-degree homosexuality.”<sup>24</sup> Yet the same practices have failed to draw a similar attention from Arabists, even though they permeate medieval Arabic writings.

One could argue that the study of medieval European homosexuality had to resort to the exploration of second-degree homosexuality only because overt depictions of same-sex desire are lacking. The situation of Arabic literature, as we have seen above, is quite different. If female homoeroticism is explicitly identified and articulated in medieval Arabic writings, one might argue, why search for indirect discourses? I would like to posit that an exploration of the multiple spaces in which expressions, both explicit and implicit, of same-sex desire occurred in medieval Arabic writings leads to a richer understanding of same-sex sexuality in the Islamicate world. Such an approach is useful because it gives us a glimpse of the complex and at times contradictory currents that circulated beneath the literary representations of lesbianism in the medieval Islamicate world. Because implicit expressions of lesbianism in medieval Arabic literature have not been explored, I propose some directions for future research that I hope will enrich, expand, and complicate our conception of female homoeroticism in the medieval Islamicate world.

Arabists can indeed fruitfully heed Judith Bennett’s call to broaden the investigation of lesbianism to include “women whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other

<sup>24</sup> This expression was coined by Michèle Perret, “Travesties et transsexuelles: Yde, Silence, Grisandole, Blanchandine,” *Romance Notes* 25, no. 3 (1985): 328. See also Christiane Marchello-Nizia and Michèle Perret, “Une utopie homosexuelle au quatorzième siècle: L’île sans femmes d’Agriano,” *Stanford French Review* 14, nos. 1–2 (1990): 233.

women.”<sup>25</sup> If these are the women whom Bennett dubs lesbian-like, this is how she describes the “range of practices” that such women might engage in and that scholars might search for:

If women’s primary emotions were directed toward other women, regardless of their own sexual practices, perhaps their affection was lesbian-like. If women lived in single-sex communities, their life circumstances might be usefully conceptualized as lesbian-like. If women resisted marriage or, indeed, just did not marry, whatever the reason, their singleness can be seen as lesbian-like. If women dressed as men, whether in response to saintly voices, in order to study, in pursuit of certain careers, or just to travel with male lovers, their cross-dressing was arguably lesbian-like. And if women worked as prostitutes or otherwise flouted norms of sexual propriety, we might see their deviance as lesbian-like.<sup>26</sup>

Bennett’s category of lesbian-like has many advantages, not least that of being more specifically sexual than Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum,” which included all woman-identified experiences.<sup>27</sup> It also possesses undeniable value for the study of literary Arab lesbians in the Middle Ages because the range of practices that Bennett describes permeates much of medieval Arabic writings. Diverse as literary medieval Arab lesbians may be, many displayed primary emotional attachments to other women; most lived in exclusively female quarters, cross-dressed, or at times prostituted themselves; and some were surprisingly autonomous from male control. The literary representations of such characters in medieval Arabic texts, while not explicitly lesbian, may certainly be considered lesbian-like. The study of such characters is pertinent, therefore, to the history of medieval Arab lesbianism.

In the caliphate court of ninth-century Baghdad, for example, the tradition of *ghulamīyyat*, slave girls who cross-dressed as boys (at times even with painted mustaches) may be an unsuspected space in which same-sex attachments could have taken place. This courtly tradition, which soon became the cultural fashion eagerly imitated even by upper-class Baghdadi women, is said to have been launched by Zubayda, wife of Harun al-Rashid and mother of Caliph al-Amin (and patron of Abu Nuwas [d. 814], one of the most famous early Arab poets of male homoeroticism), in an effort to deter her son from his homosexual inclinations:

Zubaida, noticing her son’s marked taste for these eunuchs and the ascendance they were gaining over him, chose young girls remarkable for the elegance of their figures and the charm of their faces. She had

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, “Lesbian-Like,” 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–60.

them wear turbans and gave them clothes woven and embroidered in the royal factories, and had them fix their hair with fringes and love-locks and draw it back at the nape of the neck after the fashion of young men. She dressed them in close-fitting wide-sleeved robes called *qaba* and wide belts which showed off their waists and their curves. Then she sent them off to her son. Amin, as they filed into his presence, was enchanted. He was captivated by their looks and appeared with them in public. It was then that the fashion for having young slave girls with short hair, wearing *qaba* and belts, became established at all levels of society. They were called “page-girls.”<sup>28</sup>

