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Embodying the Empire: Singing Slave Girls in Medieval Islamicate Historiography

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Reflective Essay

Reflective Essay

I knew I had found the right topic for my senior thesis when I stumbled upon the phrase “singing slave girls of the medieval Islamic world.” I could tell immediately that these singing slave girls would fit perfectly with the contingent of quirky medieval women who have populated much of my research over the course of my four years at Pomona. The qiyān—as these elite slave women are known in Arabic—were trained to compose and perform music and poetry for the imperial elite in medieval Baghdad and Andalusia, occupying a position of slavery while simultaneously accumulating great wealth and prestige. These overlapping and paradoxical identities embodied by the qiyān presented an irresistible conundrum perfectly packaged for a history major’s senior thesis.

Initially, I planned to examine the extent to which the qiyān saw themselves as autonomous, empowered individuals. Looking more closely at my primary sources, however, I realized that I would never be able to say with certainty who the qiyān “really were,” nor could I authentically determine how they perceived themselves. Primary source information about the qiyān is embedded within historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries compiled by medieval historians whose works invariably had specific narrative agendas shaped by the historical and political contexts of their own eras.

My approach to research reflects the guidance of my advisor, Ken Wolf, from whom I have gained deep appreciation for a primary source-driven research process. From the outset of my thesis project, I knew I wanted to allow the texts themselves to guide the direction of my research. As I recognized the nature of my primary sources, I began to move away from an investigation of the qiyān as a historical phenomenon and toward an examination of the role of the qiyān in narrative construction. As my focus shifted, new questions percolated to the surface. Why did medieval authors choose to include slave women in their historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries? How did these authors use depictions of the qiyān as rhetorical devices for advancing the broader political and philosophical agendas that their texts were intended to address?

The resources available through the Honnold-Mudd Library have been indispensable to the textual component of my research. Adam Rosenkrantz's presentation to those of us in the history major senior seminar provided a valuable refresher on efficient search techniques and a timely orientation to the Library's new catalogue system. Although the majority of the primary sources I needed for my research were housed in the permanent collections of other university libraries, the Library's Resource Sharing service enabled me to efficiently assemble a collection of obscure medieval Arabic texts from university libraries around the country. Not only did I benefit tremendously from the Resource Sharing service, but I might nearly have graduated from Pomona without ever having made a trip to Special Collections—had it not been for a single, slightly decrepit book sent directly from its home library to Special Collections. I greatly enjoyed my afternoon in the stately Special Collections room, feeling like a “real scholar” as I wrestled with a book whose yellowed, fold-out pages kept popping out into my face and reminding me how much I value the tactile experience of engaging with real, three-dimensional texts. In addition, the online medieval history and Middle Eastern studies research guides have been excellent resources for locating relevant secondary sources.

My research process has sparked fruitful personal connections. In particular, I was fortunate to have stumbled across a recording of a UC Santa Barbara professor, Dwight Reynolds, giving a talk about the Andalusian qiyān at Brown University. I reached out via email, and Professor Reynolds generously agreed to assist me in my research, immediately sending me his as-of-yet unpublished book chapter about the qiyān, the bibliography of which I used extensively as a map for locating relevant primary sources. I was also able to take a trip to Santa Barbara to discuss my thesis with Professor Reynolds in person. Given how specific my topic is, the opportunity to receive guidance from one of the top experts in the field proved immensely helpful.

This thesis has also benefitted from the connections I cultivated within the Claremont Colleges. Specifically, I worked with my Arabic professor, Mukhtar Ali, my thesis advisor, Heather Ferguson, and a Pitzer student and native Arabic speaker, Talyah al-Sahli, to expand my collection of primary sources by translating excerpted sections of the sources available only in Arabic. In doing so, I came to appreciate how difficult it is to produce a solid translation that simultaneously preserves meaning and conveys style. Although the translation phase of my

research was equal parts daunting and tedious, each laboriously translated sentence enhanced my sense of pride and investment in my thesis.

While there are a number of works discussing the social history of the qiyān, and a separate body of scholarship devoted to medieval Islamic historiography, I decided to position my thesis at the crossroads of these two scholarly conversations. I draw inspiration from the Swedish historian Pernilla Myrne, who discusses the representation of women in medieval Arabic historiography through the lenses of narrative construction and gender theory, and I also rely heavily on Janina Safran's notion of the "articulation of caliphal legitimacy" in medieval Andalusia. The realization that I could use these three theoretical perspectives—narrative theory, gender theory, and notions of identity formation and the construction of imperial legitimacy—to understand portrayals of the singing slave girls was a key turning point in my research process. It suddenly dawned on me that what had initially seemed a limitation—the fact that the sources reveal more about the agendas of their authors than the lives and experiences of the slave women themselves—was actually an exciting opportunity to view the subject of the qiyān from a new angle, while simultaneously commenting on medieval Islamic historiography and adding new perspectives to the scholarly conversation about the articulation of imperial identity in the medieval Islamic world.

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Research Project

“Embodying the Empire: Singing Slave Girls in
Medieval Islamicate Historiography”

EMBODYING THE EMPIRE

Singing Slave Girls in Medieval Islamicate Historiography

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts at Pomona
College

Department of History

Simone Prince-Eichner
April 13, 2016



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This thesis is built upon the support, guidance, expertise, and generosity of a number of individuals, and it is my privilege to thank them for their contributions. I am especially grateful to my thesis advisors at the Claremont Colleges, Dr. Kenneth Wolf and Dr. Heather Ferguson. It was Dr. Wolf who first introduced me to the field of medieval studies and made the distant world of the medieval Mediterranean accessible, relevant, and, more often than not, highly entertaining. During the course of this thesis—and throughout my four years at Pomona—Dr. Wolf has been an incredibly dedicated advisor, inspiring instructor, and supportive mentor. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Ferguson for generously agreeing to advise my thesis, and for investing so much time, energy, and conscientiousness in her role as an advisor. Dr. Ferguson’s ability to help me think through glitches and to steer me toward crucial insights during our coffee-fueled brainstorming discussions has been vital to the articulation of my argument.

I would like to extend my thanks to the Pomona College History Department for their support of my history education during my four years at Pomona, with a special thank you to Dr. Gary Kates for facilitating this year’s history senior seminar and for effectively channeling panic into productivity. Thank you to the Pomona College Late Antique-Medieval Studies Department, and the associated LAMS community across the Claremont Colleges, for being supportive and welcoming—and for successfully nudging my history interests further back in time.

It has been a privilege to work with Dr. Dwight Reynolds at UC Santa Barbara. I deeply appreciate Dr. Reynolds’s willingness to share his time and expertise with me, guide me to the right sources, read drafts of my thesis, and provide valuable feedback. Given the specificity of the topic of the *qiyān*, I have benefited tremendously from the opportunity to consult with one of the foremost experts on the subject.

Special thanks to Dr. Mukhtar Ali for setting aside time to help me translate primary sources from Arabic to English. I am also grateful to Talyah al-Sahli for the countless hours she spent pouring over the texts with me. Thank you to Dr. Glen Cooper for helping illuminate the etymologies of especially puzzling Arabic terms. To my dear friend Kayla Lemus, thank you very much for taking time away from your own thesis to work on a translation of a translation.

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Introduction

‘Inan was the first poet to become famous under the ‘Abbasids and the most gifted poet of her generation. The major male poets of the time would seek her out in her master’s house where they would recite their verses to her and have her pass judgment.¹

—Ibn al-Sa’i, *Consorts of the Caliphs*

As the “most gifted poet” of her generation, ‘Inan clearly occupied a position of prestige and authority in the flourishing literary world of the early ‘Abbasid empire. At the same time, she was also a slave, owned by a wealthy Baghdadi nobleman. ‘Inan’s dual identity as a distinguished poet and a female slave defies normative assumptions about gender dynamics, power relations, literacy, and slavery in medieval Islamic society. At first glance, ‘Inan’s life trajectory seems radically unlike that of the typical medieval woman. In fact, however, her remarkable life trajectory was not unprecedented. From the eighth through the thirteenth centuries in the ‘Abbasid caliphate centered in Baghdad, and from the ninth through the fourteenth centuries in al-Andalus, thousands of “singing slave girls”—the *qiyān*, as they are known in Arabic—attained positions of great prestige by entertaining caliphs, courtiers, and the urban elite as singers, musicians, poets, witty conversationalists, and concubines.

It is tempting to use the subject of the *qiyān* as a lens for examining the social status of slave women in medieval Islamic society. After all, the effort to explain the “status of women in Islamic societies” has become a standard line of inquiry in the discipline of Islamic history. Far too often, however, this question feeds into polarized debate about whether the emergence of Islam in the seventh century and the consolidation of the Muslim community throughout the medieval era “liberated” or “oppressed” women in the Arabian Peninsula, the Middle East, and other Islamic regions. Not only is the polemical nature of this debate unproductive for historical analysis, but the assumption that it is possible to provide conclusive “answers” about the “status” of women overlooks an important consideration: the textual sources we might use to tease out this information—historical chronicles, biographical dictionaries, and collections of poetry—are for the most part more literary than literal, offering constructed representations of the historical figures they depict rather than precise biographies.

Because they did not leave behind autobiographical records of their lives, everything we know about the *qiyān* emerges from historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries written by male historians. In particular, the literary nature of the texts in which these women appear makes it nearly impossible to determine who the *qiyān* “really were” or to explain how they actually fit into the social hierarchies of their communities. As will be seen repeatedly throughout this thesis, historical narratives such as these are often better indicators of the anxieties and political concerns of the eras in which they were produced than they are “authentic” representations of the past. The effort to move beyond the quixotic attempt to extract literal histories from literary texts is at the heart of this thesis, which uses chronicles and biographical dictionaries that discuss female scholars, poets, litterateurs, singers, and musicians in the Islamic Middle Ages to explore representations rather than realities. This approach transcends the seeming limitations of the sources by revealing the ways in which medieval historians represented the *qiyān* and created narratives about them, mobilizing those narratives to further the political agendas of their texts.

¹ Ibn al-Sa’i, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, trans. editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa. Bilingual edition. (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2015), 11.

The *qiyan* occupied a liminal position somewhere between that of a slave, a professional court performer, and a concubine. Dwight Reynolds illuminates the intricacies of this social category, explaining that, although the Arabic term “*qiyan*” (singular: *qayna*) is usually translated as “singing slave girls” in English, the *qiyan* “were not necessarily young (i.e., ‘girls’), indeed some of the most famous among them continued performing into a ripe old age, nor were they exclusively ‘singers,’ for they were often skilled in a variety of different literary and performing arts.”² Reynolds goes on to clarify the distinction between *qiyan* and concubines, noting, “they were sexually available to their owners, but due to their musical skills and training they were generally more expensive than female slaves who served only as concubines and were therefore usually accorded a more esteemed social status.”³

Ironically, although the *qiyan* were famous for the beauty and power of their voices, the historical record has, for the most part, silenced the *qiyan*, leaving only faint echoes of their own voices amid a cacophony of statements about them. A number of excellent studies have managed to read between the lines and against the grain of the historical record to work out a careful sketch of the historical phenomenon of the *qiyan*. Kristina Richardson and Lisa Nielson, in particular, have illuminated the social history of the *qiyan* in the ‘Abbasid era. Richardson’s “Singling Slave Girls (*Qiyān*) of the ‘Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries” (2009) provides a concise introduction to the phenomenon of *qiyan* patronage in the ‘Abbasid courts and situates the *qiyan* in relation to a gendered analysis of slavery in the Islamic world. Lisa Nielson’s “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts” (2012) is also useful for understanding the nature of the *qiyan* institution in ‘Abbasid society and the way in which the *qiyan* fit into a gendered landscape of musical performance in medieval Islamic court culture.

The topic of the political, social, and literary status of women in al-Andalus is a popular subject among medieval historians and scholars of Islam and the Middle East, and a number of studies have discussed the *qiyan* in the ‘Abbasid context. Very little, however, has been written specifically about the *qiyan* in al-Andalus. Dwight Reynolds’s book chapter, to be published in an upcoming anthology, “The *Qiyān* of al-Andalus,” is unique in the respect that it directly and exclusively addresses the topic of the *qiyan* in medieval al-Andalus. Reynolds covers the emergence, development, and eventual decline of the *qiyan* phenomenon in Muslim Spain from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries. Reynolds’s work is one of the key secondary touchstones for my own investigation, and his comprehensive bibliography provides a map to the original primary sources that comprise the basis of my thesis.

This thesis would not be possible without the contributions of the scholars who have scoured the primary source texts to provide a sketch of the *qiyan* institution as a historical phenomenon. The highly rhetorical, literary nature of the primary source texts in which the *qiyan* are discussed, however, limits our ability to say with certainty who any of the individual singing slave girls *really* were. Our ability to understand the *qayna* as an individual is essentially limited to the *idea* of the *qiyan* as it was constructed by medieval historians. Recognizing this reality, I have oriented my thesis to an *in-situ* examination of the *qiyan* as they appear in their original textual contexts. While I certainly operate from the premise that the *qiyan* did exist as historical figures, I have chosen to focus my analysis primarily on the construction of the *qiyan* as fictional characters within literary landscapes.

² Dwight Reynolds, “The *Qiyān* of al-Andalus” in *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, eds. Matthew S. Gordon and Kathryn Hain. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

³ Reynolds, “*Qiyān* of al-Andalus,” 1.

My approach builds on the works of Julia Bray and Pernilla Myrne, whose works explore the creation of narratives about female poets, scholars, and *qiyān* in the ‘Abbasid period. Julia Bray’s “Men, Women, and Slaves in ‘Abbasid Society” describes the process by which the figure of the *qayna* was cast in the literature as a romanticized emblem of the values and aesthetics of the newly urbanized ‘Abbasid bourgeoisie.⁴ Bray’s introduction to Ibn al-Sa’i’s *Consorts of the Caliphs* further contextualizes the narrative that developed around the figure of the courtly woman in the tail-end of the ‘Abbasid era. Pernilla Myrne’s *Narrative, Gender, and Authority in ‘Abbasid Literature on Women* uses the lenses of narratology to examine medieval Arabic writings about women.⁵ Myrne’s work provides a crucial theoretical model for my own analysis. Like Myrne, I believe that “trying to reconstruct the lives of these women through a reading of their biographies would be a somewhat futile operation,” given that most of the biographical dictionaries were composed years, if not centuries, after the lives of the women profiled in them and were designed to promote certain political, philosophical, and ideological agendas, or simply to maximize entertainment value, rather than to provide historical accuracy. However, I share Myrne’s conviction that this situation is “no cause for despair, since what we might find by reading the biographies as *literary texts* might allow even greater perspectives.”⁶

Taking Myrne and Bray as my methodological guides, this thesis seeks to understand how the motif of the *qiyān* contributed to broader narratives about history, identity formation, and the articulation of imperial legitimacy in both the ‘Abbasid and Andalusian contexts. In discussing the articulation of imperial legitimacy, I am borrowing from Janina Safran’s *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: The Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in al-Andalus*.⁷ I use the concepts proposed in her book to examine the process by which Andalusian historians used representations of the past to strengthen Umayyad claims to caliphal legitimacy. My objective has been to consider the ways in which the subject of the *qiyān* is a literary motif loaded with significance and coded meanings, used in ‘Abbasid and Andalusian historiography to convey specific ideas about court culture, imperial splendor, and refinement. I am interested in examining how this motif, in turn, is imbricated with ideologies about gender dynamics, power relationships, historical memory, and the articulation of Muslim identity and imperial legitimacy.

In order to understand the way in which narratives about the *qiyān* developed, it is important to reflect briefly on slavery in the Islamicate context.⁸ I would like to preface this discussion by acknowledging that slavery, regardless of contextual and cultural distinctions, is an inherently invasive act that involves the subjugation of one human being to another. That being said, in order to understand the way in which slavery in an Islamicate context operated, it is important—especially from a modern Western (and specifically American) perspective—to uncouple the concept of “slavery” from pervasive connotations that do not accurately describe slavery in the Islamicate Middle Ages. According to the German Enlightenment philosopher Georg Hegel and the contemporary sociologist Orlando Patterson, who expands on Hegel’s

⁴ Pernilla Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* (Göteborg: University of Gothenburg, 2010).

⁵ Julia Bray, “Men, Women, and Slaves in ‘Abbasid Society” in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, eds. Leslie Brubaker and Julia M. H. Smith. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶ Myrne, 14.

⁷ Janina Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: The Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in Al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁸ When describing the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African empires ruled by Muslim authorities, I will use the word “Islamicate” rather than “Islamic,” to acknowledge the broad spectrum of religions and cultures that existed in these societies. The word “Islamicate” describes a society that was organized according to Islamic principles of governance, law, and social order, but that was comprised of and shaped by other influences as well. Crucially for this thesis, it also accounts for practices that were prevalent in Islamic communities, but that did not necessarily conform to the conventional religious mandates of Islam—the “wine, women, and song” aspects of courtly society, for example. In using this term, I am, of course, echoing the eminent historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson. For more on his development of the term “Islamicate,” see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: The Classical Age*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59.

thesis, slavery is a form of “social death” stemming from the alienation of the slave from his or her community.⁹ While this model rings true in many contexts, slavery in medieval Islamicate society was a transitive state, rather than a permanent condition.

Hegel’s and Patterson’s model does not encompass the notion of slavery as a temporary social status that included social mobility. In fact, Patterson acknowledges that slavery in the Islamic context—in which “domination of the master over slave was not fixed and absolute”—does not fit the paradigm of slavery as social death. As Kristina Richardson points out, however, Patterson “does not account for women in this scheme...though female slaves also had some opportunities to command considerable political power in Islamicate society.”¹⁰ Richardson’s gender-conscious analysis of medieval Islamicate slavery, on the other hand, offers a counterpoint to the “Hegelian-Pattersonian” conception of slavery as “social death.” According to Richardson, “female slave entertainers of the caliph and other wealthy patrons of the ‘Abbasid period...exploited their sexuality and their proximity to the politically powerful for personal gain.”¹¹

In accord with Islamic conceptions of slavery, the *qiyān* were able to access opportunities for social mobility. As Lisa Nielson writes, “slavery in the Islamic era could be a temporary state and was not an impediment to social advancement. Singing girls and other female slaves had the opportunity to earn their freedom through the birth of a child, to be freed for marriage, or to buy their freedom outright.”¹² A slave woman who sang a song or composed a poem that particularly pleased her owner might be given a reward that ranged from an expensive gift to monetary compensation to full manumission. In addition, some of the *qiyān* actually owned slaves themselves. Moreover, a slave woman who bore her master a son often earned special legal protections as an *umm walad* (literally, “mother of a son”), and she may even have been granted manumission on this basis.

Clarification of the intersection between gender, sexuality, and slavery is also in order. As Joseph C. Miller explains, “Much of the literature on females enslaved in the Islamic world draws on Orientalizing tendencies to romanticize Muslim male sexual appetites and equates women slaves with concubines.”¹³ First of all, sexual encounters with slave women were not just physical, but also political—that is, the female body is uniquely equipped to facilitate biological reproduction—and, by extension, the reproduction of imperial influence and authority. Even so, however, the purpose of female slavery in the ‘Abbasid and Andalusian empires was not exclusively sexual. As Miller notes, “Harems in fact housed wives, concubines, children, female dependents, and slave servants, and in large numbers they enhanced the status of the male owners...only the most favored of the females imported became concubines in the modern sense of regular sexual partners.”¹⁴

As Julia Bray notes, although large numbers of captives were taken and enslaved as a consequence of the early Islamic wars of conquest, it was “only during the ‘Abbasids that slavery began to be perceived as a social force.”¹⁵ Bray attributes the development of an institutionalized system of slavery to several parallel motivations. For one thing, Islamic law permits the

⁹ Kristina Richardson, “Singing Slave Girls (Qiyān) of the ‘Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries,” in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Joseph C. Miller, Suzanne Miers, and Gwyn Campbell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 106.

¹⁰ Richardson, 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹² Lisa Nielson, “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts” *Early Music History*, no. 31 (2012): 248.

¹³ Joseph C. Miller, “Introduction” to *Women and Slavery. Volume One, Africa, the Indian Ocean World, and the Medieval North Atlantic*, eds. Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph Calder Miller. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 12.

¹⁴ Miller, 12.