While some critics have pointed out that this prevalent practice of cross-dressed women ought not be interpreted as evidence of medieval Arab lesbianism since their role was to compete with boys for the attention of men, we may say that such cross-dressing can nevertheless be considered lesbian-like. After all, the *ghulamīyyat* tradition, especially once it spread to the urban milieu of ninth-century Baghdad, may have been a liberating fashion, at least for some medieval Arab lesbians who might have used it to symbolize their dissociation from other female gender expectations.<sup>29</sup>

Instances of female cross-dressing are not only present in the social history of the Islamicate world but are abundant also in the medieval Arabic literary tradition. In fact, the poetry of Abu Nuwas boasts an entire genre devoted to the *ghulamīyyat* in which the beloved is a woman dressed as a man.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the tales of *Alf layla wa layla* (*A Thousand and One Nights*), although difficult to date, and the Islamic and pre-Islamic *siyar sha`biyya* (Arabic folk romances), which survive from at least the early eleventh century on, offer countless examples of women warriors and amazons. In *A Thousand and One Nights* some of the most celebrated examples include the characters of Abriza, whose story is embedded in the

<sup>28</sup> On the *ghulamīyyat* tradition see Mas`udi, *The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids*, ed. and trans. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989), 390–91; Habib Zayyat, “al-Mar`a al-ghulamīyya fi al-Islam” (The *Ghulamīyya* in Islamicate Culture), *al-Machriq* 50 (1956): 153–92; and Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nuwas: A Genius of Poetry* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Critics who warn against interpreting the *ghulamīyyat* tradition as evidence of lesbian practices include Everett Rowson, “Categorization of Gender,” 68. The parallel I am drawing between the category “lesbian-like” and what was seemingly a fashionable behavior at the time is consistent with the way homosexuality was viewed during the early Abbasid period. In a famous poem by the eighth-century poet al-Raqashi homosexuality was indeed broadcast among the fashionable misbehaviors of the time, along with wine drinking, gambling, cockfights, and dogfights. This poem is cited in Franz Rosenthal, “Male and Female: Described and Compared,” in *Homeroeticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed. J. W. Wright, Jr., and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 48n31.

<sup>30</sup> On Abu Nuwas’s *ghulamīyyat* poetry see Ewald Wagner, *Abu Nuwas: Eine Studie zur arabischen Literatur der frühen Abbasidenzeit* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner, 1965); and Abu Nuwas, *Abu Nuwas: Le vin, le vent, la vie: Poèmes traduits*, trans. Vincent Monteil (Paris: Sindbad, 1979).

tale of `Umar al-Nu`man, Princesses Boudour and Hayat el-Nefous in the story of Qamar al-Zaman and the Princess Boudour, or the island of Waq, which is inhabited exclusively by women and depicted in the tale of Hasan al-Basra. In the Arabic folk romances representative examples of cross-dressed women warriors and Amazons include Princess `Ain al-Hayat in *Qissat Firuz Shah* (The Story of the Shah Firuz); the characters of Queen al-Rabab, al-Ghayda', Ghamra, and Nitra in *Sirat Antar* (The Romance of Antar); the characters of Fatima, Alúf, al-Samta', Nûrâ, and Zanânîr in *Sirat Dhat al-Himma* (The Epic of Dhat al-Himma); Princess Turbân in *Sirat Hamza al-Bahlawan* (The Romance of Hamza al-Bahlawan); and the female army of Munyat al-Huda and the all-female Isles of Waq al-Waq in *Sirat Hayy ben Yaqzan* (The Epic of Hayy ben Yaqzan).<sup>31</sup>

The presence of one or more cross-dressed heroines in each of these texts gives rise to a multitude of ambiguous situations, while the women's frequent obsession with warrior activities and their aversion or categorical refusal to marry (often until defeated in combat) invite an exploration and an interrogation of gender, sexual hierarchy, and power relations. In addition, if some of the female characters in *Dhat al-Himma* may be considered lesbian-like because of their voiced lack of interest in men, some can certainly be viewed as lesbians, especially when they express their marked preference for women. Alúf, for instance, asserts: "I do neither long for marriage nor for men, but my heart has an inclination for the ladies." Similarly, Nûrâ is said to "love women and detest men," while Zanânîr "does not even feel desire towards young men."<sup>32</sup> Even though almost all the female characters in these popular Arabic epics eventually end up marrying men, these Arabic texts betray an ambivalence toward heterosexuality as the only form of sexual relations for women and portray lesbianism as an alternative if not viable parallel form of sexual practice. Because of the sheer length of these Arabic texts (estimated to be thousands of folios for popular romances alone), critical work on these stories has been limited to typological surveys

<sup>31</sup> These Arabic folk and epic romances likely circulated in some early form during the eighth and ninth centuries, though they were mostly written down between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. There is a great deal of borrowing between *A Thousand and One Nights* and Arabic folk romances. On their interaction see Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Penguin, 1994), 88–89. On cross-dressing in *A Thousand and One Nights* see *ibid.*, 159–77. On the Arabic folk and epic romances see M. C. Lyons, *The Arabic Epic: Heroic and Oral Story-Telling*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For an overview of women warriors in the Arabic tradition see Remke Kruk, "The Bold and the Beautiful: Women and 'fitna' in the *Sirat Dhat al-Himma*: The Story of Nura," in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 99–116; Remke Kruk, "Clipped Wings: Medieval Arabic Adaptations of the Amazon Myth," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review* 1, no. 2 (1994): 132–51; and Remke Kruk, "Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannasa Bint Muzahim and Other Valiant Ladies," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24 (1993): 213–30 (pt. 1) and 25 (1994): 16–33 (pt. 2).

<sup>32</sup> These quotations of Alúf, Nûrâ, and Zanânîr in *Dhat al-Himma* come from Remke Kruk, "Warrior Women," 222–24.

of themes and motifs. Only recently have several young scholars begun to reread these famous Arabic epics and various tales from *A Thousand and One Nights* and to uncover the endless possibilities of gender bending and gender trouble that these texts invite through their literary depictions of cross-dressing and of lesbian-like attachments.<sup>33</sup>

Cross-dressing is not the only narrative strategy that permits the exploration of second-degree homosexuality in the medieval Islamicate tradition. The life of mystics constitutes another promising source for the exploration of same-sex desire and intimate alternative attachments in the medieval Islamicate world. Indeed, in the eleventh century the meditative practice among Sufi mystics of *nazar*, “the contemplation of a beautiful pubescent boy, who was considered a ‘witness’ (*shahid*) to the beauty of God and the glory of His creation,” gave rise to yet another perhaps controversial space for the potential development of same-sex conduct.<sup>34</sup> *Nazar* often became associated with male homoerotic sentiments despite the attempt by some schools of thought, Shafīʿi in particular, to distinguish between gazing on boys with lust, which was sinful, and gazing without lust, which was permitted. While a comparatively small proportion of information has survived about women Sufis generally (their stories were simply added as appendices to biographies of male saints), no information has survived documenting the existence of a parallel *nazar* practice among female Sufis. Yet despite the fact that the *nazar* question has been formulated exclusively from a male point of view in the Islamic tradition, it is not impossible that such a tradition was also observed among female Muslim mystics. If so, it could constitute another heretofore unexplored space for the development of lesbian or lesbian-like attachments. More research needs to be conducted on the practices of medieval Muslim Sufi women to reveal the details of their mystical experiences and visions.

One of the most significant cultural practices in the medieval Arab Islamicate world that holds great promise for the study of lesbian-like attachments is undoubtedly that of *zarf*, a tradition that has been commonly translated as “refinement,” “stylishness,” or “courtliness.” It is a cultural practice that began in Medina in Arabia during the pre- and early Islamic eras, then spread from there to the urban centers of the Islamicate world from east to west. This tradition, followed by men and

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*; see also Alexandra Cuffel, “Reorienting Christian ‘Amazons’: Christian Women Warriors in Medieval Islamic Literature in the Context of the Crusades,” in *Crossing Boundaries: Gender, Religion, and Culture in the Pre-Modern World*, ed. Brian Britt and Alexandra Cuffel (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 137–66; Amer, *Crossing Borders*; and Sahar Amer, “Cross-Dressing and Female Same-Sex Marriage in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures,” in Babayan and Najmabadi, *Islamicate Sexualities Studies*, 72–113.