¹⁵ Bray, “Men, Women, and Slaves,” 134.

enslavement of people who are neither Muslims nor *dhimmis*. (The term *dhimmi* refers to Christians and Jews who received imperial protection in return for the payment of a poll tax known as the *jizya*). The enslavement of non-*dhimmi* populations served to expand and incorporate outsiders into the Muslim community.¹⁶ As Bray explains, “slaves, Islamicised from birth or infancy and lacking pedigree or identity but that of Islam and their host family, swelled the Muslim community at all levels from the small urban household upwards.”¹⁷

The enslavement of men offered some clear economic benefits to the owner, because “a skilled male slave might not only increase the value of the owner’s business but also accumulate wealth of his own, in which case the owner’s family became his heirs when he died.”¹⁸ A female slave may not have provided the same direct financial benefit to her owner, but her ability to increase the “human wealth” of the family through reproduction was a valuable asset. The regularity with which slave women bore children to free men is evidenced by the fact that all but three of the ‘Abbasid caliphs were born to slave mothers. At least in theory, slave women did not have the same inheritance rights as free women, making their presence less legally and financially threatening to the mistress of the house than that of the free co-wives.¹⁹

The *qiyān* were merely one specific group within the general category of female slaves known in Arabic as *jawari* (singular: *jariya*). The origins of the *qiyān* as a class of highly trained slaves is not entirely clear. There is some indication that training slave women in poetry and music might originally have served to increase the monetary value of women who were less physically attractive. If this is the case, however, it quickly became a way to increase the value of slave women who *were* attractive, “thereby creating a new class of particularly expensive *qiyān*.”²⁰ The willingness of the courtly and upper classes to pay extraordinarily high prices for domestic slaves indicates the status-seeking motivations for slave ownership among the urban elite. Economically, purchasing and patronizing a large number of domestic slaves was a drain on wealth. They were not *generators* of wealth so much as they were *signifiers* of wealth and symbols of prestige. Bray explains, “In rich and powerful families, there would be a contingent of domestic slaves who were expected to contribute chiefly, if not solely, to the family’s prestige rather than to its earning power, by being objects of ostentatious expenditure.”²¹

If a retinue of domestic slaves was an important way for elites to demonstrate their wealth, the ownership of *qiyān* was an effective way for rulers, in particular, to articulate the legitimacy of their authority. The patronage of poets and the hosting of literary gatherings—*mujalāsāt*—for the recitation of panegyric poetry and other works of musical and literary production was a crucial mechanism for the dissemination of imperial propaganda and the performance of authority. As Samer Ali describes it, citing Susanne Stetkevych, the patrons of poets and court performers, especially rulers, “desired a reputation as someone whom poets would supplicate. The poet’s gesture toward the ruler counted as a public ‘act of allegiance’ [and] the poet’s performance was ‘part of the iconography of power.’”²²

¹⁶ The prohibition on enslaving “people of the book” did not constrain slave traders from importing a large number Christian slave women from the Byzantine regions beyond the borders of the Islamic empire. For more on this phenomenon and an analysis of the religious, racial, and cultural composition of slaves populations in al-Andalus, in particular, see D. Fairchild Ruggles, “Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty: Race, Genealogy, and Acculturation in al-Andalus,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004). See also: Nadia M. El-Cheikh, “Describing the Other to Get at the Self: Byzantine Women in Arabic Sources (8th-11th Centuries),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40, no. 2 (1997): 239-250.

¹⁷ Bray, “Men, Women, and Slaves,” 134.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Ruggles, “Mothers of a Hybrid Dynasty,” 74.

²⁰ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 3.

²¹ Bray, “Men, Women, and Slaves,” 136.

²² Samer Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 86.

Because the production and dissemination of poetry and the venue of the courtly *majlis* was so essential to the presentation of imperial legitimacy and performance of power, court poets asserted what Jocelyn Sharlet describes as “an emerging professional identity which put them in an advantageous position.”²³ Sharlet likens the literary and rhetorical skills of medieval Islamic court poets to fluency in critical word languages or knowledge of essential technological skills in today’s world. This professional identity, she continues, “enabled many poets to cross socio-economic, religious, and ethnic boundaries.” The *qiyan*, in their capacity as court performers, were similarly able to attain and assert a pseudo-professional status.

The nature of the dynamic between patron and performer allowed the poet—or *qayna*—to exercise a certain strategic power. As Ali explains, rulers *depended* on the artistic and linguistic skills of their poets to advertise and rhetorically justify their position in the social hierarchy: “sacred language, in the hands of poets, could...be used as an instrument for engaging the king and his delegates in the hierarchy. Members of the hierarchy were perennially in need of poets to boost their public reputation.”²⁴ According to the laws of supply and demand, the fact that the rhetorical and linguistic skills of poets were in such high demand raised their value and thus increased their ability to exercise agency and power. The *qiyan*, some of whom were poets themselves, were active participants in this dynamic. Other *qiyan*, even those who were only singers, played a key role in disseminating the rhetoric developed by court poets. Through their participation in these highly intricate, two-way power dynamics between patron and performer, the *qiyan* were able to use their prestige to assert agency and authority.

The first chapter of this thesis is introductory in nature, dealing with the historical context of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, describing the long and tumultuous history of its five-hundred year lifetime and outlining the emergence of ‘Abbasid court culture, which became the authoritative template for courtly society throughout the Islamic world. The second chapter centers around a close reading of two primary sources that discuss the ‘Abbasid *qiyan*. The first source is Ibn al-Sa’i’s *Consorts of the Caliphs*, written in the late 1250s. *Consorts of the Caliphs* is a biographical dictionary about women who attained close proximity to ‘Abbasid caliphs and courtiers from the ninth through the thirteenth centuries. In this section, I analyze the nature of Ibn al-Sa’i’s portrayal of slave women singers, highlighting the major representational themes—such as the promotion of ‘Abbasid heritage through a celebration of court culture—that permeate the text. Following this close reading of *Consorts of the Caliphs*, I analyze al-Jahiz’s *Epistle on the Singing Girls*, a complex text designed to promote Mu’tazilite philosophy through a satirical critique of the *qiyan* institution. Taking a step back, the final section of the second chapter examines these two, very different depictions of ‘Abbasid *qiyan* with an eye for the distinct historical contexts and the prevailing political, intellectual, philosophic, and theological debates with which each of these authors engaged.

The third and fourth chapters are parallel in function to the second and third chapters. The third chapter offers a basic overview of the history of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus. Following this discussion of historical context, the fourth chapter provides a brief examination of the *qiyan* institution in al-Andalus as a historical and social phenomenon. The fourth chapter, like the third, is based on a close reading of primary sources that reference slave women, female scholars, and the *qiyan*. The body of sources describing the *qiyan* in al-Andalus is much more

²³ Jocelyn Sharlet, *Patronage and Poetry in the Islamic World Social Mobility and Status in the Medieval Middle East and Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 3.

²⁴ Ali, 100.

diffuse—references to notable slave women, for example, often comprise short sub-sections of historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries focusing mainly on prominent male figures.

Given this situation, my analysis of the narratives about the *qiyān* in al-Andalus is based on a close reading of six different texts, ranging from Ibn Hayyan's eleventh-century *Kitāb al-Muqtabis* to al-Maqqari's seventeenth-century *Nafh al-Tib*. Through a close analysis of portrayals of singing slave women in these sources, the fourth chapter explores the ways in which narratives about the *qiyān* facilitated the articulation of Andalusian Umayyad caliphal legitimacy and independence. The concluding chapter identifies the broad trends revealed by the analysis in the preceding chapters, and I consider the significance of the relationship between depictions of the *qiyān* and broader political agendas of 'Abbasid and Andalusian historians.

Chapter 1:

History of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate and the Development of Courtly Culture

[Baghdad], an island between the Tigris and the Euphrates – the Tigris to its East, the Euphrates to its West – will become the hub of the world. All that [sails] on the Tigris from Wasit, al-Basrah, al-Ubullah, al-Ahwaz, Faris, Unan, al-Yamamah, al-Bahrayn, and the contiguous regions will come and anchor there. Likewise, all that is carried on the Tigris by ship from al-Mawsil, Diyar, Rabia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, and all that is carried on the Euphrates coming from Diyar Mudar, al-Raqqah, Syria, al-Thughur (the fortified frontiers facing the Byzantine territories), Egypt, and North Africa will unload there. It will become the terminus for the people of al-Jabal, Isfahan, and the districts of Khurasan. Praise be to God who reserved it for me and made all my predecessors unaware of it. By God, I shall indeed build it and live in it the rest of my life, and in it my offspring after me shall dwell. It will be the most flourishing city in the world.¹

– Al-Mansur, Second ‘Abbasid Caliph and founder of Baghdad (r. 754-775)

As it happened, Al-Mansur’s grand, optimistic plans for the city he founded in 762 were successfully born out over the course of the next century, as the well-placed city of Baghdad—known more poetically as the “City of Peace” (*Medinat al-Salaam*)—blossomed into a prosperous imperial capital. Baghdad was celebrated as the “navel of the universe,” a reference to its unique architectural design (the city was comprised of a series of walled concentric circles) and to its vital role in the political, economic, and cultural landscape of the medieval Islamic world. By the ninth century, goods from every corner of the known world could be found in Baghdad’s *souqs*, and the courts of the caliphs were lavishly adorned, perfumed, and spiced with precious materials and delicacies originating in distant lands and brought to Baghdad by way of elaborate trade networks: musk and porcelain from China, spices and dyes from Malaysia, gemstones from Central Asia, honey and furs from Russia, gold from East Africa, Syrian fruits, Egyptian linens, pearls from the Arabian gulf, and Persian perfume.² Not surprisingly, the institution of the *qiyān*, which was connected to the political and geographic expansion of the ‘Abbasid caliphate and the development of slave trading networks, the increasing opulence of the elite urban environment, the influence of Persian customs on ‘Abbasid court culture, and new developments in poetry, music, and literature, rose to an unprecedented level of prominence during the early ‘Abbasid era (750-950).

Historical Background

The historical context of the ‘Abbasid empire is important for understanding the institution of the *qiyān* as a social and historical phenomenon. Moreover, the narratives that developed around the subject of famous female figures in general, and female slave poets in particular, vary depending on the distinct perspectives of the authors and the divergent contexts in which they wrote. The way in which medieval authors perceived and wrote about the *qiyān* was influenced by their specific political, philosophic, and theological agendas. In order to appreciate the role that narratives about the *qiyān* played in the construction of Muslim identity

¹ Ahmad ibn abi Yaqub al-Yaqubi, *Kitab al-Buldan*, ed. M.J. de Goeje, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1892), 237-238, quoted in George Sawa, *Music Performance Practice in the Early ‘Abbasid Era 132-320 AH/750-932 AD*. (Ottawa: Institute of Medieval Music, 2004), 3.

² Sawa, *Music Performance Practice*, 3.

and historical memory it is important to briefly survey the history of the ‘Abbasid caliphate.³ Moreover, the ‘Abbasid caliphate proved an enduring model for a particular kind of court culture that subsequent Islamic rulers across the Middle East and Mediterranean strove to emulate. As Janina Safran explains, “the ‘Abbasids defined the institution of the caliphate. The ways they elaborated their authority, asserted their claims to legitimacy, and styled their rule inspired the imitation of contemporary and future provincial rulers and rivals.”⁴

In very broad strokes, the history of the ‘Abbasid caliphate is, as Amira Benninson observes, a “story of continuity and change.”⁵ The five-hundred year span of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) was filled with political turbulence, starting with revolution in 750, followed by civil war (809-827), regicide, fratricide, and the subjugation of the ‘Abbasid family to Turkish military commanders beginning in the tenth century, and finally culminating with the invasion of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Even as successive occupants of the ‘Abbasid court displaced and seized control from one another, however, the overarching cultural fabric of ‘Abbasid society that developed in the early years of the caliphate remained reasonably consistent throughout the duration of the ‘Abbasid period. The culture of the court, in particular, within which the *qiyān* were situated, retained a quality of continuity throughout the span of the ‘Abbasid caliphate. Court culture hinged on the celebration of decadence, exhibition of splendor, and the pursuit of leisure and pleasure. Benninson notes that ‘Abbasid court culture was exported throughout the Islamicate Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world: “the patronage which the ‘Abbasid courts at Baghdad and Samarra offered to scholars, artists, poets and many others ensured that Iraq exported cultural, architectural and intellectual models across the *dar al-islam* even after the ‘Abbasids’ political fortunes faltered.”⁶

*From “Golden Age” to “Golden Cage:” 750-1258*⁷

The roots of the ‘Abbasid caliphate date to the 740s, when a group of Khurasani revolutionaries who claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad’s uncle, al-Abbas, rebelled against the Umayyad caliphate. These revolutionaries capitalized on the discontent of marginalized non-Arab Muslims, many of whom felt excluded from participation in the Muslim community. As their revolutionary movement gained traction, the ‘Abbasid rebels began to present themselves as advocates for these marginalized populations, promising to create “a fairer Islamic order in which Muslims, whatever their origin, would be able to participate on equal terms” in the economic, political, and religious life of the empire.⁸ With support from both non-Arab Muslims and the ‘Alids, and the complicity of the Khurasan-based army, ‘Abbasid revolutionaries defeated the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II, in a battle beside the river Zab (in what is now Iraq) in 750.⁹ The ‘Abbasid victory at the Battle of the Zab marked the end of the Umayyad caliphate and the beginning of the ‘Abbasid regime.

³ A full discussion of the long and tumultuous history of the ‘Abbasid caliphate from its revolutionary inception in 750 to the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols in 1258 could easily be the subject of an entire book—and this task has, in fact, already been accomplished masterfully by both Amira Benninson and Hugh Kennedy, among others. For purposes of this study, a short chapter will suffice to set the stage for a discussion of the role and representation of the *qiyān* in the ‘Abbasid context. For an excellent overview of the political history of the ‘Abbasid caliphate, see Amira K Benninson, *The Great Caliphs: The Golden Age of the ‘Abbasid Empire*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Hugh Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World: The Rise and Fall of Islam’s Greatest Dynasty* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2005).

⁴ Janina Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: The Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in Al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

⁵ Benninson, 9.

⁶ Benninson, 11.

⁷ The clever phrase “golden cage” courtesy of Benninson, 38.

⁸ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 95.

⁹ In addition to courting disenfranchised non-Arab Muslims, the ‘Abbasid revolutionaries catered to ‘Alid sympathizers by insisting that the caliphate be ruled by a member of the family of the Prophet; in order to maintain a broad base of support, however, they intentionally did not specify which branch of the family might be chosen.

Following the short rule of the first ‘Abbasid caliph, Abu-l-‘Abas al-Saffah (750-754), Abu Ja’far al-Mansur acceded to power as the second ‘Abbasid caliph, ruling from 754-775. Al-Mansur’s decision to leave the established Umayyad imperial capital of Damascus in order to move the imperial capital to Baghdad—his own, newly created, strategically placed city—had powerful reverberations. The eastward movement of the imperial capital from Damascus to Baghdad precipitated a dramatic cultural shift brought about by the increasing influence of Persian customs and traditions on the ‘Abbasid court, channeled, in particular, through influential courtiers and bureaucrats of Persian descent.¹⁰ The move to Baghdad and the increasing influence of Persian customs on ‘Abbasid court culture led to the introduction of Greek scientific and philosophic traditions into the Islamic world. Ironically, it was the Persians advisors to the ‘Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, rather than the Greek-speaking Christian Byzantine advisors to the Umayyads in Damascus, who facilitated the translation of Greek philosophic and scientific materials into the Arabic-speaking Islamic world. As Gutas explains, the culture of the local Persians, Christian Arabs, and Armenians “in the employ of the ‘Abbasids, in contradistinction to the Christians of Damascus, was Hellenized without the animosity against the ethnic Greek learning evident in Orthodox Christian Byzantine circles.”¹¹ Al-Mansur’s establishment of the *bayt al-hikma* (House of Wisdom) created a site for the translation of Greek and Persian texts into Arabic and further formalized the ‘Abbasid world’s engagement with the Greek intellectual tradition.¹²

Proximity to Persia and the infiltration of Greek texts into the Arabic-speaking community not only altered the philosophic and intellectual fabric of the ‘Abbasid world, but also contributed significantly to changes in the social structure of the empire and led to the development of an elite court culture designed to distinguish the ruling aristocracy from “commoners.” In this new urban context of Baghdad, an increasing separation developed between the elite, *khassa*, (comprised of scholars, bureaucrats, and soldiers) and the common people, *amma*, (comprised primarily of craftsmen, artisans, and merchants). Benninson suggests that this distinction reflected an Aristotelian influence: “As ethnic groups jostled for precedence and jostled with their pens, and the imperial elite ceased to be a solely Arab preserve, Muslims also began to survey society from the Aristotelian perspective... according to this model, society was divided into four categories: men of the pen, men of the sword, merchants and peasants.”¹³ In other words, if participation in the upper echelons of society was no longer defined exclusively by one’s “Arabness,” then members of the elite class needed new ways to define and demarcate their elite identity along cultural rather than ethnic lines.

The early ‘Abbasid elite distinguished and defined themselves by retreating further into the secluded world of the court—literally and figuratively—and by constructing a court culture designed to promote knowledge and refinement through the patronage of avant-garde poets, musicians, translators, and artists. According to Hugh Kennedy, “the elite were distinguished, among other things, by their greater knowledge and understanding.”¹⁴ The court culture of the early ‘Abbasid period centered around the patronage of poets and musicians. The relationship between poets and rulers was, in many ways, mutually beneficial. Poets flocked to the palace of the caliph in search of patronage and recognition; becoming a successful court poet could

¹⁰ Dmitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsīd Society, 2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1998), 2.

¹¹ Gutas, 20.

¹² Benninson, 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 112.

provide a ticket to social mobility and an inroad into the world of the elite. Meanwhile, courtly patrons benefited from the praise poetry composed by the poets they patronized. As Kennedy explains, “successful and popular praise poetry would be circulated way beyond the occasion for which it was originally produced...the poetry would spread and immortalize the memory of the patron.”¹⁵ In this way, court poetry was a highly political product, and poets played an important role in legitimizing caliphs and their administrations.

The eastward shift of the imperial capital from Damascus to Baghdad, the Greek-Arabic translation movement, the growing seclusion of the ruling elite, and the creation of a distinct court culture are among the classic features of the ‘Abbasid “Golden Age” of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The “Golden Age” of the ‘Abbasid caliphate is generally associated with the era of the fifth caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809). This period is frequently considered the “Golden Age” of Islamic civilization as a whole, “when the word ‘Baghdad’ evoked opulence and splendour as far west as the court of the Carolingians.”¹⁶ In many ways, however, the concept of the ‘Abbasid “Golden Age” of the eighth century was invented by nostalgic historians, beginning as early as the late ninth century, for whom the previous era seemed more prosperous than their own time. Although it is often celebrated for the cultural vibrancy of the ninth century, the early ‘Abbasid era was also a time of fragmentation and disintegration that revealed the latent fault lines within the Muslim community. Many of the ills of the later ‘Abbasid era had their roots in policies implemented during the “Golden Age” of the eighth and ninth centuries. Moreover, the eighth-century empire was itself already riddled with political and religious tensions.

Ironically, Harun al-Rashid’s actions during the height of the “Golden Age” set in motion the dynamics that led to the bloody civil war of the ninth century (809-827). When Harun al-Rashid divided the empire between his two sons, Muhammad al-Amin and ‘Abd Allah al-Ma’mun, his intentions were to simplify the question of succession after his death.¹⁷ His plan, unfortunately, backfired. Pre-existing tensions between the elites of Baghdad and Khurasan cast the two princes as leaders of rival communities. As stipulated by his father’s arrangements, al-Amin became caliph first. Although he initially planned to respect the succession agreement that made his brother next in line for the caliphate, under the pressure of an influential advisor who disliked al-Ma’mun and his Khurasani supporters, al-Amin designated his own son as his successor, thereby supplanting and antagonizing his brother. Tensions between the two brothers escalated into full-blown civil war that eventually resulted in al-Ma’mun’s victory and the assassination of al-Amin by al-Ma’mun’s military leader.

The civil war is a dramatic example of the tensions that characterized the early ‘Abbasid period, but there were also other, less violent tensions associated with the effort to maintain a coherent sense of Muslim identity in the face of a changing cultural milieu.

These anxieties manifested themselves in the form of divergent, competing intellectual frameworks for defining Muslim identity. One of these was the crystallization of a distinction between the partisans of ‘Ali—the proto-Shi’i Muslims—and mainstream Sunni Muslims. Less notorious processes of differentiation, however, were also significant. The development of *falsafa* (Greek-based philosophy), for example, led to the parallel emergence of the *‘ulema*, an elite class of religious scholars who disapproved of the proponents of *falsafa* and claimed exclusive rights to Qur’anic knowledge by arguing that Islamic piety required accepting the

¹⁵ Ibid, 114.

¹⁶ Benninson, 30.

¹⁷ Ibid. To this end, al-Mansur devised a plan whereby “Muhammad al-Amin should become caliph and control Iraq and the western flank of the empire while ‘Abd Allah al-Ma’mun would take over the governorship of Khurasan in the east and eventually succeed his brother as caliph.”

Qur'an "*bi la kayf*"—"without asking why." At the same time, the communities of both the philosophers and the legal scholars had their own major internal disagreements, and this situation produced rival factions of philosophical schools and four different schools of legal interpretation. Moreover, in the midst of these intellectual and theological debates, Sufism rose in popularity as an alternative to both the legalistic and philosophic paradigms.