<sup>34</sup> Rowson, “Categorization of Gender,” 62. On the practice of *nazar* see Annemarie Schimmel, “Eros—Heavenly and Not So Heavenly—in Sufi Literature and Life,” in Marsot, *Society and the Sexes*, 119–41. Because Sufis only contemplated boys and never women, they were frequently disparaged for their sexual depravity and corruption.

women alike, centered on the promotion of a nexus of behaviors that involved an overarching sophistication in clothing, food, language, and home decoration as well as an intellectual atmosphere in which participants engaged in debates related to love, recited poetry, sang, danced, and told stories. This tradition encouraged the development and circulation of the bawdy literature of *mujun* (libertinage), which even included treatises on copulation (*kutub al-bah*).<sup>35</sup> Women played a prominent role in the development of *zarf* by holding literary salons to which they invited not only members of the aristocracy but also the increasingly wealthy bourgeoisie, enriched by trade and international commerce. If the activities in which these women engaged cannot always be specifically labeled lesbian, the lifestyles that they led, their surprising independence from male control, and the androgynous nature of the poetry they transmitted may certainly be considered lesbian-like.

Much has been written on the development of *zarf* throughout the Islamicate world, and much survives from the centuries in which the practice flourished. The most important source of our knowledge of medieval Arab courtly practices remains undoubtedly the *Kitab al-zarf wa al-zurafa'* (Book of Refinement and Refined People), also known as the *Kitab al-muwashsha'* (literally, the Varicolored Book), written by a tenth-century grammarian from Baghdad, Mohammed ibn al-Washsha' (d. 936).<sup>36</sup> In it he describes at length how the *zurafas* (refined courtly men) and *mutazarrifat* (refined courtly ladies, but a term also used for lesbians) adorned their homes with poetry, which was sculpted on their doors, windows, ceilings, beds, tables, and sofas, or decorated pillows, curtains, rings, shoes, belts, and other items of clothing with poetic verses that were luxuriously embroidered with gold and precious stones.

<sup>35</sup> On *mujun* as a literary genre rather than a sociological phenomenon whose main features are sexuality and scatology see Julie Scott Meisami, "Arabic *Mujun* Poetry: The Literary Dimension," in *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Poetry and in the Representation of Women in Arabic Literature: A Collection of Papers Presented at the 15th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants*, ed. Frederick de Jong (Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, 1993), 8–30; and Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 165–67.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammed ibn al-Washsha', *Kitab al-muwashsha'*, ed. R. E. Brünnow (Leiden: Brill, 1886). This work has recently been translated into French by Siham Bouhlal as *Le livre du brocart* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004). Another important medieval source on *zarf* is Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *al-Mustazraf min akhbar al-jawari* (Courtly Tales of Slave Girl Stories), ed. Ahmad 'Abd al-Fattah Tammam (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turath al-Islami, 1989). Useful secondary sources written in European languages on *zarf* include Malek Chebel, *Traité du raffinement* (Paris: Payot, 1995); Mohammed Ferid Ghazi, "Un groupe social: 'Les raffinés' (*Zurafa'*)," *Studia Islamica* 11 (1959–60): 39–71; Lois A. Giffen, *Theory of Profane Love among the Arabs: The Development of the Genre* (New York: New York University Press, 1971); Jean-Claude Vadet, *L'esprit courtois en orient dans les cinq premiers siècles de l'hégire* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1968), 317–51. A useful Arabic secondary source on *zarf* is al-Bashir Majdub, *Al-Zarf bi-al-'Iraq fi al-'asr al-'Abbasi* (Courtliness in Iraq during the Abbasid Period) (Tunis: Nashr wa-Tawzi' Mu'assasat 'Abd al-Karim Bin 'Abd Allah, 1992).

The case of Wallada (d. 1087 or 1091) deserves mention in this regard. She was a daughter of Muhammad III (ruled 1024–25), also known as al-Mustakfi, the caliph of Córdoba (the capital of Islamic al-Andalus in modern Spain). More important, Wallada unquestionably stands as the archetype of the practitioner of *zarf* and thus also of the unparalleled refinement of the Andalusian aristocracy in the eleventh century and of women's unsuspected sexual freedom. Hostess of a literary salon in eleventh-century Córdoba, Wallada defied convention, as she is said to have openly entertained two male lovers (Ibn Zaydun and Ibn `Abdus) as well as one female lover (Mohja).<sup>37</sup> She had the following two verses embroidered in gold thread on her coat: "By God, I am fit for greatness, and stride along with great pride" and "I allow my lover to reach my cheek, and I grant my kiss to him who craves it."<sup>38</sup> Although Wallada uses here nouns and pronouns that are grammatically masculine ("my lover" and "to him") and although these have been read as referring to her active (heterosexual) love life, I would like to propose that the use of the masculine may simply be part of the literary conventions of the time and that her verses therefore need not be read exclusively as heterosexual ones. After all, addressing the female beloved as male was part and parcel of the Arabic literary tradition. Wallada's famous embroidered lines, if not specifically or exclusively lesbian, can no longer be read as exclusively heterosexual either and may be more fruitfully considered lesbian-like. Her lifestyle, which was part and parcel of the development of the *zarf* tradition in medieval al-Andalus, makes Wallada one among the multiple aristocratic *mutazarrifat* of the Islamicate world. Evidently, in the medieval Islamicate world courtliness and courtly love were not exclusively heterosexual practices.

<sup>37</sup> There is a heated debate among scholars as to whether Wallada may be considered a lesbian in the medieval Islamicate world. Philip K. Hitti has called her "the Sappho of Spain" (*History of the Arabs from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 9th ed. [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968]). This view was repeated by Abu Khalil ("A Note on the Study of Homosexuality in the Arab/Islamic Civilization," *Arab Studies Journal* 1–2 [Fall 1993]: 34) and by Murray and Roscoe (*Islamic Homosexualities*, 99). However, Rowson takes the opposite view, stating that there is insufficient evidence for making any assertions about her lesbianism. Rowson has summarized the debate in his forthcoming book on male homoeroticism in the medieval Islamicate tradition. I would like to thank him for sharing parts of his unpublished manuscript with me.

<sup>38</sup> Devin J. Stewart, "Ibn Zaydun," in *The Literature of al-Andalus*, ed. Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Anthony Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 308. On Wallada see Antonio Arjona Castro, *La sexualidad en la España musulmana* (Córdoba: Universidad de Córdoba, 1985), 25. Arabic sources on Wallada include Abu al-Hasan `Ali ibn Bassam al-Shantarini (d. 1147), *Dhakhirah fi mahasin ahl al-Jazirah*, ed. Ihsan `Abbas, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 2000), 332–35; Abul-`Abbas A. Maqqari (d. 1632), *Nafh al-tib min ghusn al-Andalus al-ratib*, ed. Ihsan `Abbas, vol. 4 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1968), 205–11; and `Umar Rida Kahhalah, *A`lam al-nisa' fi `alamay al-`Arab wa-al-Islam*, vol. 5 (Beirut: Mu`assasat al-Risalah, 1977), 287–90. Another illustrious and possibly lesbian-like poetess of medieval al-Andalus is Hafsa Bint al-Hajj (ca. 1135–90); see Wiebke Walther, *Women in Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: M. Weiner, 1993), 144–48.

Most of what we know about medieval women and the practice of *zarf* concerns not aristocratic women like Wallada but rather slave girls (*jawari*) and especially singing slave girls (*qaynas*). Slave singers, despite or rather *because* of their social status as slaves, played a significant role in the medieval Islamic world not only because they were freer to express themselves (in contrast to freeborn women, who were veiled and kept outside the public sphere) but also because of their superior intellectual skills and extraordinary beauty. Freed slaves could sometimes achieve lucrative careers; some in fact rose to the top levels of society, marrying caliphs and other rulers.