The complexity of Muslim identity in the early 'Abbasid era was not only a matter of abstract theological and philosophical questions. Debate over the best way to be Muslim also encompassed questions about everyday matters—what, when, and how to eat and drink, how to pray and perform the ablutions, how to conduct oneself and interact with individuals of other classes, races, religions, and genders in the market-place and other public venues, as well as questions about what constituted appropriate expressions of desire and sexuality. Questions of gender relations and expressions of sexuality, set amid the increasingly diverse, decadent, secular, and urban environment of medieval Baghdad, informed perceptions and representations of the *qiyan*.

Following al-Ma'mun's death in 833, his brother, al-Mu'tasim, assumed the position of caliph and instituted two major changes that would have long-lasting impacts on the history of the empire. His first act was to begin "the systematic recruitment of Turkish slave soldiers to replace the Arab and Khurasani troops of the early 'Abbasid era."¹⁸ The use of slave soldiers was hardly new to the Mediterranean world, nor was the specific engagement of Turkish slave soldiers unprecedented for the 'Abbasid empire, but the institutionalization of this practice as directed by al-Mu'tasim was a new development, and one that was "sorely needed...to resist Byzantine pressure on the northern frontier."¹⁹ The influx of Turkish soldiers into Baghdad, however, had problematic consequences. As Kennedy explains, "The people of Baghdad resented the coming of the Turks. The stationing of a brutal and licentious soldiery among a large civilian population was never going to be easy. The fact that many of them spoke no Arabic and had converted to Islam recently if at all made relations more fraught."²⁰ To make matters worse, the Turkish troops displaced Baghdadi and Khurasani soldiers who had previously enjoyed the elite status of being the caliph's "crack troops."²¹

In response to growing tensions between Baghdadi civilians and Turkish soldiers, al-Mu'tasim decided in 836 to relocate the imperial capital from Baghdad to Samarra.²² Located about 125 kilometers north of Baghdad, the city of Samarra was constructed entirely from scratch for the caliph, his court, and the quarrelsome Turkish army. Unconstrained by space, the city was monumental in scale and lavishly appointed. It was in many ways a physical manifestation of the decadent court culture that flourished under the early 'Abbasid caliphs. Kennedy describes the details of the city: "There were broad, straight streets and numerous equally straight side streets...Great mosques were established and huge palaces built with acres of courts, rooms, gardens and parks. Racecourses were laid out and ports were set up on the banks of the river."²³ The cultural landscape was similarly decadent, featuring singing slave women, poets, musicians, and court performers.²⁴

¹⁸ Ibid, 36.

¹⁹ Ibid, 37; Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 214.

²⁰ Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 218.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Benninson, 36.

²³ Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 219.

²⁴ Agnes Imhof, "Traditio vel Aemulatio? The Singing Contest of Samarra, Expression of a Medieval Culture of Competition," *Der Islam* 90 (2013): 1.

Vibrant court culture notwithstanding, the move to Samarra ultimately proved self-destructive and paved the way for the decentralization of power in ‘Abbasid society. In Samarra, the Turkish slave soldiers were able to consolidate their power and use their proximity to the caliphs to gain political control. Although “Samarra was a city of boundless grandeur which became a byword for royal splendour throughout the Islamic world,” writes Benninson, “it also became a golden cage in which caliphs resided at the mercy of the Turkish *amirs* who commanded the loyalties of the troops and their families.”²⁵ As Turkish commanders gained the power to install and depose caliphs at their will during second half of the ninth century, the institution of the caliphate declined in power.

The attenuation of the caliph’s authority led to a decentralization of power, allowing individual provinces and cities to take control of their own affairs. Benninson observes, for instance, that “the main political outcome of the Samarran period was therefore not the strengthening of the caliphate through its possession of a strong and stable army but its weakening as provincial governors took the opportunity to assert their *de facto* independence from Iraq and establish local dynasties which acknowledged the ‘Abbasids but paid them little practical heed.”²⁶ This decentralization of power replicated itself on a broader geographic scale over the next few centuries. By the end of the tenth century, the Muslim *umma* had divided itself into three sections—the ‘Abbasids in Baghdad (though they were by that point effectively ruled by Turkish military leaders), the Shi’i empire of the Fatimids in Egypt (founded in 909), and the Umayyads in al-Andalus (who proclaimed their regime an independent caliphate in 929, headed by Abd al-Rahman III, the descendant of an Umayyad escapee of the ‘Abbasid revolution).²⁷

The ‘Abbasid caliphs never fully regained independent power after the Turks asserted their authority in the Samarran period. Instead, they remained reliant on the “protection” of military regimes, first the Shi’i Buyids in the tenth century, and then the Sunni Seljuk Turks in the eleventh century. The subjugation of the Sunni ‘Abbasid caliphs to the Shi’i Buyids was a low point for the ‘Abbasid caliphate.²⁸ Ironically, it was Turkish soldiers—this time in the guise of the Seljuks—who reinvigorated traditional ‘Abbasid structures by displacing the Buyids. The Seljuk Turks patronized Sunni thinkers and bureaucrats in Baghdad. As “protectors” of the ‘Abbasids and “rescuers” of the historically Sunni caliphate from the Shi’i Buyids, the Seljuk Turks used their Sunni legitimacy to construct a new kind of ruling institution—the *sultanate*—which the was seen as a “complement to the caliphate.”²⁹ Despite the supposedly complementary roles and shared power of the caliphate and the sultanate, however, the ‘Abbasid caliphs essentially became figureheads lacking real political authority.

Not surprisingly, the decreasing power of the caliphs and the corresponding rise of Turkish military regimes inspired nostalgia among the Baghdadi elite for the halcyon days of the early ‘Abbasid period. The process of mythologizing late eighth and early ninth-century Baghdad as an idyllic “Golden Age” began as early as the late ninth century and continued on into the thirteenth century—and even persists in many ways to this day. This process is evident in famous works like the enduringly popular *Tales from The Thousand and One Nights*, a collection of fantastical stories set in late eighth-century Baghdad. The stories in the *Thousand and One Nights* collection celebrate the legendary glory of the ‘Abbasid empire under the rule of

²⁵ Benninson, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50. “By 1100, the map of the Middle East had become a mosaic of small principalities clustered around the notional centres of Baghdad, where the ‘Abbasids and Great Saljuqs held court, and Cairo, the capital of the Fatimids.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 44. The term sultan “came to denote a Muslim ruler whose assumption and maintenance of power by military means was legitimized by the dedication of his financial and military resources to defending the faith.”

Harun al-Rashid. As will be seen later in this chapter, nostalgia for lost glory is similarly evident in Ibn al-Sa'i's thirteenth-century text, *Consorts of the Caliphs*, which focuses on famous female companions of the 'Abbasid caliphs.

As noted previously, however, the so-called "Golden Age" was far more complex than nostalgic depictions might suggest, and it was during the flourishing days of Harun al-Rashid's rule that the groundwork was laid for the succession crisis and civil war that plagued the next generation. At the same time, the decentralization of political power did not automatically mean "decline." In some instances, it had the effect of diffusing and expanding 'Abbasid court culture. From a cultural perspective, the ninth through thirteenth centuries witnessed a surge of cultural revival throughout the Muslim world, as small independent centers sought to emulate the elaborate court culture established by the eighth-century 'Abbasids. As Benninson explains, "political fragmentation thus had the converse effect of encouraging cultural integration and the dissemination of knowledge and other cultural artifacts across vast territories, from which it would migrate again into Christendom through Spain, Sicily and the Levant."³⁰

The late thirteenth century saw a brief resurgence of 'Abbasid caliphal power in the person of the determined 'Abbasid caliph al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225). Interestingly, it was in the shadow of al-Nasir's 'Abbasid comeback that Ibn al-Sa'i wrote his *Consorts of the Caliphs*. While the work demonstrates a tone of nostalgia for the past, it can also be seen as an attempt to bolster and legitimize the glimmering resurgence of his own age by embedding it within a longer historical tradition of 'Abbasid vitality. Ultimately, however, 'Abbasid resurgence only lasted a few decades. In fact, Ibn al-Sa'i was really writing on the eve of the what came to be known as the most disastrous event in the history of the 'Abbasid empire: the Mongol invasion. Between 1206 and 1279, the Mongols conquered an enormous swath of land stretching from the Pacific Ocean in the east to the Mediterranean Sea in the west.³¹ Beginning with the campaigns of Chinggis Khan in 1219–1222, the Mongols began making incursions into the Muslim world. From the perspective of thirteenth-century Muslims who experienced the invasion, the expansion of the Mongols was an apocalyptic event.

Although the sack of Baghdad in 1258 did destroy the city and did bring the 'Abbasid Empire to its knees, examining the process of the Mongol expansion through a wider lens reveals that the Mongol invasion initiated the beginning of a new kind of *umma*. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Mongol rulers adopted Islam. The Islamicization of the Mongol empire, combined with an unprecedented era of trade-based cohesion across the Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian worlds (the "*pax Mongolica*"), in some ways actually enhanced the continuity and cultural permeation of the Muslim *umma* in the late medieval period.

The *Qiyān* Institution as a Social and Historical Phenomenon

Although the practice of training slave women to perform for courtly audiences predates the 'Abbasid era, the *qiyān* institution reached an exceptional level of cultural, social, and economic importance in the 'Abbasid period.³² *Qiyān* were held and patronized not only by caliphs themselves, but also by elite courtiers seeking upward mobility. The development of this

³⁰ Ibid, 45.

³¹ Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405: The Making of a Civilization* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2003), 257. The lands the conquered encompassed China, Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus, and the steppe region between Mongolia and Poland.

³² For more on the pre-'Abbasid *qiyān*, see Suzanne Meyers-Sawa, "Historical Issues of Gender and Music" in *The Garland Encyclopedia of Music: The Middle East*, ed. Virginia Danielson, et al. (New York: Routledge: 2002), 293-98.

pervasive “*qiyān* culture,” according to Lisa Nielson, reflected a convergence of cultural preferences set by the caliph’s court, economics, politics, and legal developments. She writes, “The combination of a rising middle class, increased wealth and stability in the ‘Abbasid’s seat of power and the establishment of laws related to marriage and adultery created the right atmosphere for the development of a courtesan-patron dynamic.”³³

The *qiyān* belonged to the milieu of the *majlis*. As Sawa explains, the term *majlis* (plural: *mujalāsāt*) literally refers to an assembly of people sitting together. Dominic Brookshaw defines a *majlis* as an “assembly or meeting hosted by a caliph, king, high official, prominent merchant, scholar, or poet” in which “much of the intellectual, cultural, and social life of medieval Muslims took place.”³⁴ *Mujalāsāt* could be convened for a number of different purposes: debating law, jurisprudence, theological doctrine, or they could be festive occasions in which “guests drank wine, consumed sweetmeats, contemplated beauty, and, on occasion, danced to the accompaniment provided by poets, singers, and musicians.”³⁵ Samer Ali likens the *majlis* to a literary salon, a “nightly venue for witnessing the oral performance of...poetry [that] offered edification, entertainment, and escape for middle –and upper-rank men and women; it also served as a means of building one’s public reputation, establishing one’s status, [and] expanding one’s social network.”³⁶ Music, too, was central to the production of courtly culture: “Music, as both art and science, was one of the intellectual preoccupations of the court...song as well as music theory were the manifestations of a ‘lay’ culture...that could only be cultivated at the court.”³⁷ The *majlis* was one of prime venues for performing and creating *adab* culture—a highly valued combination of good manners, courtly etiquette, intellectual knowledge, and the ability to engage with and produce refined, light, and entertaining literary works.³⁸

The secular nature of the *majlis* meant that it was also associated with wine drinking and expressions of sexuality that would typically fall under the category of morally suspect behavior according to the parameters of conservative Muslim piety.³⁹ This convivial atmosphere—in which wine, music, poetry, and socializing blended together into a montage of cultured merrymaking, often set in an ornately decorated performance hall or a picturesque garden—is apparent in the writings of Abu Ishaq al-Husri, an eleventh-century scholar who offers the following description of a musical *majlis*:

The *majlis*: its wine is the ruby, its blossom is the rose, its orange is gold and its narcissi are *dinars* and *dirhams* carried by the chrysolite...a *majlis* in which the strings have begun to answer one another and the goblets to rotate; the flags of intimate friendship are fluttering and the tongues of the musical instruments are speaking. We are seated between full moons while the wine cups are circulating.⁴⁰

³³ Lisa Nielson, “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts,” *Early Music History* 31 (2012): 247.

³⁴ Dominic P. Brookshaw, “Palaces, Pavilions and Pleasure-gardens: The Context and Setting of the Medieval Majlis,” *Middle Eastern Literatures*, no. 6 (2003): 1.

³⁵ Brookshaw, 1.

³⁶ Samer Ali, *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages: Poetry, Public Performance, and the Presentation of the Past* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 3.

³⁷ Hilary Kilpatrick, “Princes, musicians et musicologues a la cour Abbaside,” in *Les intellectuels en Orient musulman, statut et fonction*, ed. Floreal Sanagustin (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientales, 1999), 1, quoted in Matthew S. Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet: Al-Jahiz and the *Risalat al-qiyān*,” in *Al-Jahiz: A Muslim Humanist for Our Time*, eds. Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy, Tarif Khaldi, and Manfred Kropp (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 2009), 265.

³⁸ Pernilla Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* (Göteborg: University of Gothenburg, 2010), 42. For an extensive discussion of *adab* in the ‘Abbasid context, see S.A. Bonebakker, “*Adab* and the Concept of *Belles-Lettres*,” in *‘Abbasid Belles-Lettres*, eds. Julia Ashtiany et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16-27.

³⁹ Nielson, 255.

⁴⁰ Abu Ishaq al-Husri, quoted in Dominic P. Brookshaw, 199-200.

As al-Husri's reference to "intimate friendship" indicates, the ambience of the *majlis* was designed to foster a sense of familiarity and apparent intimacy between the ruler and his entertainers and companions—while of course remaining within the confines of established power dynamics and rules of etiquette.

In an environment where such high value was placed on the ability to engage and entertain with both skill and informality, a successful *qayna* needed to have a wide range of skills at her disposal. As one might expect, the *qiyan* were trained in the performing arts as singers, poets, and musicians, but some were also educated in fields more typically reserved for men. The profile of a slave girl named Tawaddud, featured in one tale from the *Thousand and One Nights* collection, though that of a character in a fictional account, reflects the characteristics of a highly educated *qayna* that would not have been out of place in 'Abbasid Baghdad. In the story, Tawaddud has "studied grammar, poetry, law, philosophy, the Qur'an, mathematics, Arabic folklore, medicine, music, logic, rhetoric and composition."⁴¹ In addition, the *qiyan* not only performed formally for assembled audiences, but also engaged their masters in casual, witty repartee as charming and refined "boon companions."⁴²

Throughout the sources, considerable emphasis is also placed on the ability of the *qiyan* to compose and recite poems extemporaneously and to successfully "cap" verses. Verse capping, a "favorite courtly game in which one person begins the verse and another finishes," requires a deep mastery of the Arabic language and the complex technical structure of Arabic poetry.⁴³ The challenge of verse capping lies in the fact that the poet must respond with a line that extends the same pattern of rhyme and meter while also making sense in terms of content and imagery. Like Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, Arabic poetry is highly technically complex, making the exercise of spontaneous composition and verse capping very challenging.

Concurrent with her reputation for literary brilliance and culturedness, the singing slave girl was also sexually available to her owner. In this regard, she was an object on display, valued for her physical beauty, notorious for her sexual promiscuousness, and viewed with a degree of moral suspicion by more conservative Muslims. Kristina Richardson notes that although "the nature of a *qayna's* service gave her opportunities for artistic creation and a public forum of expression...it was still true that her master derived sexual and nonsexual pleasure from a *qayna's* body and art."⁴⁴ Richardson goes on to discuss the implications of the fact that the *qiyan*—and other slave women—went unveiled in public spaces (though at times, *qiyan* were reported to have performed for male audiences from behind a curtain). In the medieval Islamic world, wearing a veil was an indication of a woman's social status. Slave women were *prohibited* from veiling, while free noble women wore the *hijab* not only as a marker of their piety, but also as an indication of their social class. Richardson argues that the "*qayna* was seen as socially and morally distinct from other women in the household by the prominence of

⁴¹ Kristina Richardson, "Singing Slave Girls (Qiyān) of the 'Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," in *Children in Slavery through the Ages*, eds. Joseph C. Miller, Suzanne Miers, and Gwyn Campbell (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 110.

⁴² Because this thesis focuses on representations of the *qiyan*, it is outside the purview of the present discussion to describe the nature of the songs and poetry attributed to the *qiyan*. Moreover, as explained previously, given the fact that the *qiyan* were primarily singers and extemporaneous oral poets, their works were only later written down by historians—typically after they had already taken on a folkloric quality. As a result, it is difficult to say with certainty that the poems attributed to the *qiyan* are, in fact, presented as the women created or intended them. Nonetheless, several collections of medieval Arabic poetry do provide insight into the poetic landscape in which the *qiyan* played an important role. For a collection of poetry fragments by Arab women from pre-Islamic times to the fifteenth century (published in Arabic and in English translation), see Abdullah al-Udhari, *Classical Poems by Arab Women* (London: Saqi Books, 1999). For works by female Andalusian poets, see Mahmud Sobh, *Poetisas Arabigo-Andaluzas* (Granada: Biblioteca De Ensayo, 1994). Finally, for poems by both male and female Andalusian poets, see Cola Franzen, *Poems of Arab Andalusia* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1989).

⁴³ Marla Segol, "Representing the Body in Poems by Medieval Muslim Women," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 45, no. 1 (2009): 152.

⁴⁴ Richardson, 112.

her unveiling, which represented slave status [and] impiety.”⁴⁵ She goes on to suggest that *qiyān* were also at times associated with the concept of *fitna*—which, in a ninth-century context, referred simultaneously to its primary Qur’anic meaning of general social chaos and to its secondary meaning of “dangerous female sexuality.”⁴⁶

Although the *qiyān* were expected to serve their patrons sexually as well as artistically, there were two-way power dynamics associated with this relationship of intimacy. The *qayna*’s proximity to men of the elite actually allowed her to assert her own agenda and even at times to achieve a position of indirect political influence. Richardson writes, “like the Ottoman concubines of the sultan’s royal harem, the female slave entertainers of the caliphs and other wealthy patrons of the ‘Abbasid period...exploited their sexuality and their proximity to the politically powerful for personal gain.”⁴⁷ In fact, one of the main concerns expressed by medieval critics of the *qiyān* institution was that singing girls were expert manipulators who used their charms to financially extort infatuated men. This sentiment suggests that, in the case of the *qiyān*, sexual availability evidently did not necessitate the abdication of agency.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Ibid. The dynamics between slave women and free women, while too far outside the scope of this thesis to explore in detail, is a fascinating topic. As noted in Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 173: “The eighth and ninth centuries were they heyday of the singing girl. In a social environment in which free women from respectable families were increasingly restricted and concealed, the singing girl, always a slave, could entertain her master and his friends (or, in some cases, his customers).” In other words, the prestige and prominence of the *qayna* hinged, in some ways, upon the concealment of free women. An interesting direction for further research might be the interactions between slave women and free women who shared the same households. Although information about free noblewomen tends to be very scarce and obscure, we do know something about the former slave girls who were manumitted and married by caliphs. In particular, the historical record yields significant information about four especially powerful, dominating former slave-girls who became mistresses of the harem and “queen mothers”—Khayzuran, Zubayda, Qabiha, and Shaghab. Compared to the vibrant accounts of the lives of numerous slave girls, however, we know next to nothing about the daughters of caliphs and the elite in the ‘Abbasid period. The only ‘Abbasid princess who appears in the historical record at all is Ulayya bint Mahdi (777-825), and we know about her only because she was a well known poet who was written about in the *Kitab al-Aghani*. On this subject, see Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 181.

⁴⁶ Richardson, 112-113.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 106.

⁴⁸ Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 174: “The image of the singing girl in literature, such as the *Book of Songs*, is a lively and attractive one. They are beautiful, of course, and they have wonderful voices, but they are also clever, accomplished and assertive, fully capable of putting down a boorish or unattractive man.”

Chapter 2:

Representations of the *Qiyān* in the ‘Abbasid Era (750-1258)

In this chapter, we move from a discussion of the *qiyān* as a social phenomenon in ‘Abbasid society to an examination of the ways in which medieval writers wrote about and represented the *qiyān*. The *qiyān* did not write their own stories, and the songs and poems attributed to them were typically recorded by male historians, often years after the lifetimes of the women identified as the poetesses or singers. Additionally, the songs and poems most likely to end up recorded for posterity were those that attracted the most attention and had already attained a larger-than-life, folkloric quality. Sources that discuss the *qiyān* are for the most part biographical dictionaries, historical chronicles, and treatises on culture and music often compiled with a particular political or ideological cause in mind. As a result, our understanding of the *qiyān* cannot be separated from the broader literary, political, philosophical, and theological agendas of the texts in which discussions about them are embedded. In light of this reality, the following analysis seeks to return the *qiyān* to their original context by considering how the subject of the *qiyān* was mobilized as a symbolic motif for specific narrative purposes.