The tradition of *jawari* and of *qaynas* in particular may be considered as yet another significant sociocultural space in which Arab lesbians may have thrived and Arab lesbian-like intimate attachments may have flourished. Some of the most successful singing slave girls left traces in the historical records of the period. A few were prominent poets of the Abbasid period in Basra (in modern Iraq) and considered the most trustworthy transmitters of the oral repertoire as well as the most accomplished performers and entertainers. Occasionally, they even had their own singing schools and owned slaves themselves.<sup>39</sup> The best known of these slave girls remain undoubtedly `Inan (d. 841), Fadl (d. 875), and `Arib (d. 890), all of whom were cited by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (897–972), the tenth-century Abbasid historian, poet, and musicologist, in his *Kitab al-aghani* (Book of Songs).<sup>40</sup> Although none of these three famous *qaynas* was explicitly referred to as lesbian (*sahiqqa*) in the surviving sources, they were labeled *mutazarrifat*, that very term for elegant courtly ladies who practiced *zarf* and who sometimes displayed lesbian-like characteristics. Additional research into the lives and production of *qaynas* could reveal the extent to which their erotic practices and the verses they left behind reflect not only heterosexual relations but also same-sex attachments. If so, *qaynas*, like the cross-dressed heroines from *A Thousand and One Nights* or Amazon warriors from Arab epics, could be some of the forgotten representatives of lesbian or lesbian-like desire in the medieval Islamic world.

<sup>39</sup> Suzanne Meyers Sawa, "The Role of Women in Musical Life: The Medieval Arabo-Islamic Courts," *Canadian Women's Studies: Les cahiers de la femme* 8 (1987): 94. Much information about the education of *qaynas* can be learned from the ninth-century writer al-Jahiz's *Risalat al-qiyas*, which survives only in one manuscript, Istanbul MS Damad 949, fols. 177v–188v. The Arabic text has been edited and translated into English by A. F. L. Beeston as *The Epistle on Singing-Girls of Jahiz* (Warminster, U.K.: Aris & Phillips, 1980), and into French by Charles Pellat as "Les esclaves-chanteuses de Gahiz," *Arabica* 10 (1963): 121–47, esp. 145 on *qaynas*.

<sup>40</sup> On the *Kitab al-aghani* see Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani's "Kitab al-Aghani"* (New York: Routledge, 2003); and Ignazio Guidi, *Tables alphabétiques du "Kitab al-Aghani"* (Leiden: Brill, 1900). Information about *qaynas* is also found in histories of Muslim women written in the Middle Ages such as Ibn al-Sa`i (1196–1275), *Nisa' al-khulafa'* (Women of the Caliphs), ed. Mustafa Jawad (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, 1968). While al-Sa`i discussed primarily aristocratic women, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505) treated slave girls from all sections of society in his discussion of *zarf* in *al-Mustazraf min akhbar al-jawari*.

LESBIANISM IN THE MEDIEVAL ISLAMICATE TRADITION:  
MODERN IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps not surprisingly and given the sociopolitical climate in the Islamicate world today, a significant number of primary sources, whether composed in Arabic, Persian, or Turkish, that have survived documenting medieval same-sex practices between women or lesbian-like attachments are today silenced or censored. Most of the medieval erotic treatises remain unedited, unpublished, and difficult to obtain not only in manuscript form but also in libraries and bookstores across the Arab world. Indeed, very few of them have been examined by scholars either within or outside the Islamicate world. One of the main challenges of my research into medieval Arab lesbianism has been precisely that of locating and obtaining copies of relevant material. Understanding these difficulties and appreciating who is permitted to have access to Arabic materials on alternative sexuality provide a glimpse of the potential for political and social subversion that these documents undeniably possess.