Ibn al-Sa’i’s *Consorts of the Caliphs*

Born in 1197, Taj al-Din ‘Ali ibn Anjab ibn al-Sa’i was a Baghdadi scholar and historian who circulated among the courtly elite of ‘Abbasid society. Although Ibn al-Sa’i wrote a number of historical texts, *Consorts of the Caliphs* is the only work that has survived in its entirety. It is a biographical dictionary, with brief entries describing the lives, characteristics, and artistic contributions of the women Ibn al-Sa’i refers to as the “famous favorites” of caliphs, “whether consorts [wives] or concubines.”¹ Much like its name suggests, a biographical dictionary is a collection of biographies of prominent individuals, sometimes organized according to a particular theme. *Consorts of the Caliphs* is a thematic biographical dictionary in the respect that all the individuals profiled in the text are women who rose to prominence in the courtly sphere and came to occupy notable positions in the male-dominated world of the court. Under this broad category, the types of women Ibn al-Sa’i designates as the “consorts” of the caliphs encompass individuals from a wide range of social backgrounds—including regular female slaves (*jawari*) singing slave women (*qiyān*), concubines, free women poets commissioned as court performers, pious noblewomen, and wives of caliphs.

In order to understand Ibn al-Sa’i’s text, it is important to elaborate briefly on the nature of the biographical dictionary as a genre. Biographical dictionaries were not random assortments of factoids about famous people; instead, according to both Wadad al-Qadi and Ruth Roded, biographical dictionaries were carefully organized and deliberately designed to convey a specific—often politically or ideologically charged—message. As Wadad al-Qadi notes in her article on biographical dictionaries in the medieval Islamic world, “the genre of biographical dictionaries emerged...at a time when the medieval Islamic civilization was starting to have a definite identity, one which was primarily religious, with a linguistic (Arabic-Qur’anic) and a

¹ Ibn al-Sa’i, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, trans. editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa. Bilingual edition. (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2015), 3.

poetic touch to it.² The genre of the biographical dictionary facilitated a kind of categorical analysis that resonated with Islamic community's efforts to consolidate and articulate its historical, religious, linguistic, and cultural identity.

The subject of the *qiyān* and other prominent female scholars was a significant topic in the genre of the biographical dictionary. Ruth Roded observes that “poets and singers were held in high regard, and their works were collected and studied on a parallel with the religious sciences. Thus, female poets and singers, many of them concubines, appear frequently in the biographical collections.”³ Roded conducted a quantitative analysis of Islamic biographical dictionaries from the earliest works in the ninth century through the twentieth century. She argues that the proportion of women in these various biographical dictionaries ranges from less than one percent of the entries in some biographical dictionaries to 23% in others. Roded explains that although these percentages are “far below the proportion of women in the population,” they are “more than we might expect from a society in which presumably women were not seen nor heard.”⁴ As Roded's prosopographical analysis reveals, the number of female figures profiled in Islamic biographical dictionaries is not insignificant.

What drew medieval authors to include entries on women in their biographical dictionaries—and, in some cases, to devote entire collections to female figures? Roded argues that “the biographical interest in women is directly related to the crucial role of the female Companions of the Prophet in various aspects of Islamic culture.”⁵ The female Companions of the Prophet were religious role models who occupied a privileged position in the historical memory of early Islamic culture. In addition, Roded suggests that women played a key role in the preservation of oral tradition, which took on great significance as medieval scholars codified the *hadith* and the *sunna* and sought to locate every piece of information possible about the life of the Prophet. Roded proposes that “the pattern of having women surround a great man and then report on his words and deeds would be imitated in later generations, whether the man was a noted scholar, a sufi master, a ruler, or a prominent poet.”⁶ Accordingly, even women known for their contributions to more secular traditions, like poetry and music, attracted the attention of historians. Roded succinctly explains, “Although some of these women may not have been idealized role models [in a moral or religious sense], they are larger than life in their worldliness.”⁷ Roded's comment suggests that the established practice of writing about and memorializing outstanding female religious figures had the spillover benefit of creating a space for the commemoration of women who played prominent roles in secular spheres, thereby laying the groundwork for the inclusion of female scholars and slave women singers in biographical dictionaries.

Female poets and singers made their way into biographical dictionaries not merely because doing so represented an unconscious continuation of the phenomenon of memorializing female religious figures, but also because women were an important part of the landscape of Arabic performance culture, as musicians, singers, poets, and transmitters of musical styles. This dynamic is apparent in the works of Abu l-Faraj al-Isbahani, a tenth-century litterateur who was generally considered the foremost authority on musicians, singers, and poets in the medieval

² Wadad al-Qadi, “Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance” in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, edited by George Nicholas Atiyeh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 112.

³ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 1994), 55.

⁴ Roded, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

Islamicate world by his contemporaries and by subsequent generations of chroniclers and historians. Al-Isbahani's magnum opus, the *Kitab al-Aghani* (*The Book of Songs*), is a voluminous collection of anecdotes and commentary on music, poetry, and singers from pre-Islamic times to the early 'Abbasid era. The *Kitab al-Aghani* references numerous female figures—both free and slave—who played a role in the development of the Arab-Islamicate musical tradition.⁸

To be sure, women also figure into the *Kitab al-Aghani* somewhat tangentially as objects of affection in entries on famous male figures. At the same time, however, many women poets and performers receive their own profiles in the *Kitab al-Aghani* in which they are presented as valuable contributors to the Arabic musical tradition alongside their male counterparts.⁹ One famous ninth-century *qayna* named 'Arib, for example, is presented in the *Kitab al-Aghani* both as the lover of the poet-courtier Ibrahim ibn al-Mudabbir, and as “a skilled composer... an expert on tunes and melodic modes... [with] a vast knowledge of poetry and the different branches of culture.”¹⁰ Hilary Kilpatrick proposes that al-Isbahani also sought out women as sources of knowledge about the Arabic musical tradition: “Women singers were... knowledgeable about the musical tradition... As transmitters of tradition, older women were particularly valuable, and Abu l-Faraj knew a number of them.”¹¹ As Matthew Gordon observes, al-Isbahani takes pride in describing the “lay, secular culture” of the court, “in which the women singers played a cherished part.”¹² Moreover, al-Isbahani's work is permeated with a sense of melancholy and nostalgia: “Abu al-Faraj [al-Isbahani] is gloomy on the state of contemporary music, seeing a near collapse in the standards established by past, and probably, highly idealized generations of performers.”¹³ Al-Isbahani was certainly not the last medieval historian to present the history of Arabic music and poetry with a nostalgic overlay.

Because it is so thorough and encyclopedic, Al-Isbahani's *Kitab al-Aghani* became the prototype for many subsequent works on Arabic music and poetry. This is certainly true for Ibn al-Sa'i, who draws heavily on the *Kitab al-Aghani*, especially in his discussion of early 'Abbasid figures. *Consorts of the Caliphs*, however, spans four centuries of 'Abbasid history, from the 800s through the 1200s. For entries focusing on the later period, Ibn al-Sa'i employs his own observations and relies less on previous authors. Interestingly, the identificatory features of the women he profiles subtly evolve as the entries move forward through time. The earlier entries, depicting ninth through eleventh-century figures, are dominated by witty, unrestrained slave women, while the entries depicting individuals who lived closer to Ibn al-Sa'i's own time tend to be pious noblewomen, wives of caliphs, and women scholars.

⁸Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū L-Faraj Al-Isbahānī's Kitāb Al-Aghānī* (London: Routledge: 2003), 321-344. These pages contain a comprehensive list of the individuals referred to in al-Isbahani's *Kitab al-Aghani*. Due to the constraints of time and language, this thesis does not utilize al-Isbahani's 25-volume text as a primary source. Kilpatrick's *Making the Great Book of Songs*, however, is an extremely thorough synthesis of the *Kitab al-Aghani* and serves as my guide to the text. For those interested in the primary source itself, see Al-Isbahani, Abu-l-Faraj. *Kitab al-Aghani*. 23 vols. in 15. (Cairo: al-Mu'assasa al-Misriyya al-'Amma li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Tiba'a wa-l-Nashr, 1963-1964.)

⁹Kilpatrick, *Great Book of Songs*, 53. As Kilpatrick explains, “when read together, the profiles convey some important features of the evolution of music in the early Islamic period. They indicate the role of *mawali* [non-Arab client populations] and singing girls....”

¹⁰Quoted in Kilpatrick, *Great Book of Songs*, 53.

¹¹Kilpatrick, 47. Notably, al-Isbahani's patron, al-Muhallabi, also commissioned a book specifically focused on slave women poets—a text called *al-Ima' al-Shawa'ir* (*The Slave Poetesses*). This text was only discovered to be extant in the 1980s, and its recovery reinforces the idea that the topic of slave poetesses was intrinsically interesting to elite audiences in 'Abbasid society. A third work that touches on slave women poets, titled *al-Qiyan* is often attributed to al-Isbahani, but the extant manuscript is likely a more recent text written by someone else who quotes al-Isbahani. If al-Isbahani did write an earlier version of the same book, it has not yet been recovered.

¹²Matthew S. Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet: Al-Jahiz and the *Risalat al-qiyan*,” in *Al-Jahiz: A Muslim Humanist for Our Time*, eds. Arnim Heinemann, John L. Meloy, Tarif Khalidi, and Manfred Kropp (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 2009), 265.

¹³Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet,” 265.

This temporal and topical evolution in *Consorts of the Caliphs* brings up a number of interesting questions: if Ibn al-Sa'i's biographical dictionary is carefully and deliberately organized—as works in the genre of biographical dictionaries usually are—what overarching idea is he trying to convey? Did he approve of the witty, often irreverent, slave women of the early 'Abbasid period? Or was he trying to show that his own era was more sophisticated, because the women of his time were more pious, known for endowing law colleges and theological schools? Looking closely at the narrative with an eye for the historical context in which Ibn al-Sa'i lived and wrote, however, suggests that the essential point of his book was not to pass moral judgment on the characters and activities of the consorts of the caliphs, but rather to use the women of the court as signifiers of imperial grandeur, thereby establishing the legitimacy of his own era by interpolating the 'Abbasid resurgence of the twelfth century into a continuous history of 'Abbasid vibrancy.

For Ibn al-Sa'i and others of his ilk, the elaborateness of court culture was a useful metric for assessing the vibrancy of 'Abbasid caliphate. Imperial vitality might be measured more directly by assessing the “hard facts” of military success, political stability, and economic prosperity. These conditions fluctuated wildly during the tumultuous era of the 'Abbasid empire. Court culture, on the other hand, remained consistently lavish and decadent even as the political fortunes of the empire rose and fell. Focusing instead on the degree to which the court retained an aura of luxury and magnificence yielded a much more consistent picture of imperial stability. Women belonged—at least in theory—to the realm of leisure, entertainment, and pleasure, thus perfectly embodying courtly grandeur. To be sure, Muslim writers express a degree of moral ambivalence about the *qiyān* and their activities, but the figure of the singing girl nonetheless earned a place in the narrative as an indicator of imperial splendor.

Description of the Court Setting

Ibn al-Sa'i spends considerable time describing the opulence of the Golden Age 'Abbasid court, conjuring up an image of life in a jewel-encrusted world suffused with costly fragrances from far-flung regions of the world. Ibn al-Sa'i's account of the marriage between the caliph al-Ma'mun and the daughter of one of his viziers, Buran, vividly illustrates the aura of wealth and abundance that permeated ninth-century Baghdad. “On their wedding night,” Ibn al-Sa'i reports, “Buran's grandmother ceremonially bestrewed her with over a thousand large pearls from a golden tray...for the occasion, a candle of ambergris weighing seventy pounds was lit and set in a candelabrum made of gold.”¹⁴

In the early years of the 'Abbasid empire, there was a close, but sometimes contested, connection between the increasing affluence of the imperial elite and their development of a court culture that pushed the boundaries of Muslim propriety. It is in this context that a courtly entertaining class began to emerge as a social entity, attracting the wary patronage of the imperial elite and raising controversial questions about etiquette and morality. This dynamic is evident in an exchange between the Barmakid vizier Yahya ibn Khalid and his son, Ja'far ibn Yahya. Ibn al-Sa'i reports that Yahya ibn Khalid criticized his son for being too open about his opulent lifestyle. “If you can't enjoy your revelry and drink discreetly and keep your secrets hidden,” his father cautions him, “then build yourself a palace...where you can get together with your drinking companions and your singing girls...out of the public eye.”¹⁵ This story suggests that revelry, wine-drinking, and socializing with female performers was not uncommon, but also

¹⁴ Ibn al-Sa'i, 39. For additional descriptions of courtly decadence, see Ibn al-Sa'i, pages 41, 51, 83, 111, 117. English translations of Ibn al-Sa'i's *Consorts of the Caliphs* courtesy of the editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, who translated and compiled the bilingual (Arabic and English) edition of the text that I used.

¹⁵ Ibid 45. See also page 49.

reveals a pervading sense of anxiety around the irreverent appearance of this lifestyle and the desire on the part of the rulers to keep these activities somewhat out of the public eye. There is also something of a generation gap between Yahya ibn Khalid and his son, indicative of the tension between the first generation of ‘Abbasid revolutionaries, whose efforts to distinguish themselves from their Umayyad predecessors incentivized the promotion of piety, and the subsequent generations of ‘Abbasid rulers, who more openly embraced a court culture of leisure and luxury, featuring the notorious triumvirate of “wine, women, and song.”

Depictions of the “Consorts”

Ibn al-Sa’i typically begins his entries on slave women with a comment about their ethnic origins, their training, and the course of events that brought them to a particular caliph or courtier. His commentary on the ethnic origins of the slave women emphasizes the empire’s cosmopolitan character and its participation in global trade networks. According to sources quoted in *Consorts of the Caliphs*, slave women were obtained from regions as far away as the Byzantine Empire, the Hejaz, and Central Asia. Ibn al-Sa’i writes, for example, “Fadl was a slave of mixed parentage from Basra, where she was raised. She was born in al-Yamamah [in the Hejaz].”¹⁶ Similarly, we are informed that a slave by the name of Shahan “was a Byzantine slave belonging to Khata Khatun” and later given to the caliph al-Mustansir when he took office.¹⁷ Rather than presenting the women in isolation from their ethnic identities and communities of origin, Ibn al-Sa’i makes a point of identifying the origins of slave women, which positions the women as embodied evidence of ‘Abbasid cosmopolitanism.¹⁸

Often in the same breath as his commentary on ethnic origins, Ibn al-Sa’i describes the physical appearance of the women he profiles. For example, he writes, “Al-Natifi’s slave ‘Inan was a blonde of mixed parentage, brought up and trained in al-Yamamah.”¹⁹ Not only does Ibn al-Sa’i include objective facts about a woman’s appearance (the color of her hair and skin, for example), but he also includes references to subjective judgments about the magnitude of her beauty. Quoting an earlier biography of the *qayna* ‘Arib, he writes, “I never saw a more beautiful or refined woman than ‘Arib...”²⁰ Throughout the text, there is a general sense that a woman’s physical beauty complements and enhances her poetic talent and makes her a more valuable entertainer. Ibn al-Sa’i describes the *qayna* Mahbuba by writing, “Mahbuba...was the foremost of her generation as both a poet and as a singer. She had a beautiful face and voice...as one of a group of four hundred slaves...she surpassed them all.”²¹ For Ibn al-Sa’i, Mahbuba’s status as an exceptional *qayna* was the product of the combined power of her beautiful face and lovely voice.²²

Surprisingly, perhaps, Ibn al-Sa’i’s focus on physical appearance is actually quite minimal, often presented in conjunction with—and at times even overshadowed by—his discussions of their poetic abilities and intellectual accomplishments. In some instances, in fact, discussions of intelligence are actually given precedence over descriptions of physical traits. For instance, in his entry on Qatr al-Nada, Ibn al-Sa’i makes no mention of the woman’s physical appearance, but we are informed that she is one of the most “intelligent and regal women who ever lived.”²³ Similarly, Ibn al-Sa’i states that Fadl al-Sha’irah al-Yamamah was “dark-skinned,

¹⁶ Ibid, 65

¹⁷ Ibid, 121.

¹⁸ For more examples of instances in which Ibn al-Sa’i describes ethnic origins, see Ibn al-Sa’i, pp. 11, 111, 115, 127, 129, 135, and 139.

¹⁹ Ibid, 11.

²⁰ Ibid, 27.

²¹ Ibid, 77.

²² In like manner, a *qayna* named Haylana is described as “extraordinarily lovely and accomplished.” See Ibn al-Sa’i, 23.

²³ Ibid, 99.

cultured, elegant, and could think on her feet. Poetry came naturally to her, and she was better at it than all the women of her time.”²⁴ This comment demonstrates the integration of physical and intellectual characteristics that is typical of Ibn al-Sa’i’s style. Throughout the book, descriptions of physical appearance compete for attention with remarks about intelligence, quick-wittedness, and artistic talent.²⁵

The ability of the *qiyān* to generate extemporaneous compositions and engage in witty repartee was a vital skill, and being asked to spontaneously “cap” an unfinished verse was the quintessential test of their poetic acumen. Not surprisingly, the verse-capping exercise plays a central role in Ibn al-Sa’i’s text. In his account of the caliph al-Mu’tamid’s purchase of a *qayna* named Nabt, for example, Ibn al-Sa’i reports that the caliph tested her singing and calligraphy skills. He then asked a renowned male poet to assign her a verse to cap. Only when she had demonstrated her proficiency in verse capping and extemporaneous composition did the Caliph commit to purchasing her.²⁶ Throughout the book, Ibn al-Sa’i’s complimentary depiction of a particular *qayna* is consistently presented in conjunction with his commentary on her ability to successfully complete a “verse-capping” exercise. The accounts of Fadl al-Sha’irah al-Yamamiyyah and ‘Inan, two of the most famous *qiyān* poets, for example, consist of a series of anecdotes recounting their sophisticated responses to would-be challengers who assign them verses to cap. In both entries, Ibn al-Sa’i’s depiction of their impressive performance in verse-capping exercises confirms the validity of the praise he confers on the poetesses.²⁷

That Ibn al-Sa’i is interested in highlighting the intellectual and poetic skills of the *qiyān* is further demonstrated by the fact that he transmits commentary from renowned male poets who enthusiastically praise the talents of slave women poets. Echoing al-Isbahani, Ibn al-Sa’i reports that, upon hearing ‘Inan extemporaneously recite verses, the famous male poet Marwan Ibn Abi Hafsah declared, “If any man or jinn alive is a greater poet than she, I’ll free every single slave I own!”²⁸ Ibn al-Sa’i uses this anecdote to support his own assertion that “‘Inan was the first poet to become famous under the ‘Abbasids and the most gifted poet of her generation. The major male poets of the time would seek her out in her master’s house where they would recite their verses to her and have her pass judgment.”²⁹ Together, these statements suggest that Ibn al-Sa’i wanted to deliberately emphasize the talents of *qiyān* like ‘Inan, both in terms of their own merits, and in terms of their abilities relative to the best male poets of the time.³⁰

Gender Dynamics

The theme of comparing the *qiyān* to famous male poets is evident in Ibn al-Sa’i’s portrayal of the ways in which female poets participated in and excelled in pursuits typically associated with the male sphere. For example, the renowned Persian musician, Ishaq al-Mawsili, who performed for Harun al-Rashid’s court, said of the *qayna* ‘Arib al-Ma’muniyyah, “I never saw a more beautiful or refined woman than ‘Arib, nor one who sang, played music, wrote poetry, or played chess so well. She possessed every quality of elegance and skill one could wish for in a woman.”³¹ Ishaq al-Mawsili’s likening of traditionally male activities—poetry

²⁴ Ibid, 65.

²⁵ See also Ibn al-Sa’i, 57, 93, 105.

²⁶ Ibid, 91. Another example of the verse-capping dynamic can be seen on page 13: “I heard someone say: while I was leafing through some books, I came upon a verse that I was hoping someone could cap, but however hard I tried, I couldn’t find anyone. A friend said to me, ‘You should go see ‘Inan, al-Natifi’s slave.’ So I did, and I recited the verse to her: ‘He complained of love so long / that his whole body sighed and spoke.’ Without a moment’s hesitation she rejoined with: ‘He weeps and pitying him I weep / he weeps tears, but on tears of blood I choke.’”

²⁷ Ibid, 11-19, 65-73, and 91.

²⁸ Ibid, 13.

²⁹ Ibid, 11.

³⁰ For similar examples, see Ibn al-Sa’i, 23, 27, 33, 65, 73, 81.

³¹ Ibid, 27.

composition and chess—with the most desirable characteristics any one “could wish for in a woman” suggests that the desirable characteristics of slave women poets were not confined to “feminine” activities.

The inversion of conventional gender dynamics manifests itself throughout *Consorts of the Caliphs*. On multiple occasions, in fact, Ibn al-Sa’i describes scenes in which female poets humiliate talented male poets by outdoing them in composition and verse-capping. For example, Ibn al-Sa’i reports that the caliph al-Mutawakkil asked his friend ‘Ali ibn al-Jahm, a well-respected poet, to compose verses about an experience he found particularly moving. Meanwhile, the *qayna* Mahbuba was “sitting behind [a] curtain, listening to [them] talk, and in the time it took for an inkstand and a scroll of paper to be brought and for ‘Ali to formulate his thoughts, she had already improvised” an exceptionally beautiful poem that perfectly captured the feeling al-Mutawakkil was trying to express. Ibn al-Sa’i concludes, “‘Ali ibn al-Jahm was dumbfounded at being upstaged like this.”³²

‘Ali Ibn al-Jahm is not the only male poet in Ibn al-Sa’i’s account upstaged and humiliated by an accomplished slave woman poet. The exchange between Ibn al-Tahir, a ninth-century Baghdadi poet and a *qayna* named Nabt is another example of Ibn al-Sa’i’s depiction of the *qiyana* as exceptionally talented women who could easily hold their own among—if not triumph over—free-born male poets. Ibn al-Tahir asks Nabt to cap a half-line of poetry he has composed. Ibn al-Tahir pronounces, ‘Nabt, your beauty outshines the moonlight.’ She responds, “and your beauty all but robs me of my sight.” When Ibn al-Tahir pauses “to compose the next half line,” Nabt beats him to it with the verses, “Your perfume is sweet as musk, / a breath from gardens in dawn’s dim light.” After Nabt’s second set of verses Ibn al-Tahir once again stops to gather his thoughts, but before he can open his mouth again, Nabt beats him to the next verse. According to Ibn al-Sa’i’s source, Ibn al-Tahir “got up and left” in humiliation.³³

Even in the absence of outright competition, Ibn al-Sa’i indicates that some of the best *qiyana* were considered by their male counterparts to be pioneers of cutting-edge poetic styles. He recounts a conversation between the vizier Ibrahim Ibn al-Mudabir and the poet Sa’id ibn Humayd, in which Ibrahim ibn al-Mudabir suggests that Sa’id ibn Humayd has been writing letters on behalf of the *qayna* Fadl. “‘A nice thought!’” Sa’id ibn Humayd is said to have replied, “‘If only she were getting it from me. No, in fact, I’m the one who has been imitating her style, cribbing from her letters. My friend, if the most talented and senior state secretaries were to imitate her, by God, it would set a whole new standard!’”³⁴ Not only does Sa’id ibn Humayd admit to copying Fadl’s work, but he places her above the “most talented senior state secretaries” in skill, identifying her as a standard-setter in the highly literate world of ninth-century Baghdad.

Social Status

Consorts of the Caliphs sheds light on the degree to which social mobility accompanied the experience of being an elite slave in the medieval Islamic world. Ibn al-Sa’i identifies slave women who possessed their own slaves, were given monetary rewards for exceptional compositions or performances, and were granted their freedom. When the *qayna* Bid’ah composed a verse that especially pleased the Caliph al-Mu’tadid, for instance, he “rewarded her with a magnificent gift and sent her home with many fine clothes and perfumes.”³⁵ Other slave women profiled in *Consorts of the Caliphs*, such as ‘Inan and Hayat Khatun, were manumitted

³² Ibid, 81.

³³ Ibid, 93.

³⁴ Ibid, 71.

³⁵ Ibid, 35.

upon the deaths of their owners.³⁶ At other points in the text, we learn that some women, though they were slaves themselves, also possessed their own entourage of servants and slaves. Bid'ah al-Kabira, for example, is described as the slave of 'Arib, who was herself a slave belonging to the caliph al-Ma'mun.³⁷

Ibn al-Sa'i's account of a slave's slave who is given the latitude to choose whether she consents to be sold epitomizes the potential for the *qiyan* to claim some agency over their lives. He writes, "Ishaq ibn Ayyub al-Ghalibi paid Bid'ah's mistress 'Arib one hundred thousand dinars for her...When 'Ali ibn Yahya brought the matter up with 'Arib, she summoned Bid'ah, introduced them, and asked her, 'Do you consent, and do you choose to be sold?' Bid'ah let her know that she did not, so 'Arib returned the money and freed her on the spot."³⁸ Ibn al-Sa'i's book deliberately emphasizes the multifaceted social status of the *qiyan* and suggests that the designation of "slave" encompassed a degree of social mobility and the ability to exert power over other slaves and servants, as well as some personal agency.³⁹

Although *Consorts of the Caliphs* reveals that a degree of social mobility was available to the *qiyan*, it also underscores the ways in which their position in society remained a precarious one. Despite the advantages they enjoyed, each *qayna* was ultimately the "property" of her owner, and as such, could be shuttled about from one caliph to his successor, sold on the slave market, and occasionally subjected to physical abuse if she disobeyed her master. The transference of *qiyan* from one caliph to his successor is evident in the following passage: "the slaves of al-Mutawakkil were divided up after his death. Several of them, including Mahbubah ended up going to [his successor] Wasif."⁴⁰

Ibn al-Sa'i also speaks to the imposition of physical violence against the *qiyan*. For instance, he conveys the following story from Marwan ibn Abi Hafsah: "One day I ran into al-Natifi, who invited me to come and meet 'Inan. We went into his house and he entered her room ahead of me saying, 'Look, I've brought you the greatest poet of all—Marwan ibn 'Ali Hafsah!' 'Inan was not feeling well and said, 'I have other things than Marwan to worry about right now!' Al-Natifi struck her with his whip."⁴¹ Ibn al-Sa'i's dispassionate, matter-of-fact tone in relaying this story suggests that the use of physical discipline to control slave women was not a particularly surprising occurrence and reminds us that, although the *qiyan* may have been clever and confident, the privileged position they enjoyed could be easily disrupted.⁴²

Political Influence

Ibn al-Sa'i makes it clear that the women of the court were not limited in their sphere of influence solely to the realm of entertainment and sexual companionship. He describes multiple instances in which *qiyan*, concubines, and wives used their influence over caliphs to access political power. First of all, marriage was a valuable means of establishing important kinship ties between caliphs and other important social and political groups. As a result, the brides in these strategic alliances held an implicit degree of power and prestige. When the caliph al-Ma'mun married Buran, daughter of the Persian governor al-Hasan ibn Sahl, for instance, the marriage strengthened the relationship between the caliph and al-Hasan, as evidenced by the economic arrangements that following the wedding: "Al-Ma'mun remained with his father-in-law al-Hasan

³⁶ Ibid, 11 and 127.

³⁷ Ibid, 33. Other slave women profiled in *Consorts of the Caliphs* who owned slaves themselves include Khallafah, a concubine/dependent of the caliph al-Mu'tamid (page 95), and a slave woman named Faridah, who had her own servants (page 31).

³⁸ Ibid, 33.

³⁹ For more examples of social mobility, see Ibn al-Sa'i, 35, 69, and 127.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 83.

⁴¹ Ibid, 13.

⁴² For additional examples of the precariousness of the *qayna*'s position in society, see Ibn al-Sa'i, 15 and 59.

ibn Sahl for seventeen days. Al-Hasan provided al-Ma'mun with all his needs for every single day and also distributed ceremonial robes, horses, and cash to the caliph's commanders, each according to his rank." In return, al-Ma'mun left, "ordered that ten thousand dirhams from the tax revenues of Fars be sent to al-Hasan. Al-Ma'mun also granted him the revenues of the district of al-Sihl."⁴³ This type of economic alliance was particularly important given that effective administration of the empire required "buy-in" from intermediaries who ensured that taxes were collected at the provincial level and conveyed to the court's imperial capital.

According to al-Sa'i's report, Buran shrewdly used her privileged position as a bride in a politically strategic marriage to advocate on behalf of her own family, and to ingratiate herself with her new mother-in-law. Upon marrying al-Ma'mun, Buran was given the chance to tell the caliph what she wanted for a wedding present. She requested the pardoning of her uncle, Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi, and she "also asked him to grant his stepmother Zubayda permission to perform the hajj."⁴⁴ The caliph agreed to both requests. Interestingly, Ibn al-Sa'i specifically links Ibrahim al-Mahdi's pardoning to Buran's intervention—which suggests that she commanded an impressive degree of influence, especially given that Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi had challenged al-Ma'mun's authority during the 'Abbasid civil war. Evidently, the political significance of the wedding, which bolstered the alliance between Baghdad and Persia, imbued Buran—the physical embodiment of this strategic alliance—with enough authority to spare her uncle from execution.

Some women profiled in *Consorts of the Caliphs* exert influence more subtly by wielding their charisma and sex appeal over their owners. Ibn al-Sa'i writes of one *qayna*, Shahan, for instance, that she "became [the caliph's] concubine and achieved a level of favor and intimacy that no one else could attain. Shahan went on to hold her own independent court and had a fiscal office, agents, functionaries, servants, and a splendid retinue. She spent liberally from her funds just as she pleased, and her authority on all matters was unquestioned."⁴⁵ Evidently, Shahan's unusually authoritative presence was linked to her sexuality. On the other hand, however, Ibn al-Sa'i indicates that a woman by the name of Banafsha was known for both power and piety. He writes, "The caliph held her in high regard and included her as part of his inner circle. She had authority and real power. She was also a godly, magnanimous woman who did all manner of good works and pious deeds."⁴⁶ As these divergent examples indicate, Ibn al-Sa'i associates the attainment and exercise of political power by women with physical attractiveness and sexual desirability in one instance, and with piety and generosity in another.

Ibn al-Sa'i points out not only the subtle ways in which women of the court could gain power and influence, but also their more overtly political roles. Ibn al-Sa'i notes that slave women could also attain status and influence by bearing a son to the caliph, through which act they become an "*umm walad*," ("mother of a son"). In some cases, this resulted in women effectively acting as rulers. We are told of one such situation in which Khatun, the wife of Sultan Malik Shah and "the mother of Sultan Mahmud, whose father passed away while he was still a boy," came to hold the reigns of political power. Ibn al-Sa'i explains that the child sultan acceded "to the royal throne under the regency of his mother, who had in her service ten thousand Turkic slave soldiers. She directed the affairs of the state and commanded the military until she passed away."⁴⁷ Although this anecdote is just one instance of a woman (who was already the wife of a sultan) commanding the empire, it is worth noting that Ibn al-Sa'i describes

⁴³ Ibn al-Sa'i, 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 121.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 111.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 143. (Emphasis added).

her accession to authority as a positive accomplishment worthy of earning her a place in his history of the women he designates the “famous favorites.”⁴⁸

Overarching Narrative of Ibn al-Sa’i’s Text

The “consorts of the caliphs,” as they appear in Ibn al-Sa’i’s narrative, are active participants in the cultural and political life of the ‘Abbasid court. They are highly accomplished artists and *litterateurs* whose verses and voices animated the *mujalasa*t of the ‘Abbasid caliphs. In his book, Ibn al-Sa’i provides a picture of the *qiyana* that embraces the complexities and ambiguities of their status. Singing slave women hearken from far-flung corners of the world and are displayed publicly for sale, yet they also come to take up residence within the secluded orbit of the palace, while also remaining public figures who attract the attention of famous poets. Ibn al-Sa’i emphasizes both their physical beauty and intellectual capacities, suggesting that the two characteristics could coexist within the same woman.

Ibn al-Sa’i establishes the intellectual sharpness of the *qiyana* by recalling moments when the poetesses inverted conventional gender dynamics by humiliating the most highly esteemed male poets of their times, and *qiyana* such as Fadl are cast as the “standard-setters” of literary production, vaunted above the best of the state secretaries. *Consorts of the Caliphs* offers a glimpse of both the social mobility and the precariousness of the *qayna*’s status. The *qayna*’s political power may derive from her sexuality, as in the case of Shahan (the caliph’s favorite concubine), or it may be the result of her piety, as in the case of Banafsha, the pious benefactor. Ibn al-Sa’i weaves this diversity into a single narrative, underpinned by the motive he cites in the very beginning of the book: to write about the “famous favorites, whether consorts or concubines of caliphs.”⁴⁹ Each of the women profiled in his text shares the distinction of being one of the “famous favorites,” regardless of the individual paths taken to reach this point.

Al-Jahiz’s Epistle on Singing Girls

Born in Basra in the 770s, Abu ‘Uthman ‘Amr Ibn Bahr al-Jahiz was a ninth-century Arabic prose writer who lived most of his life in Baghdad and Samarra.⁵⁰ He was a proponent of Mu’tazilite theology, which integrated a religious emphasis on the absolute unity of God and the createdness of the Qur’an with the Greek intellectual tradition’s emphasis on logical reasoning.⁵¹ Mu’tazilism reflected “the desire to use Greek concepts and methods of argument in defense of Islam.”⁵² The Mu’tazilites employed logical reasoning, and sought to engage in a “systemic, rational treatment of religious beliefs.”⁵³ Al-Jahiz wrote prolifically on a wide range of topics, producing over 240 individual texts, ranging from treatises on logical epistemology and Islamic law to discussions of physical deformities and an essay weighing the respective merits of intimate relations with slave-girls versus slave-boys.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ For more on women’s influence over powerful men, see Ibn al-Sa’i, 81, 97, 111, 115, 117, 123, 127, 129, and 143.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁰ For a classic—if dated—overview of al-Jahiz’s life and works, see Charles Pellat *The Life and Works of Jahiz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). See also: Ignacio Sanchez, “Reading ‘Adab as Fiqh’: al-Jahiz’s Singing Girls and the Limits of Legal Reasoning,” *Bulletin d’etudes orientales* 60 (2011): 203-221; James E. Montgomery, “Beeston and the Singing-Girls,” *Proceedings for the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006): 17-24; and Matthew S. Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet: Al-Jahiz and the *Risalat al-qiyana*,” in *Al-Jahiz: A Muslim Humanist for Our Time*, eds. Armin Heinemann, John L. Meloy, Tarif Khalidi, and Manfred Kropp (Beirut: Beirut Texts and Studies, 2009), 254-268.

⁵¹ Kennedy, *When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World*, 250.

⁵² Vernon Egger, *A History of the Muslim World to 1405: The Making of a Civilization* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2003), 134.

⁵³ Egger, 134.

⁵⁴ James Montgomery, “Beeston and the Singing Girls,” *Proceedings for the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 36 (2006): 17-24.

The *Epistle on Singing Girls* is a satirical essay in which Al-Jahiz impersonates a group of *qiyān* owners writing to “defend” the practice of holding of singing slave girls against “undiscerning” critics who fail to recognize the “moral legitimacy” of the institution.⁵⁵ Since the work is satire, the purported argument of the text runs counter to al-Jahiz’s intended message. The true point of the *Epistle*, of course, is not to defend the institution of the singing slave girls, but to critique it, which is made clear by Al-Jahiz’s rhetorical strategy—which involves presenting a solid, logically sound argument against the institution of the *qiyān* and then dismissing it with a deliberately foolish, illogical response. Matthew Gordon describes the *Epistle* as a “polyphonic” text, meaning that al-Jahiz “employs overlapping, interacting ‘voices’ (read: perspectives) on the question of the *qiyān* and the passions to which they give rise among their male associates and handlers.”⁵⁶ Ultimately, these diverse voices “cancel themselves out in the wielding of specious and contradictory evidence,” revealing that the arguments for the institution of *qiyān* ownership are absurd.⁵⁷

Reading al-Jahiz’s Satire

In order to explain the real message that al-Jahiz intends to convey with his *Epistle*, it is important to first understand the “façade argument” that he places in the mouths of the *qiyān* owners. Al-Jahiz begins the text with an address to the reader indicating that the “authors” of the text are “people who enjoy prosperity, whose choice is pleasure, and who are well provided with singing girls and companions who furnish regular banquets and wines.”⁵⁸ He assumes the identity of upper class *qiyān* owners—not the caliphs and courtiers who also associated with *qiyān*, but the “middlemen,” those who trained, traded, and sold singing girls.⁵⁹ Al-Jahiz goes on to state (from the perspective of the supposed authors of the text), “We have set down in this letter of ours some arguments against him who reproaches us for possessing singing girls, and abuses us for carousing with our friends, and resents our displaying and talking about our prosperity.”⁶⁰ Only a paragraph into the text, al-Jahiz is already lampooning the *qiyān* owners by arguing that these upper class businessmen are “the victims of aggression,” subject to attack by those of less means who are jealous of their prosperity.

To defend and justify the institution of the *qiyān*, the purported authors of the text deploy a variety of arguments—including religious arguments based on the authority of the Qur’an and the Hadith, justifications based on human nature, and references to historical precedent. For example, the *Epistle* defends the *qiyān* institution by observing that because the Qur’an does not explicitly prohibit social interactions between men and women, such interactions are *implicitly* licit. “Everything which is not prohibited in God’s Book and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet is free [not forbidden],” the *Epistle* states, and since the Qur’an is God’s word, “human disapproval provides no basis for argument.”⁶¹ Therefore, he suggests, the institution of the *qiyān*, which simply provides opportunities for men to be entertained by singing women, need not be condemned. The *Epistle* further dismisses any religiously-motivated critique by suggesting that being entertained by singing slave girls is not more inherently distracting to one’s religious practice than anything else: “We find many things, such as tales, food, drink, the visual

⁵⁵ Al-Jahiz, *Epistle on the Singing Girls*, trans. A.F.L. Beeston. (Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd., 1980).

⁵⁶ Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet,” 258.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Al-Jahiz, 12.

⁵⁹ This distinction is important, because al-Jahiz was patronized by caliphs and courtiers, and he would have needed to tread carefully so as not to insult his patrons.

⁶⁰ Al-Jahiz, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

enjoyment of gardens and bouquets, hunting, sex and other pleasures, which divert and distract one from the contemplation of God.”⁶²

The text uses the actions of the companions of the Prophet and other well-regarded religious figures to further bolster the religious defense. Al-Jahiz cites the claim that the caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khatib did not object when ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib saw and spoke with ‘Umar’s bride, ‘Atikah, before their wedding. Al-Jahiz argues, “if looking at, and talking and joking with [women] had been occasions of jealousy, certainly ‘Umar would have been the first to object...on account his being particularly jealous; if it had been illicit, he would have prevented it, since there is no doubt of his puritanical respectability and his competence in legal knowledge.”⁶³ There is an obvious discrepancy here between a man speaking with a woman in the context of a wedding and the phenomenon of men frequenting *qiyān* houses and profiting from the training and sale of slave women entertainers.⁶⁴

In addition to constructing a “defense” based on a distorted interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, al-Jahiz satirically extrapolates liberally from assumptions about human nature to explain why associations between men and women are necessary and innate. Al-Jahiz purports to argue, for example, “women are ‘tillage ground’ for men, just as herbage is a provision for...animals.”⁶⁵ In a similar vein, he suggests sarcastically that men’s liaisons with women—were it not for the unfortunate necessity of “keeping offspring free from adulterous parentage and of [ensuring] the falling of inheritances to the right heirs”—ought to be entirely unrestricted, just as “no beast is better entitled than another to graze the pastures watered by the rains.”⁶⁶ One of the prevailing narratives about the emergence of Islam is the idea that Muhammad’s revelations brought order and morality to a people who lived in a state of ignorance (*jahiliyya*). The uncontested idea that the Qur’an encouraged morality and modesty would make the uncritical likening of human sexuality to animals driven by carnal instincts antithetical to the mores of Islam. The cartoonish quality of this “defense” would not have been lost on al-Jahiz’s contemporaries.

Similarly, justifying the institution of the *qiyān* by pointing to the practices of pre-Islamic Bedouins would have been equally ludicrous in an Islamic society in which the customs of pre-Islamic Arabia (especially those governing sexuality and morality) were viewed with suspicion as the unenlightened ways of an ignorant people. Capitalizing on this irony, al-Jahiz invokes historical precedent to “justify” socializing between men and women as a legitimate tradition in Arab society. He writes, “Among Bedouin men and women there was no veiling of women...they were accustomed to [gather] for conversation and evening parties, and might pair off for whispering and joking...all this would take place under the eyes of the woman’s guardians or in the presence of her husband.”⁶⁷

Al-Jahiz further “defends” the *qiyān* institution by asserting that there is nothing inherently wrong with singing and that the institution of patronizing singing slave girls is rooted in established historical precedent. The irony of this argument would have been clear to al-Jahiz’s contemporaries, as he once again cites the practice of non-Muslim Persians and Greeks.

⁶² Ibid, 24. Similar statements are made on pages 15 and 20.