I would like to give one example of the current state of the earliest erotic treatise in Arabic, the *Jawami` al-ladhdha*, or *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*. I became aware of the existence of an Arabic edition of this text in 2003 (it was published in 2002) but acquired it only through the intercession of a male Arab friend who was able to buy the book in secret at a bookshop in Cairo. When I had tried to buy the book myself one summer earlier, the owner of the largest (and supposedly most liberal) bookstore in Egypt told me that although he had copies of the text in his back room, he could not sell it to, in his words, “a proper Muslim woman such as yourself.” At the same time that I discovered the existence of this Arabic edition of the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, I found out that it was published as part of a series entitled *Adab al-jins`inda al-`Arab* (The Erotic Writings of the Arabs), which to date includes half a dozen titles on Arabic eroticism published in Damascus, Syria, by a press called the Arabic Book Press (Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi). Still today, several years after the press’s first publication (2002), many of these Arabic erotic treatises are more widely available in specialized bookstores in the West, such as London and Paris, than in the Arab world.

The initial moment of celebration at acquiring the Arabic edition of the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* was quickly tempered when I actually examined the Arabic text. The name of the press had been carefully blacked out, as was the date of publication. The entire book was printed in black ink on white paper, and prints of large trees in red ink had been superimposed over the text. Most likely this design represented a cheap attempt at avoiding censorship by making quick identification of the book’s subject matter difficult, but it also made the reading of the entire book quite challenging. The superimposition of image over text and of red over black ink over white paper literalized for me the multiple layers of veils that had

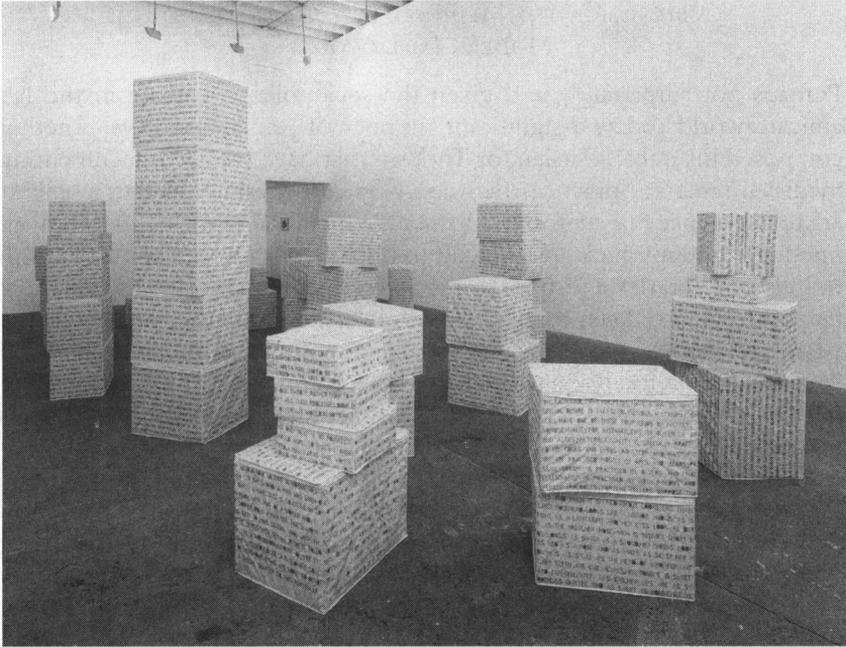


Figure 1: *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 2001. Embroidered Sculpture, installation view at Deitch Projects. © Ghada Amer. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

covered the Arabic erotic text over time. In addition, the Arabic edition remained incomplete at best, most likely because it was based on a single, unidentified, and probably extremely defective manuscript. Several of the chapters found in the English translation, particularly those dealing with same-sex relations, had been left out of the Arabic edition. Still today, the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* remains known primarily through an English translation, a 1977 Canadian PhD dissertation by Salah Addin Khawwam, translated by Adnan Jarkas and Salah Addin Khawwam and published by Aleppo Publishing in Toronto. The existence of this published translation should not deceive us into thinking that this text is readily available even in English. Quite the opposite: Aleppo Publishing has since gone out of business; none of the translators is to be found in any scholarly listings or directories; no information is given on the university where the dissertation was submitted and defended; the book is utterly unavailable for purchase anywhere; and it can only be consulted through two known copies, one at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the other at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