⁶³ Ibid, 18-19.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 34. Al-Jahiz also uses a deliberately out-of-context Hadith quote to defend the possession of singing slave girls, writing, for example, “Nor is...[their duplicity] any criticism of them, but the highest praise, for we find in the Tradition, ‘The best of your women are the charmers and deceivers.’”

⁶⁵ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 15. Al-Jahiz continues, “The sky and all that the regions of the earth contain and all that the earth’s wide spaces carry, are for a man chattel and a ‘usufruct for time.’ But of all things subservient to his use, the closest to his spirit and the most akin to his soul is the feminine creature; since she was created for him ‘that he might find solace in her.’”

⁶⁷ Ibid, 16.

He observes, “Singing slave girls have been from time immemorial in the entourage of Arab and non-Arab kings. The Persians regarded singing as a polite accomplishment, the Greeks as philosophy.”⁶⁸ Given the prevailing notion that the pre-Islamic and non-Islamic practices were steeped in moral impropriety, it is clear the use of pre-Islamic, Persian, and Greek examples as evidence in favor of a moral argument for the permissibility of the *qiyān* helps al-Jahiz underhandedly critique the institution of *qiyān* ownership while superficially appearing to justify it.⁶⁹

The final tenet of Al-Jahiz’s satirical defense of the *qiyān* institution is his suggestion that the practice of selling *qiyān* to infatuated men solves the problem of illicit sexual relations, because it forces men to pursue *licit* encounters with women through the legitimate purchase of the women rather than through informal love affairs. This process, we are told, “frustrates the devil” and promotes morally respectable sexual encounters. In discussing the behavior of men who associate with *qiyān*, al-Jahiz comments, “his captivation by, and addiction to, singing girls is the very thing in his behavior which is productive of good.”⁷⁰ Although the man may initially pursue the singing girl out of lust, he will inevitably encounter “the carefulness of the owners, the watchfulness of the custodians, and the strictness of the seclusion in which the girls are kept,” creating a situation in which “the lover is forced in the end to making a purchase; whereby sexual intercourse becomes licit and the Devil is the frustrated one.”⁷¹ In reality, of course, one of the main criticisms of the *qiyān* institution was that it was really only a thinly veiled form of prostitution. Although a man is permitted by Islamic law to pursue a sexual relationship with his slave girl, the act of paying for a temporary liaison with a professional singer, who also happens to be a slave, reads much more like prostitution than the licit purchase of a slave girl.

Al-Jahiz’s Intended Argument

After setting up his “defense” of the *qiyān* institution as an elaborate “straw-man argument,” Al-Jahiz condemns passionate love as a malady of the spirit. It is this section where his true voice and opinions are to be found. Al-Jahiz sees the passion of love as a “malady which cannot be controlled,” and he explains that “passion is compounded of love and infatuation and natural affinity and habitude of association. It begins with a growing intensity, reaches a climax, and then falls off by natural progression to the stage of complete dissolution and the point of positive revulsion.”⁷² The association between passionate love and bodily ills was not an uncommon concept among medieval philosophers, especially the Mu’tazilites, who valued rationality over emotion.⁷³ This classically Socratic sentiment also points to the impact of Graeco-Arabic translation movement discussed earlier.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 22-23. An additional defense is offered which suggests that singing is not inherently objectionable: “We can see no harm in singing, since it is basically only poetry clothed with melody. If [the poetry] is truthful, it is good; if false, then evil. The Prophet has said, “Some poetry is true wisdom. ‘Umar b. al-Khatib said, ‘Poetry is but a form of speech; that which is [as speech] is good, is good [in verse], and that which is evil, evil... If it be allowed that speech as such is not a prohibited thing, the addition of metre and rhyme to it cannot by any possible argument entail making it prohibited.”

⁶⁹ Furthermore, Matthew Gordon points out that al-Jahiz had a particular dislike for the Persian nobility, because they were associated with the Shu’ubi movement—a reactionary movement led by non-Arab Muslims who resented Arab claims to superiority. In support of this movement, certain Persian Muslims began to champion their Persian heritage, using it to challenge Arab hegemony. See Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet,” 259.

⁷⁰ Al-Jahiz, 27.

⁷¹ Ibid, 27.

⁷² Ibid, 39. Similarly, on page 27, al-Jahiz elaborates, stating, “Now I will describe for you the definition of the passion of love, so that you may understand exactly what it is. It is a malady which smites the spirit, and affect the body as well by contagion, just as physical weakness impairs the spirit and low spirits in a man make him emaciated. Love sickness and its general effect throughout the body is due to the position of the heart in relation to the limbs. The difficulty of curing it arises from the variousness of its causes. For it is compounded of a number of aspects: like a fever attack which is compounded of cold and phlegm, so that anyone who attempts only increase the malady caused by the other element. The stronger the constituent causes of the malady are, the more inveterate it is, and the slower it is to clear up.”

⁷³ Ibid, 27-28.

Al-Jahiz goes on to reveal his true conviction that the dangerousness of singing girls stems from the ways in which they manipulate male susceptibility to feminine charm, knowing that men will succumb to the malady of passionate love. According to al-Jahiz, the attractiveness and talent of singing girls is an irresistible temptation for male onlookers. He warns that “passion for singing girls is dangerous, in view of their manifold tendencies and the satisfaction one’s soul finds in them. They provide a man with a combination of pleasures [sight, hearing, and touch] such as nothing else on the face of the earth does.”⁷⁴ Another reason for the dangerousness of the singing girls, al-Jahiz writes, is their manipulative and duplicitous nature. “Most singing girls are insincere,” declares al-Jahiz, “and given to employing deceit and trickery in squeezing out the property of the deluded victim and then abandoning him.”⁷⁵

Despite his warnings about the dangers of feminine manipulation and duplicity, Al-Jahiz suggests that it is not the women themselves who ought to be blamed for their morally dubious behavior, but rather the environment in which they were brought up. “Their origins in pimping houses throw them unto the arms of fornicators,” he remarks, “How, indeed...it possible for [a singing girl] to be chaste? It is in the very place where she is brought up that she acquires unbridled desires, and learns her modes of speech and behavior.”⁷⁶ The real villains, al-Jahiz argues, are the profiteering *qiyan* owners. He denounces the *qiyan* merchants for charging infatuated men exorbitant prices to “rent out” their *qiyan*. The *qiyan*, in turn, manipulatively feign true love for the duped men in order to extract more gifts and money from them: “The owner of singing-girls...takes the substance and gives the appearance, gets the real thing and gives the shadow, and sells the gusty wind for solid ore and pieces of silver and gold.”⁷⁷ As these comments indicate, al-Jahiz places a significant portion of blame for the morally suspect nature of the *qiyan* institution on the owners rather than on the women themselves.

Overarching Narrative of Al-Jahiz’s Text

Embedded within Al-Jahiz’s satirical defense of the patronage of singing girls is a pointed critique of the culture of the *qiyan* institution. For instance, Al-Jahiz’s justification based on misinterpreted Qur’anic evidence suggests that he intended to convey precisely the *opposite* idea—that the institution of the *qiyan* was religiously impermissible. Even if no *explicit* prohibition can be found in the Qur’an, al-Jahiz indicates that it can be assumed through logical inference that patronizing singing slave women is—if not explicitly, then at least indirectly—precluded by Islamic sexual mores. Similarly, he indicates that there is no real support in the Hadith nor in the examples of truly pious Muslims for legitimately associating with singing girls. We can also infer that al-Jahiz similarly disapproved of using non-Islamic Persian and Greek culture, as well as pre-Islamic Arab practices, to justify the *qiyan* tradition, since both of these cultural systems are outside the ambit of Muslim morality and Arab hegemony. Al-Jahiz further indicates that the *qiyan* appeal to man’s baser instincts and his animal desires rather than his reasoning mind. Given his Mu’tazilite emphasis on reason and his rejection of passionate love, al-Jahiz indicates that encounters with the *qiyan* are not only immoral, but also dangerously destabilizing.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 34. He expresses similar ideas on page 31.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 34.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 36-37.

Comparing the Narratives of Ibn al-Sa'i and al-Jahiz

Both Ibn al-Sa'i and al-Jahiz focus on the role of slave women poets in 'Abbasid society. The difference, however, between Ibn al-Sa'i's complimentary portrayal of the *qiyān* and al-Jahiz's critical view of the institution is striking. In part, al-Jahiz's critical view may reflect the fact that he was not describing the elite, imperial institution of *qiyān* ownership, but rather the "low-brow" brothel-like operations in which "owners actively used their *qiyān* for personal gain by extracting gifts and various forms of payment from admirers."⁷⁸ There are other factors, however, that also explain his unfavorable portrayal of the *qiyān*. Examining the historical and intellectual context within which each author operated helps explain this difference. Ibn al-Sa'i praises the accomplishments of women poets as he reminisces nostalgically about the former glory of the 'Abbasid empire from his position as a historian in the late 1250s, when the 'Abbasid world had lost much of its "golden" glow. Al-Jahiz, on the other hand, lived in the midst of the ninth century during a time when the Muslim community was experiencing the growing pains of rapid expansion, urbanization, and cultural evolution.⁷⁹ As a social critic writing about his own society, al-Jahiz was not susceptible to the sense of nostalgia that permeated Ibn al-Sa'i's era in the thirteenth century. As Hugh Kennedy aptly notes, "nobody ever knows they are living in a golden age until it is over and they can look back and realize what has been lost."⁸⁰

In her introduction to *Consorts of the Caliphs*, Julia Bray posits that Ibn al-Sa'i's text is a work of 'Abbasid loyalism. She explains, "about one third of all the writings ascribed to him were devoted to the 'Abbasids," and many of them were "designed to please" and act "as propaganda for current members of the ruling house."⁸¹ Ibn al-Sa'i may have had a personal stake in cultivating the favor of the rulers. After all, the caliphs provided endowments to libraries, and Ibn al-Sa'i was a librarian in two law colleges. For beneficiaries of these endowments, the practice of writing books favorable to the ruling establishment was a way of "ingratiating themselves with the ruler."⁸² The relevant question, as Bray observes, is how a book on early 'Abbasid slave women fits into "the program of glorifying the dynasty's virtues."⁸³

Written in the thirteenth century, but focusing primarily on the dynamics of ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-century Baghdad, *Consorts of the Caliphs* is a retrospective text, and Ibn al-Sa'i directs a nostalgic gaze back at the history of the 'Abbasid dynasty. From the perspective of a thirteenth-century Baghdadi *adib*, the literary efflorescence of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries would have been an enticing age to recall with nostalgia. Although Baghdad in Ibn al-Sa'i's time was a shadow of the powerful urban center and cultural hub it had been in the ninth century, the 'Abbasid empire of the mid-thirteenth-century was buoyed by a resurgent "claim to universal leadership" through the promotion of an "all-inclusive Sunnism" and "the groundswell of Sufism," which allowed Baghdad to remain a powerful force in the Arabic speaking intellectual and cultural landscape. This uptick in 'Abbasid power was short-lived, however, lasting only until the Mongol expansion swept the Muslim world, leveling Baghdad in 1258 and

⁷⁸ Reynolds, "Qiyān," 4.

⁷⁹ Gordon, "Yearning and Disquiet," 261. Gordon elaborates on the historical context in which al-Jahiz lived, using an anecdote about the pietistic caliph al-Muhtadi to describe one attitude that some members of 'Abbasid society shared during al-Jahiz's lifetime: "Shortly upon assuming the throne, the good 'Abbasid caliph swept Samarra's palaces clean of all trappings of luxury and decadence, notably among these singers and eunuchs. The episode bears mention here as it may well have been driven by a worldview—Mu'tazili in meaning, pietistic in impulse—that was shared by al-Jahiz, (who died only a year or two earlier)."

⁸⁰ Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 52.

⁸¹ Julia Bray, introduction to *Consorts of the Caliphs* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), xxi.

⁸² Bray, "Introduction," xxi.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xxii.

overtaking what remained of the ‘Abbasid empire.⁸⁴ Bray writes, “*Consorts of the Caliphs*...is an essay in cultural memory written during the reign of al-Musta’sim [the last ‘Abbasid caliph], but it shows no premonition of danger, even though the Mongols were already on the march.”⁸⁵ Instead, the work reveals a desire to reaffirm ‘Abbasid cultural resurgence on the eve of the Mongol invasion, and Ibn al-Sa’i uses the wives and concubines of the caliphs “as a connecting thread” that “yokes the current regime to the age of the early, legendary Abbasids.”⁸⁶

The ninth-century slave woman who internalized the art of *adab*, whose poetic talents surpassed that of the finest male poets, who exhibited brilliant mastery of witty repartee, and who conducted herself with grace in the elegant setting of the *majlis* was the consummate embodiment of ‘Abbasid cultural primacy. If captured in a war of conquest, she represented the process by which the ‘Abbasid rulers expanded their domain and pushed the frontiers of the *umma*. If obtained through trade, she was evidence of ‘Abbasid cosmopolitanism and the empire’s involvement in a broader Mediterranean commercial system. The *qayna* was brought into the courtly sphere as an outsider, but her instruction in Arabic, training in poetry, singing, playing musical instruments, and calligraphy ensured that she would be subsumed into the ‘Abbasid community; the very fact that a foreign slave woman could become a paragon of refinedness, wit, literacy, and poetic talent is a testament to the cultural power of the ‘Abbasid empire in its “Golden Age.” In Bray’s assessment, the early ‘Abbasid *qiyān* were “culture heroines,” and celebrating their accomplishments was a way of remembering, displaying, and reasserting ‘Abbasid imperial vibrancy.⁸⁷

Although Al-Jahiz’s portrayal of the *qiyān* diverges sharply from Ibn al-Sa’i’s, his perspective is similarly conditioned by historical context. The ninth century was defined by evolving conceptions of “Muslim” identity brought about by urbanization, geographical expansion, involvement in trade networks, efforts to consolidate collections of Hadith and codify Islamic law, and attempts to grapple with the influence of Greek intellectual traditions. The environment of cosmopolitanism, artistic creativity, and increasing urbanity existed in concert with anxieties and tensions around the effort to maintain a coherent sense of Muslim identity in the face of rapid change. Al-Jahiz’s *Epistle on Singing Girls* highlights the cacophony of voices that sought to make themselves heard in a ninth-century context beset with fragmentation and contested definitions of Islamic imperial identity.⁸⁸

There may also have been a classist element to al-Jahiz’s critique of the singing girls. In some of his other works, al-Jahiz expresses concern about the role of common people as patrons of poetry.⁸⁹ The idea that anyone of moderate means could commission praise poetry struck al-Jahiz as an affront to established social hierarchies. Ironically, al-Jahiz was something of a social-climber himself—having managed to “bootstrap” himself up from the lower class to a position of prestige and proximity to the elite by currying favor with influential patrons. Perhaps it was precisely for this reason that he was so attached to the notion that his own elevated standing was the result of the favor he won among the “authentically” elite members of society. He may have felt threatened by the idea that any member of the bourgeoisie could *buy* his way

⁸⁴ Ibid, xix.

⁸⁵ Ibid, xx.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, xxiv.

⁸⁸ Gordon, “Yearning and Disquiet,” 267. “The early ‘Abbasid period was one in which the law on slavery, as on many other topics, was very much in flux.” This, Gordon suggests, indicates that al-Jahiz’s *Epistle* is “best understood as an echo of debate, polemic, [and] uncertainty among circles of the third/ninth century and fourth/tenth century *fuqaha*, coming to terms as they were with the extent and details of the law.”

⁸⁹ Jocelyn Sharlet, *Patronage and Poetry in the Islamic World Social Mobility and Status in the Medieval Middle East and Central Asia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011). 2. “Criticism of poetry for pay is also criticism of the social mobility that it makes possible for poets...[which is] bound up with the...issue of social mobility for patrons.”

into the role of patron. The commodification of praise poetry, he asserted, degraded its artistic sophistication and devalued its significance as a marker of social status for the patron.⁹⁰ A similar sentiment might explain al-Jahiz's condemnation of the lower-class *qiyān* institution: like the growing role of the lower class in patronizing poets, the increasing prevalence of lower- and middle-class *qiyān* patronage presented a similarly problematic opportunity for class-jumping and the flattening of social hierarchies.

Ultimately, Al-Jahiz's depiction of the *qiyān* phenomenon can be most convincingly read as a means of displaying Mu'tazilite philosophy. From an epistemological perspective, the text demonstrates his interest in approaching the Qur'an with an emphasis on logical reasoning—a hallmark of Mu'tazilite philosophy that hinged on the Mu'tazilite conviction that the Qur'an was created by God at a discrete moment in time.⁹¹ Kennedy explains, "If the Koran was created then it could be interpreted and even, conceivably, modified by new revelation or human investigation to suit changed circumstances. However, if it had existed through all eternity, it clearly had an absolute and universal status that could not be challenged in any way...Mu'tazilism...allowed the use of human reason to investigate the divine mysteries."⁹² In the *Epistle*, he satirizes interpretations of the Qur'an that follow the *letter of the law* at the expense of its *spirit*, parodying, for example, those who justify the institution of the singing girls based on the absence of a formal, explicit prohibition in the Qur'an. Al-Jahiz suggests that an implicit prohibition can be inferred through logical analysis of the scripture. This viewpoint clearly resonates with a Mu'tazilite conviction that the Qur'an is a created document that can be examined and understood through logical reasoning. Al-Jahiz's critique of passionate love as a malady of the soul also aligns perfectly with the Mu'tazilite prioritization of "reason" over "passion."

When al-Jahiz's writing is examined in relation to this philosophical context, it becomes apparent that the *Epistle on the Singing Girls* is not strictly a treatise against the institution of the *qiyān*. It is also an avenue for al-Jahiz to expound upon his broader philosophical worldview. In fact, it is worth questioning whether the *Epistle on Singing Girls* is really about the *qiyān*, or whether the topic of singing slave girls merely serves as the incidental subject of a text that is primarily designed to promote the Mu'tazilite philosophy. Might it be possible that the text is really more a Mu'tazilite manifesto that uses the *qiyān* as a rhetorical device rather than a deliberate censure of the *qiyān* institution? (In some ways, this makes sense, given that al-Jahiz's patrons were likely owners of singing girls *and* proponents of the Mu'tazilite school.)⁹³ If the main point of the *Epistle* is to display Mu'tazilite ideas rather than to denounce the institution of the *qiyān*, however, this situation indicates that the subject of singing slave girls had enough cultural relevance to act as a vehicle for conveying broader social, ideological, and political messages.

Concluding Analysis

Examining Ibn al-Sa'i's and al-Jahiz's divergent accounts of early 'Abbasid singing slave girls reveals the impact of historical context on medieval Islamic depictions of the *qiyān*. The

⁹⁰ Sharlet, 13. Sharlet eloquently summarizes, "The trend toward incorporating people of lower status into literary patronage exacerbates the tension between material interests and the appearance of the professional, independent, and voluntary depiction of patrons in panegyric as a form of ethical discourse."

⁹¹ The tenth-century, theologians engaged in heated debate over whether the Qur'an was an eternal, timeless entity that has always existed or a sacred text created by God at a discrete moment in time. The Mu'tazilites were strong proponents of the doctrine of createdness.

⁹² Kennedy, *Baghdad*, 250.

⁹³ Gordon, "Yearning and Disquiet," 258. There is some evidence that the patron who commissioned the *Epistle* was a Mu'tazilite *qadi* named Ahmad b. Abi Du'ad (d. 240/854).

fact that representations of the *qiyān* were mobilized for both Ibn al-Saʿī's and al-Jahiz's broader political and philosophical agendas suggests that depictions of the *qiyān* could be readily politicized. For Ibn al-Saʿī, the impressive accomplishments of slave women singers and poets signify the glory of the 'Abbasid past as embodied evidence of 'Abbasid cultural potency. Celebrating the legacies of the *qiyān* helps Ibn al-Saʿī recast his own times as a natural reassertion of 'Abbasid legitimacy. Meanwhile, in the *Epistle on the Singing Girls*, al-Jahiz places his satirical critique of the *qiyān* institution at the center of a broader commentary on the supremacy of Mu'tazilite reasoning and logical epistemology. For both Ibn al-Saʿī and al-Jahiz, the topic of the *qiyān* played an important role in the rhetorical strategies they deploy to convey their political and philosophical messages. The *qiyān* were evidently implicated in the broader political discussions and debates over Muslim identity that framed the medieval Islamic world.

Chapter 3:

A Brief History of al-Andalus

Cordova, under the sultans of the family of Umeyyah, became the tent of Islam, the place of refuge for the learned.... To it came, from all parts of the world, students anxious to cultivate poetry, to study the sciences, or to be instructed in divinity or the law; so that it became the meeting-place of the eminent in all matters, the abode of the learned, and the place of resort for the studious; its interior was always filled with the eminent and the noble of all countries; its literary men and soldiers were continually vying with each other to gain distinction, and its precincts never ceased to be the arena of the distinguished, the hippodrome of the foremost, the halting-place of the noble, and the repository of the true and virtuous. Cordova was to Andalus what the head is to the body, or what the breast is to the lion.¹

—Unknown Andalusian poet, as quoted by al-Maqqari (circa 1628)

At its apex in the tenth century, Cordoba styled itself the Baghdad of the West—an *axis mundi* for the cultured, intellectual elites of the medieval Islamic world. By the tenth century, the city of Cordoba had made a name for itself not only as the seat of the reinvigorated Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus but also as a magnet for scholars, litterateurs, poets, singers, scientists, philosophers, and theologians from around the Mediterranean world.² Cordoba's splendor represented the successes of Islamic expansion and the Umayyad caliphate's triumphant reassertion of power in al-Andalus. In later generations—after the fall of the Cordoban caliphate, the ensuing civil war, and the Christian *reconquista*—the image of golden-age Cordoba embodied nostalgic myths about the lost glory of Muslim Spain.

As a vibrant center of cultural and intellectual production in the Islamic world and as a symbol of historical nostalgia, Andalusian Cordoba paralleled 'Abbasid Baghdad. Echoing the analysis in the previous chapter, the following section examines Andalusian chronicles, histories, and biographical dictionaries, tracing the evolving role of the *qiyān* motif in the construction of narratives about Andalusian identity and recollections of a nostalgic past. Before delving into a close reading of the texts and an analysis of narrative construction, however, it is important to lay the groundwork for understanding the distinct historical contexts that underpinned each of the sources examined later in this chapter by briefly outlining the political history of al-Andalus.³

Historical Background

The conquest of the Iberian Peninsula was in some ways an outgrowth of the effort on the part of the Arab governors of North Africa to channel the combative energies of rebellious

¹ Ahmad Ibn-Muhammad Al-Maqqari, *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain: Extracted from the Naḥḥu-T-Tib Min Ghusni-L-Andalusi-R-Rattib* by Ahmad B. Muhammad Al Makkari, trans. Pascual de Gayangos. (Oriental Translation Fund, 1843), Book III, Chapter 1, 202.

² For more on the cosmopolitan nature of tenth-century Cordoba, as well as a nuanced reframing of the notion of *convivencia*, see Kenneth B. Wolf, "Convivencia and the Ornament of the World," in *Revisiting Convivencia in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, edited by Connie L. Scarborough (Juan de la Cuesta, 2014), pp. 41-60. See also Robert Hillenbrand, "The Ornament of the World: Medieval Cordoba as a Cultural Center," in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi. (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 112-135.

³ This sketch of Andalusian political history relies primarily on the works of Richard Fletcher and Janina Safran. See Richard A. Fletcher, *Moorish Spain* (New York: H. Holt, 1992) and Janina Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: The Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in Al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Other histories of al-Andalus include Hugh Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal: A Political History of Al-Andalus*. (London: Longman, 1996). For another concise political history see Mahmoud Makki. "The Political History of al-Andalus (92/711-897/1492)" in *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 3-87.

Berber tribes away from their resistance against Arab control. As Richard Fletcher writes, “One way of taming the Berbers and of simultaneously profiting from their fighting skills was to compel their enlistment into Arab-led armies for the prosecution of military campaigns elsewhere.”⁴ By 711, the practice of conducting minor raids into southern Spain had evolved into a full-scale push for conquest. In 711, the ambitious Arab governor of North Africa, Musa Ibn Nusayr, sent his Berber military commander, Tariq Ibn Ziyad, across the Strait of Gibraltar to invade the Iberian Peninsula. One year later, in 712, Tariq and his Berber troops defeated and killed Roderick, the Visigothic king who ruled the Iberian Peninsula, and claimed decisive victory in a battle that would have far-reaching consequences for the history of the region.

Crossing the Strait of Gibraltar did not put an end to tensions between Arabs and Berbers. With only a few exceptions, the Berber soldiers whose labor facilitated the conquest were not permitted to participate in the political administration of the newly acquired territory. Exclusion from social mobility—coupled with the raw wound of the Arab-Islamic conquest of their ancestral North African homeland in the late 600s—triggered the Berber Revolt of 740. In a nutshell, al-Andalus may have been conquered in the name of the Arab Muslims, but it was a contested land in which Arabs and Berbers vied with one another for control. On the eastern side of the Mediterranean, meanwhile, similarly dissatisfied non-Arab Muslims were helping foment revolution against the Umayyads, hoping that the ‘Abbasids would institute policies of equality for marginalized *mawali* groups. Ironically, it was a member of the ousted family of the Umayyads who ultimately managed to assert authority over al-Andalus and put an end to the ongoing civil war in the Iberian Peninsula.

Escaping the ruthless extermination of his family in the aftermath of the ‘Abbasid revolution, the young Umayyad prince ‘Abd al-Rahman I fled westward from Damascus, arriving first in the Maghreb, and then crossing the Strait of Gibraltar in 756, where he reestablished the Umayyad dynasty in al-Andalus and ruled from 756 to 788. His rise to power was by no means inevitable—at first, ‘Abd al-Rahman was just one of many local rulers contending for authority and territory. Eventually, however, he consolidated his power, taking control of Toledo in 764, Seville in the 770s, and the Ebro valley and the northeast quarter of the Peninsula in 780. By the 780s, ‘Abd al-Rahman had risen above the other contenders as the most successful ruler, though his power remained tenuous. As Fletcher observes, the “centralised state of the peninsular Umayyads was indeed in the fullness of time to be an imposing political system...but the authority of the early amirs...was fragile and vulnerable.”⁵

The ninth century saw a gradual increase in conversion to Islam, greater economic stability, and the crystallization of a literary and artistic court culture in al-Andalus. Later in this chapter, we will discuss the projection and performance of Andalusian imperial authority in more detail, but for now it is enough to mention that in the ninth century Umayyad imperial officials began to “adopt elements of court etiquette developed by the ‘Abbasids after Persian models, designed to make the ruler more remote, imposing and difficult [to] access.”⁶ Even as the gleaming trappings of court culture began to accrue to the city of Cordoba, however, Umayyad political control remained shaky, especially on the peripheries of the empire. Rebellious provincial rulers like Musa ibn Musa and ‘Umar ibn Hafsun challenged the Umayyad establishment by carving out autonomous strongholds for themselves in the countryside.

⁴ Fletcher, 20.

⁵ Ibid, 28.

⁶ Ibid, 43.

‘Abd al-Rahman III, who came to power in 912 and ruled until 961, presented himself as the heroic savior of al-Andalus who rescued the Iberian Peninsula from malicious rebels bent on undermining legitimate Umayyad rule and the destroying the region’s cities and croplands. Janina Safran writes, “‘Abd al-Rahman III came to power after half a century of rampant rebellion had reduced Umayyad rule to Cordoba and its environs. The new ruler embarked on a virtual reconquest of the peninsula and finally secured control over the heart of al-Andalus in 928.”⁷ ‘Abd al-Rahman III began his ruling career with this dramatic military success, which he used “as the basis for reviving Umayyad claims to the caliphate.”⁸ In fact, at the Friday *jumma* prayer in Cordoba on January 16, 929, ‘Abd al-Rahman proclaimed himself Caliph and adopted the title of *Amir al-Mu’minin* (“Prince of the Believers”).

In assuming the caliphal title, ‘Abd al-Rahman III explicitly rejected the legitimacy of both the ‘Abbasid and Fatimid caliphates. Between the ‘Abbasids in Baghdad and the Fatimids in Cairo and North Africa, the role of *Amir al-Mu’minin* was already a contested position. In order to promote his own legitimacy, he conducted a vigorous “public relations” campaign. In addition to enhancing his image by combatting heresy, ‘Abd al-Rahman III aggressively pursued holy war campaigns against the Christians in the north. To further symbolically demonstrate the legitimacy of the Andalusi Umayyad caliphate—both internally within al-Andalus and externally to the Fatimids and ‘Abbasids—‘Abd al-Rahman III and his supporters bought slaves, traded with distant lands, amassed considerable wealth, constructed monuments, staged elaborate public ceremonies, commissioned panegyrics, patronized artists, musicians, and scholars, collected books, and employed court historians.⁹

‘Abd al-Rahman III’s efforts to establish the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus were not mere fanciful aspirations. Tenth-century Cordoba was, in fact, a vibrant city, increasing in population, able to exert far-reaching economic influence, and brimming with wealth.¹⁰ The city was, in particular, known for vibrant patronage of the arts and sciences. As Fletcher notes, “Before the tenth century the rulers of al-Andalus had had little time, resources, or inclination” for patronizing the arts and sciences. “From the middle years of the tenth century,” he continues, “their commitment to it was full-hearted.”¹¹ The elaborate palace complex of Madinat al-Zahra, which essentially became a second capital that complemented the palace in Cordoba, is the consummate example of the tenth-century caliphal project of constructing and commissioning imposing monuments that symbolically attested to Umayyad strength.

The cultural efflorescence that characterized the reign of ‘Abd al-Rahman III continued during the rule of his son, al-Hakam II, who was a particularly avid scholar. During his reign, Cordoba “acquired...a reputation for learning which spread very widely.”¹² Al-Hakam II collected an enormous royal library totaling some 400,000 books. As will be seen later, the collection of extensive libraries became a mark of social prestige and members of the upper echelons of Cordoban society competed with one another to build impressive collections of books. It was in this environment that the famous female scholar, Lubna of Cordoba, supervised al-Hakam II’s royal library. Although female scholars were by no means commonplace, Lubna

⁷ Safran, 21.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Fletcher, 62. The economy al-Andalus was similarly vibrant in the mid-tenth century, and exerted a financial influence, according to Fletcher, as far away as Norway and Nigeria.

¹¹ Ibid, 70.

¹² Ibid, 71.

was not the only woman to obtain an education and carve out a space for herself in the academically-inclined world of the tenth century Cordoban elite.

The image of tenth-century Andalusia as a “Golden Age” may have had more to do with the hapless fate of the Umayyad caliphate in the eleventh century than the realities of the tenth century. The undoing of the Umayyad dynasty began with the death of al-Hakam II in 976. His son, Hisham II, was only eleven years old when he succeeded his father as caliph. Given Hisham II’s young age, three of al-Hakem’s most powerful advisors—the administrator al-Mansur, the minister al-Mushafi, and the military general Ghalib—assumed actual control of the caliphate. Ultimately, al-Mansur removed the other two from power and claimed sole control. To pursue his aggressive military campaigns, al-Mansur expanded his army by importing Berber mercenaries from Morocco, installing them as slave troops.

As in the ‘Abbasid empire, al-Mansur’s reliance on imported slave soldiers proved perilous. The years between 1008 and 1031 are described as the “*fitna* of al-Andalus.” As Fletcher explains, al-Mansur’s actions demonstrated that “constituted authority could be pushed aside.”¹³ Indeed, the Berber generals used their own growing power in the Iberian Peninsula to seize political control, appointing a certain Sulayman as caliph, in a direct affront to Muhammad II, who inherited the caliphate from Hisham II. Sulayman assassinated Muhammad II and occupied the Madinat al-Zahra in 1010. Three years later, in 1013, Cordoba surrendered to Sulayman’s siege, and he laid waste to the city, plundering valuables and massacring inhabitants of the city. Under Sulayman’s auspices, “his Berber followers treated Cordoba as a city under enemy occupation and instituted a reign of terror, killing and looting as they pleased.”¹⁴ In the tumultuous years between 1008 and 1031, Sulayman and his army generals seized effective power and rendered the Umayyad caliphs mere puppet rulers, while massacring citizens and destroying the city of Cordoba and the royal palaces. At the same time, Christian powers in the north of Spain were consolidating their power and gaining territory at a faster rate than ever before.

Beholden to his Berber military commanders, Sulayman handed out governorship positions in the provinces, setting the stage for the next epoch of Andalusian history: the rise of the *muluk al-tawaiif*, the so-called “party states”—small, autonomous kingdoms scattered throughout rural al-Andalus. The central authority that held al-Andalus together in the tenth century had always been fragile, and the disintegration of centralized Umayyad power led to the emergence of “a number of regional successor states...known to historians as ‘the *taifa* kings’...meaning ‘rulers of the parties’ or factions.”¹⁵ Compared to the chaotic years of the 1008-1031 *fitna*, the period of the *taifa* kings in the eleventh century was relatively stable and prosperous. In fact, as the *taifa* kingdoms aspired to universal rule, they vied with one another to patronize the arts, kindling a cultural renaissance in the midst of political fragmentation. In fact, the decentralization of political authority was the impetus behind this provincial cultural efflorescence: during the previous century’s Golden Age, cultural patronage was an activity restricted to the city of Cordoba, the empire’s urban, cosmopolitan nucleus. “The switching off of this centripetal current in the eleventh century,” writes Fletcher, “reactivated the creative energies of provincial centers.”¹⁶

¹³ Ibid, 77.

¹⁴ Ibid, 80.

¹⁵ Ibid, 81.

¹⁶ Ibid, 87. One intriguing primary source dealing with the *taifa* period is an autobiographical memoir of an eleventh-century Zirid prince, Abd Allah ibn Buluggin. In this text, called the *Tibyan*, he describes the political events of his time, prominent figures, and defends the decadent court culture he enjoys. For an English translation of the text and commentary, see Amin T. Tibi, *The Tibyan: Memoires of ‘Abd Allah b. Buluggin, Last Zirid Amir of Granada* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

The rise of the Almoravids in the late eleventh century brought an abrupt end to the festive atmosphere of the era of the *muluk al-tawaif*. Ruled by Moroccan Berbers who gained control first of the Maghreb, and then eventually of the Iberian Peninsula in the late eleventh century, the Almoravids were religious fundamentalists who saw it as their duty to bring wayward Andalusian Muslims back to the fold of Sunni orthodoxy. Initially, the rulers of the *muluk al-tawaif* welcomed the Almoravids to their shores, hoping they could help stem the tide of Christian incursions in northern Andalusia. The Almoravids did successfully push back against the Christians, and they were able to reunify the Iberian Peninsula. Al-Andalus, however, became something of a colony of the Marrakesh-based Almoravids. The pietistic Almoravids were also far less tolerant of Christians and Jews. Ultimately, the reassertion of tribal alliances, the loss of territory to the Christians, the alienation of non-Muslim subjects, and Andalusian rebellions against Almoravid authority weakened the regime.

At the same time, the rise of a second Berber kingdom in Morocco further challenged Almoravid authority on both sides of the Strait. Led by Muhammad Ibn Tummart, who studied in al-Andalus and in the East and developed an appreciation for the philosophy of the mystic al-Ghazali, the Almohads adamantly championed the notion of “the unity of God.” Driven by religious fervor, Ibn Tummart evangelized the indigenous inhabitants of the High Atlas mountains and established a growing political presence in southern Morocco. Moving northward, the Almohads cross the Strait and gained a foothold in the city of Gibraltar in 1159. Increasingly unpopular among their subjects, the Almoravids were also losing ground to the Christians. They were thus hard-pressed to stave off the rising power of the Almohads. Having replaced the Almoravids as the dominant Muslim political power in al-Andalus, the Almohads began their ruling career with a dramatic campaign against the Christians, reclaiming most of al-Andalus for the Muslims by 1203. In a predictably cyclical manner, however, the Almohads eventually lost their authority over al-Andalus through a combination of the reassertion of tribal divisions, continuing Christian conquest, and challenges to their power brought about by the rise of other Moroccan tribes.

As the Almohad administration unraveled in the first few decades of the thirteenth century, King Fernando III of Castille and King James I of Aragon consolidated the power of their respective kingdoms. The two Christian kings proceeded to make significant—and ultimately irreversible—gains against the Muslims of al-Andalus. Christian expansion picked up steam in 1236 with Fernando III’s conquest of Cordoba, escalating every year until he managed to secure Seville in 1248, which effectively marked the end of Muslim dominance in al-Andalus. Only the fortified hilltop city of Granada remained in Muslim hands, held by Muhammad Ibn Yusuf Ibn Nasir, a resilient Almohad ruler. The Nasrids (as his descendants were called) maintained their authority in Granada through a combination of a highly effective defense system and a strategic alliance with both the kingdom of Castille and the powerful Moroccan tribe of the Banu Merin. Granada was a place of refuge for artists and intellectuals fleeing the *reconquista*, and the construction of a magnificent palace—the Alhambra—reflects the concentration of artistic skill in this tiny Muslim enclave. Despite the paradisaic design of the Alhambra, Granada was not an idyllic community. Constantly on the edge of attack from Castille, and simmering with internal tensions between Muslims and Jews, Fletcher describes late medieval Granada as “a tense, volatile, unharmonious place” that operated according to a “siege mentality.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, Granada held out as an independent state until Castilian troops

¹⁷ Fletcher, 158.

acting under the orders of the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella conquered Granada in 1492, eliminating the last Muslim principality on the Iberian Peninsula.

Andalusian *Qiyān* Institution as a Social and Historical Phenomenon

The movement of the *qiyān* from the Abbasid East to Andalusia began occurring during the reign of al-Hakam I (796-822).¹⁸ Although the *qiyān* of al-Andalus initially received their training in Medina and Baghdad, by the ninth century most of the *qiyān* were trained in Andalusia—first in Cordoba during the height of the Umayyad caliphate and later in Seville during the period of the *taifa* kings. As a result, the *qiyān* of al-Andalus began to develop their own unique artistic styles, distinct from their counterparts and predecessors in Baghdad.¹⁹ By the thirteenth century, however, the historical record bears fewer references to the *qiyān*, and by the fourteenth century, the training of and commerce in *qiyān* seems to have drawn to a close.²⁰ Even as the *qiyān* institution decline in the Islamic world, echoes of the *qiyān* phenomenon remained alive and well in the troubadour culture of Christian Europe, having filtered into late eleventh century in Occitania through a process of cross-pollination with the *qiyān* tradition of Al-Andalus.²¹

¹⁸ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 70-71.

Chapter 4:

Making Andalusia Great Again: Nostalgic Representations of the *Qiyān*

When ‘Abd al-Rahman III declared himself the rightful caliph and only genuine *Amir al-Mu’minin* in 929, he placed himself in the midst of a pitched battle over the semiotics of caliphal legitimacy. Prior to his reign, Umayyad rulers of al-Andalus saw themselves as *amirs* (princes), and they conceived of their institution as an *amirate* (principality). As Janina Safran writes, the first Umayyad *amirs* of al-Andalus “did not command either the authority or the resources to support a claim to the caliphate or rival the ‘Abbasids. Nor did they have a constituency for whom the identification of their rule in these terms would make a significant difference.”¹ This is not to say that the first Umayyad *amirs* were apathetic about creating an institution with material and symbolic authority. Rather, they did so in humbler terms. Safran goes on to explain that these *amirs* manifested their authority by waging war in the northern frontier, building monuments, making themselves available for hearing grievances, and respecting the opinions of the *‘ulama*. “Over time,” she continues, “the *amirs* also demonstrated an interest in the display of power and authority by renovating the palace of Cordoba and developing a court protocol.”²

‘Abd al-Rahman likely would not have proclaimed himself caliph without knowing that the power and authority of Umayyad rule in al-Andalus was already widely acknowledged and respected. Safran states, for example, that ‘Abd al-Rahman “built on the foundations of Umayyad legitimacy in al-Andalus” and promoted his right to rule as caliph in ways that were “consistent with the practices of the Umayyad *amirs* who preceded him in al-Andalus but differed in scale.”³ In many ways, the court protocol of the Umayyad *amirate* already resembled that of the ‘Abbasid court in Baghdad, whose elaborate court society was by that point the standard for courtly culture in the Islamic world. Owning *qiyān* was certainly among the activities that characterized the Andalusian adaptation of ‘Abbasid court culture, and, as noted above, *qiyān* ownership was an established part of Andalusian court culture at least by the time al-Hakam I came to power in 796.

What distinguished ‘Abd al-Rahman III from his predecessors was not so much the way he ruled or the way he styled his court as much as it was the rhetorical strategies he used to present himself as caliph. These rhetorical strategies are significant, as they came to dominate the content and tone of many subsequent generations of Andalusian historiography. ‘Abd al-Rahman III and his successors after him employed two main strategies in the articulation of caliphal legitimacy. One tactic was the direct display of wealth, power, and refinement. The other method for establishing legitimacy, however, was the commissioning of literary works in which “partisans of the Umayyad dynasty expressed the caliph’s legitimacy” in poetry, prose accounts, and historical narratives that set the stage for ‘Abd al-Rahman III to assume the role of Commander of the Faithful.⁴ In fact, the works produced in the tenth and eleventh centuries in

¹ Janina Safran, *The Second Umayyad Caliphate: The Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy in Al-Andalus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 11.