In 2001 the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer (who is my sister) created a sculpture inspired from the medieval Arabic text and entitled it *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure* (Fig. 1). This sculpture is the first and only work

in any media, as far as I know, devoted exclusively to this groundbreaking Arabic text. Her sculpture is an unprecedented and perhaps subversive gesture by an Arab woman to save from oblivion this essential text and, in broader terms, to break the silence imposed upon female eroticism in the Arab world and to resurrect a frank and nonjudgmental discussion around women's sexuality that until today continues to be absent in the East.<sup>41</sup>

Yet the difficulty of obtaining access to medieval Arabic writings on alternative sexualities should not be understood to be a problem specific to the Arab world; it manifests itself also in the West, though under a different guise. To give but one example, the only English translation of al-Tifashi's *Nuzhat al-albab* is called *The Delight of Hearts* and was translated by Edward A. Lacey from a French translation by René Khawam rather than from the Arabic original. The translation has ended up ghettoizing this important Arabic text. Even though it is almost certain that this medieval Arabic work was addressed to a much wider audience, its contemporary English translation is published by an exclusively male gay press called the Gay Sunshine Press and thus has a limited circulation and is likely to be known primarily to a gay audience. Moreover, Lacey has taken the liberty to excise from his work the chapter on lesbianism as well as other sections dealing with heterosexuality because of budgetary concerns and press policy, which dictates that Gay Sunshine Press address exclusively male gay literature.<sup>42</sup> The manipulations that *Nuzhat al-albab* has thus undergone have transformed this important text almost beyond recognition. Not only has this English translation utterly erased those lesbian voices that were audible in the medieval Arabic tradition, but it has also categorized sexuality in ways that were certainly not present in the medieval text. Translating only the sections on gay men's sexuality has imposed a modern and Western perspective onto the medieval Arabic work that places sexual desires and behaviors much more on a continuum.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See Sahar Amer and Olu Oguibe, eds., *Ghada Amer* (Amsterdam: De Appel, 2002), and Sahar Amer, "The *Encyclopedia of Pleasure* and the Politics of Eroticism," *Xavier Review* 27, no. 1 (2007), special issue, "Sex and the Spirit," ed. Keith Mitchell and Robin Vander, 53–66.

<sup>42</sup> Lacey, introduction to *The Delight of Hearts*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> A similar approach characterizes French translations by René R. Khawam, who omits certain sections of the medieval manuscript that he considers to be of lesser stylistic value; see, for example, his introduction to his translation of al-Hawrani entitled *Les ruses des femmes* (Paris: Phébus, 1994), 14. Some modern French translations of medieval Arabic literary anthologies and erotic writings contribute to another set of problems. Even though they claim their work is based on "original Arab manuscripts," the translators seldom provide basic critical information, such as the manuscript used or the name of the library holding the manuscript, as with René Khawam's translation of al-Tifashi entitled *Les délices de coeurs*, or his translation of al-Souyouti entitled *Nuits de noces ou comment humer le doux breuvage de la magie licite* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1972), and also his translation of Ali al-Baghdadi entitled *Les fleurs éclatantes dans les baisers et l'accolement* (Paris: A. Michel, 1973).

There is no denying the extraordinary wealth of material documenting same-sex love and desire between women in the medieval Islamicate world. The medieval Arabic tradition of eroticism is particularly noteworthy because it is far more progressive than is commonly imagined, given the current reappropriation of Islam by fundamentalist political regimes. It brings to light a much richer understanding of sexualities than is imagined to be possible in lands with a majority Muslim population. The texts that have survived are especially valuable because they paint medieval Arab and Muslim women with unexpected agency over their social and sexual lives and have thus the potential to become powerful models of resistance for contemporary Arab and Muslim women. Recovering the evidence of lesbianism and of lesbian-like attachments in the medieval Arabic tradition speaks thus to the emancipatory possibilities of the history of sexuality. Moreover, the medieval Arabic practices of homosexuality and lesbianism also challenge contemporary Western and Eastern (Arabic) assumptions about gender and, in particular, the binary constructions of masculinity and femininity. It is thus significant for the cross-cultural history of sexuality and holds great promise in redressing what Bennett has termed “the heterosexist bias of history.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Bennett, “Lesbian-Like,” 4.