² Safran, 11.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14. For an example of this kind of lionizing literature, see James T. Monroe, “The Historical Arjuza of Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi, a Tenth-Century Hispano-Arabic Epic Poem,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91, no. 1 (1971): 67-95. Monroes’s article contains a full text of Ibn ‘Abd

the wake of ‘Abd al-Rahman’s vigorous efforts to establish and publicize the nature of the Umayyad caliphate’s legitimacy in al-Andalus do not focus only on ‘Abd al-Rahman III himself. They also establish legitimacy in historical terms, discussing the past events that paved the way for ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s heroic unification of al-Andalus and his formal assertion of the Umayyad caliphate. As Safran notes, historical revisionism was a useful tool in the articulation of caliphal legitimacy in tenth-century al-Andalus.

The narratives produced in the tenth century, in turn, helped the next generation of Andalusian historians construct their own revisionist narratives. For eleventh-century historians like Ibn Hayyan, for example, the fall of Cordoba and the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate was a recent, and undoubtedly traumatic, memory. Reinvigorating the works of tenth-century historians who wrote about the conquest of the Peninsula, recorded the successes of Umayyad amirs, and celebrated Abd al-Rahman III’s realization of the Umayyad caliphate helped Ibn Hayyan construct a nostalgic narrative that resonated with the melancholy mood of his generation. Safran explains this phenomenon in detail: “The Andalusian historiography of the caliphal period and to some extent the Andalusian and Maghribi historiography of the post-Caliphal period, grew out of and expanded caliphal ideology. Histories elaborated themes such as the continuity of Umayyad legitimacy but in a more complex and variegated way.”⁵ Each generation of historians integrated the existing historiographical corpus into their own works, subsuming the works of their predecessors and adjusting their narratives to fit evolving historical and political contexts. The motif of the *qiyān* was an important signifier in the development and evolution of these historical narratives.

Textual Context

The assortment of extant primary sources discussing the *qiyān* in al-Andalus is far less cohesive than the body of texts focusing on the *qiyān* in the ‘Abbasid era. While this state of affairs is, in part, due to deliberate literary decisions on the part of Andalusian authors about how to construct their texts and which figures to include, it is also a product of the vagaries of the historical record. According to Reynolds, for example, a female Andalusian author named Umm al-Fath bint Ja’far (who lived during the eleventh century), wrote a book called the *Kitāb fī Qiyān al-Andalus* (*The Book of the Qiyān of al-Andalus*). Reynolds notes that Umm al-Fath wrote about the *qiyān* of al-Andalus in a manner mirroring that of al-Isbahani’s *Kitāb al-Aghani*, but her book, unfortunately, has not survived.⁶

The sources that do provide information about the *qiyān* in the Andalusian context are primarily histories of al-Andalus and biographical dictionaries, many of which pay close attention to scholars, poets, and musicians. For the purposes of this thesis, the most useful works include the following texts, explored in detail in the following section: Ibn Hayyan’s *Kitāb al-Muqtabis fī Tarīkh al-Andalus* (*The “Quoter,” on the History of the Men of al-Andalus*),⁷ Ibn Bassam’s *al-Dhakhira fī Mahasin Ahl al-Jazira* (*The Treasure: On the Merits of the People of Peninsula*),⁸ Ibn Bashkuwal’s *Kitāb al-Sila* (*The Book of the Continuation*), Ahmad al-Tifashi’s

Rabbihi’s epic poem about ‘Abd al-Rahman III’s heroic exploits against the Christians, as well as detailed commentary on the poem and its significance.

⁵ Ibid, 115.

⁶ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 2.

⁷ Ibn Hayyān, *Al-Sifr al-thānī min kitāb al-muqtabis*, ed. Maḥmūd ‘Alī Makkī. (Riyadh: Markaz al-Malik Fayṣal li-l-Buḥūth wa-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya, 2003).

⁸ Ibn Bassām, *Al-Dhakhira fī mahāsīn ahl al-jazīra juz’ al-thalith*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1998).

Muta'at al-Asma fi 'ilm al-Sama' (Pleasure to the Ears, on the Art of Music),⁹ the *Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar* (*The Paths of Perception Among the Realms of the Great Cities*) by the Syrian author al-'Umari,¹⁰ and *Nafh al-Tib fi Ghusn al-Andalus al-Ratib* (*The Scented Breeze of the Tender Branch of al-Andalus*) by al-Maqqari.¹¹ The first five sources are products of the eleventh through fourteenth centuries (Ibn Hayyan's *Muqtabis* was written in the late 1050s, and al-Umari's *Masalik* was written in the mid 1300s). These texts provide a useful lens for examining the evolving nature of representations of the *qiyān* in medieval al-Andalus. The sixth source, the *Nafh al-Tib* by al-Maqqari, a seventeenth-century Algerian-born historian, provides a retrospective history of al-Andalus and is useful for demonstrating the extent to which references to the *qiyān* continued to play a role in narrativizing Andalusian history even as late as the seventeenth century.

Due to the passage of time and its unfortunate propensity for misplacing documents useful to modern historians, we must content ourselves with a patchwork of references to the *qiyān* located discretely within a number of different primary sources. As Reynolds explains, "the portrait of the *qiyān* in al-Andalus...[is] both partial and fragmentary and consists not of a comprehensive history but rather of a study of several clusters of sources that provide relatively ample documentation for certain historical periods, with little to no information currently available for the time in between."¹² Although this fragmented textual landscape makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive history of the *qiyān*, it is not necessarily an impediment to examining the way in which medieval authors invoked the *qiyān* in their historical narratives. The fact that references to the *qiyān* are scattered throughout an array of texts actually provides a more panoramic picture of the diverse ways in which Andalusian authors wrote about female poets, scholars, and singers in general, how they approached the subject of the *qiyān* in particular, and how the figure of the *qayna* is used to signify imperial grandeur, caliphal legitimacy, and historical nostalgia.

Ibn Hayyan's *Book of Quotation*

Ibn Hayyan (b. 987) was one of the most famous and widely quoted medieval Andalusian historians. His most famous text, the *Kitab al-Muqtabis* (*Book of Quotation*), was originally a ten-volume work chronicling the history of al-Andalus from conquest to his own era. Unfortunately, only a few fragments are extant today. As its title suggests, the *Book of Quotation* is, comprised primarily of quotations from earlier Andalusian historians, which Ibn Hayyan arranged and edited.¹³ The text quotes extensively from the tenth-century historians who acted as 'Abd al-Rahman III's "public relations" specialists. Ibn Hayyan's inclusion of these earlier sources has the important effect of preserving for posterity texts that are not otherwise extant and makes the *Muqtabis* something of a time capsule of Andalusian historiography.

Reading the *Muqtabis* with an eye for the excerpts from older texts allows us trace the previous two centuries of narrative construction in al-Andalus. Because court historians were essentially propagandists for the ruler himself, these extracts from earlier works make it possible

⁹ Benjamin M Liu and James T. Monroe, *Ten Hispano-Arabic Strophic Songs in the Modern Oral Tradition: Music and Texts* in University of California Publications in Modern Philology, vol. 125. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁰ Ibn Faḍl Allāh Al-'Umārī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār, al-juz' al-'ashir: ahl al-ghina' wa al-musiḳi fī al-mashriḳ wa al-maghreb al-'arabi wa misr al-mahrusah*, ed. Ghattas 'Abd al-Malik Khashabah and Husayn Nassar (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmīyah, 2005).

¹¹ Aḥmad Ibn-Muḥammad Al-Maqqārī, *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain: Extracted from the Nafḥu-T-Tib Min Ghusni-L-Andalusi-R-Rattib by Aḥmad B. Muḥammad Al Makkari*, trans. Pascual de Gayangos (Oriental Translation Fund, 1843).

¹² Reynolds, "Qiyān," 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

to examine the imagery and rhetoric through which the tenth-century Andalusian Umayyad administration expressed its legitimacy, from its inception to ‘Abd al-Rahma’s caliphal self-proclamation.¹⁴ As the architects of the legitimacy-promoting campaign of the early Umayyad caliphate, these historians also defined Andalusian court culture in a way that contributed to the idealization of the tenth century as a “golden age” in subsequent generations. Ibn Hayyan’s references to earlier works are also useful to this thesis because the works of tenth-century court historians such as ‘Isa ibn al-Razi and Ibn Mufraj provide detailed descriptions of the court of ‘Abd al-Rahman II, who was one of the first patrons of *qiyan* in al-Andalus.

Although the *Muqtabis* is a useful tool for examining excerpts from earlier sources, it is also a reflection of Ibn Hayyan’s own narrative agenda. He did not merely replicate earlier texts; instead, as Samuel Armistead remarks, “With brilliant control and surprisingly modern editorial criteria—indicating lacunae, adding editorial notes and clarifications—Ibn Hayyan assembled and commented on a great number of earlier historians.”¹⁵ The *Muqtabis* is very much a product of Ibn Hayyan’s editorial discretion, and the individual source texts he uses are subsumed into the broader, eleventh-century narrative that Ibn Hayyan constructed and promoted. I will consider Ibn Hayyan the author of the *Muqtabis*, though it should be kept in mind that the text is really the product of Ibn Hayyan’s editorial engagement with the existing corpus of Andalusian historiography.

Some indications of Ibn Hayyan’s narrative agenda can be inferred from his personal background. His father was a secretary in the administration of al-Mansur, and Ibn Hayyan was raised in the “cultured environment” of the court, where he “received a thorough education” and developed a strongly pro-Umayyad political outlook.¹⁶ He witnessed the sack of Cordoba in 1031, and wrote the *Muqtabis* in the post-Umayyad world of the *muluk al-tawaif*. After the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate, Ibn Hayyan obtained a secretarial position in the administration of the Jahwarid kingdom—a *taifa* state centered in Cordoba. Although he managed to land a job as a secretary in a *taifa*-state administration, he was “sharply critical of the fall of the [Umayyad] dynasty, the break-up of centralized power, the civil war and lands given over to violence.”¹⁷ His history of al-Andalus is a nostalgic celebration of the Umayyad caliphate at the height of its former glory. Implicit in his glorification of Umayyad caliphate as a Golden Age is a criticism of his own times, a lament over the chaos of the *fitna* and fragmentation of the *muluk al-tawaif* period. Ibn Hayyan was also an outspoken critic of the implied assumption that Andalusian culture was merely a replica of that found in the Islamic East. As an Andalusian author recording the history of his own community, Ibn Hayyan was deeply invested in demonstrating the ways in which the literature, poetry, music, and science of the West developed their own traditions distinct from those of the East.

Most useful to the present discussion are the sections devoted to the women of ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s court and the discussion of singing, music, and courtly entertainment during his reign. Quoting al-Razi, Ibn Hayyan reports that ‘Abd al-Rahman II was very interested in singing and music, had particularly high standards for musical performance, and assembled an exceptionally skilled retinue of singers and musicians, both male and female. Ibn Hayyan states, ‘Abd al-Rahman II was “a great admirer of singing. He was enamored of listening [to it] and

¹⁴ Safran, 112. Safran explains that historians like Isa Ibn al-Razi “recorded panegyrics recited to celebrate special occasions and included caliphal documents in their texts, thus reviving caliphal propaganda and flagging the events in the historical narrative that the caliphs themselves identified as significant.”

¹⁵ Samuel G. Armistead, “Ibn Hayyan” in *Medieval Iberia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Michael E. Gerli (New York: Routledge, 2003), 413.

¹⁶ Muhammad Meouak, “Ibn Hayyan,” in *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History, Volume 5, 1350-1500* eds. David Thomas and Alex Mallett (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 166.

¹⁷ Meouak, 167.

placed it above all his other pleasures. He patronized singers who competed in it and had a predilection for the best of them.”¹⁸ The text goes on to explain that the caliph would identify the very best male singers and employ them as instructors for the best of his *qiyan*. “He selected the best among these women [to send] to the male singers he had taken into his service, so that these latter could be their guides in this art, transmitting their artistry, in search of ever greater gratification in listening [to music], always guided by the pursuit of excellence.”¹⁹

As in other biographical dictionaries with entries on *qiyan*, physical beauty is identified in the *Muqtabis* as one important characteristic that makes certain women notable, but intelligence and artistic talent ultimately receive at least as much—if not more—attention in the narrative. Consistent with ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s “pursuit of excellence,” Ibn Hayyan explains that the *qiyan* underwent intensive training and developed a wide range of skills. He writes, for example, that Fadl was “expert in the ‘science’ [*ilm*] of Medina, of superior beauty, skilled in singing and of perfect qualities.”²⁰ References to Fadl’s “superior beauty” are interspersed with remarks about her expertise and skill in singing. Ibn Hayyan’s description of the slave girl Qalam is similarly characteristic of his emphasis on intelligence and skill over physical beauty.²¹ Like Ibn al-Sa’i, Ibn Hayyan emphasizes the *combined* power of the *qayna*’s beauty and intellect.

Notwithstanding Ibn Hayyan’s noticeable emphasis on the talent and intelligence of the slave women, there are plenty of indications in the *Kitab al-Muqtabis* that female value in Andalusian court society was also deeply contingent on sex appeal. ‘Abd al-Rahman II was a notorious “appreciator of women,” and Ibn Hayyan points out that he was “among the caliphs the one who was most desirous of women and the fondest of sex.”²² He was also notorious for being extremely selective about the women he chose as concubines. In his acquisition of expensive *jawari*, Ibn Hayyan writes, he would rigorously investigate “their origins, class, education and conduct. He never took any that was not a virgin, even if she surpassed the other women of her era in beauty and excellence.”²³ Evidently, the *amir*’s exacting standards for “excellence” governed not only his taste in music and singing, but also his choice of sexual companionship.

It is possible to extrapolate from the *Muqtabis* that ‘Abd al-Rahman II was interested in women not exclusively as sex objects nor solely as intellectuals and musicians. In many ways, the figure of the *qayna* united these two categories in one person. Qalam, for instance, who was known for her expertise in singing, composition, literature, calligraphy, poetry, and history—was also one of ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s concubines.²⁴ Fadl occupied a similar position: renowned for her skill in singing, she was also one of ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s “principal favorite” concubines. Ibn Hayyan notes, “Fadl...was considered superior. This garnered her the favor of the Emir...Fadl continued to be his principal favorite and bore him a son.”²⁵ Those *qiyan* who make it into the *Kitab al-Muqtabis* as ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s favorites, the mothers of his sons—such as Qalam and Fadl—evidently had to meet the *amir*’s standards not only for musical talent but also sexual attractiveness.

¹⁸ Translated by Dwight Reynolds in “The Qiyān of al-Andalus,” 11. For the original Arabic, see Ibn Hayyan, *al-Muqtabis*, 307.

¹⁹ Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 307 (Arabic).

²⁰ Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

²¹ Reynolds, 12 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 307 (Arabic). Qalam was “the most skilled of his *qiyan* in singing, the best in the knowledge of the art of composing melodies, the most versatile in the distinct varieties of song. She had as well a good memory for literature, was a good calligrapher, a reciter/transmitter of poetry, a memorizer of historical/literary accounts, and knowledgeable in all genres of literature and etiquette.” For more examples of Ibn Hayyan’s descriptions of the impressive talents of Andalusian *qiyan*, see Reynolds 14 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 329 (Arabic).

²² Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 303 (Arabic).

²³ Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 303 (Arabic).

²⁴ Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

²⁵ Reynolds, 11 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

Ibn Hayyan emphasizes the cosmopolitan character of the al-Andalus by highlighting the diverse geographic origins of the *qiyān* and their regionally distinct styles of singing. He observes that Qalam “was of Andalusian origin, a Basque captive, and daughter of one of their leaders.”²⁶ Similarly, he also writes, “it is said that [Fadl] had belonged to one of the daughters of [the caliph] Harun al-Rashid, was Baghdadi of origin and education.”²⁷ Many of the *qiyān* who ended up in al-Andalus were experts in the style of singing developed in Medina. Fadl, for example, was taken from Baghdad to Medina, “where her level in singing improved.”²⁸ The same Qalam who Ibn Hayyan tells us was originally from Baghdad was also taken east to Medina before ‘Abd al-Rahman purchased and brought her to Cordoba. In Medina, “she learned the art of singing until she mastered it, and was then purchased for ‘Abd al-Rahman, who took her as a concubine and with her completed his set of Medinese favorites...they gave their name to the ‘House of the Medinese’ in [‘Abd al-Rahman’s] palace.”²⁹ Focusing on these seemingly minor details about the places in which the *qiyān* were born and trained actually helps Ibn Hayyan establish Andalusian cosmopolitanism by demonstrating that the musicians and singers of the court embodied the empire’s integration into the broader Mediterranean and Islamic world.

Not only does Ibn Hayyan use information about the origin and training of the *qiyān* to demonstrate Andalusian cosmopolitanism, but his celebratory portrayal of the famous male singer, Ziryab, illustrates the process by which al-Andalus developed its own unique forms of cultural, musical, and poetic expression. Originally from Baghdad—but reputedly forced to leave due to the jealousy of his former teacher—Ziryab arrived in al-Andalus in 822, where ‘Abd al-Rahman welcomed him as a court musician, and he quickly rose to prominence as an iconic figure in the Andalusian music scene. In Ibn Hayyan’s narrative, Ziryab’s arrival signifies the maturation of Andalusian music. ‘Abd al-Rahman was completely enchanted with Ziryab’s singing, and he was certain that Ziryab was more talented than all the rest of the court musicians, both men and women. In order to preserve his celebrated style and repertoire for posterity, ‘Abd al-Rahman requested that some of his best *qiyān* complete an apprenticeship with Ziryab so as to ensure the perpetuation of his influence. With Ziryab’s arrival in al-Andalus, it was suddenly far more popular to patronize *qiyān* trained locally in al-Andalus in the styles promoted by Ziryab than to import singing girls trained in the East. Through his account of Ziryab’s arrival in al-Andalus and the introduction of new strategies for training *qiyān*, Ibn Hayyan highlights the growing Andalusian contribution to cultural innovation in the medieval Islamic world.

We learn from Ibn Hayyan that the *qiyān* trained by Ziryab were considered the “storehouses” and transmitters of his musical knowledge. This observation places slave women squarely in the middle of the development of a distinctly Andalusian musical tradition. For example, Ibn Hayyan provides the following description of a woman named Shunayf who was an expert on Ziryab’s singing and repertoire:

Shunayf was a singing-girl of Ziryab’s who lived for a long time after him such that when [later] singers were confused about something in his repertory—and they differed in a great deal of it—they would have recourse to her and seek her knowledge. They listened to her and found her to possess the oldest [i.e., most authentic] style and to be the most reliable transmitter of [his

²⁶ Reynolds, 12 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

²⁷ Reynolds, 12 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

²⁸ Reynolds, 12 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

²⁹ Reynolds, 12 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 306 (Arabic).

repertory], so they called her “the Imam.” They thronged to learn from her and referred to her regarding anything that troubled them.³⁰

Shunayf is described as the most authoritative of transmitter of Ziryab’s repertoire, even earning the lofty—if slightly tongue-in-cheek—title of “the Imam.” Shunayf is not, however, the only woman who learned from Ziryab and passed down his teachings. Ibn Hayyan makes a point of highlighting the contributions of several other *qiyān* as well. He notes that “many of the best female vocalists learned from” three other *qiyān* who “excelled in the style of Ziryab.”³¹ A *qayna* named ‘Aj, for instance, is described by Ibn Hayyan as “one of the most prolific transmitters from Ziryab and most skilled in the art [of singing].”³² Another of his *qiyān* was “skilled in the craft [of singing], and many songs were transmitted by way of her from Ziryab.”³³ The *qiyān* thus play a major role in the *Kitab al-Muqtabis* as the keepers of Ziryab’s tradition and as contributors to the development of an independent school of Andalusian music.

The most striking part of Ibn Hayyan’s text is the language and imagery he uses to describe the interactions between ‘Abd al-Rahman II and his slave women. His use of the word *ghalaba* to describe slave women who exert power over their masters is particularly intriguing. The term “*ghalaba*” evokes a sense of authority and force: according to the Hans Wehr Arabic-English dictionary, the Form I version of the verb *ghalaba* usually refers to the act of subduing, conquering, and vanquishing, and is used to describe a situation in which one person gains the upper hand over or dominates someone else.³⁴ Ibn Hayyan states that Abd al-Rahman II was very fond of women, and that his favorite women “dominated [*ghalabna*] over him.”³⁵ The word *ghalaba* appears a second time, when Ibn Hayyan discusses Abd al-Rahman II’s infatuation with a slave woman named Tarub (who, incidentally, was complicit in trying to poison and kill the amir to get her son into power). Tarub is described as “dominating [*ghalabna*] the heart of the Amir, and making him subservient to her [*tatayayamha*].”³⁶ The second part of this sentence is also extremely fascinating, because the Form II version of the verb “*tayama*” means to “enslave, or enthrall, to make someone blindly subservient, to drive someone out of his mind, to infatuate.”³⁷ Through his use of the words *ghalaba* and *tayama*, Ibn Hayyan casts the slave women as charming, manipulative, and irresistibly attractive, imbuing them with a distinct kind of agency and power derived primarily from their sexuality.

Overarching Narrative

The *Kitab al-Muqtabis* depicts ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s court as a cultured, cosmopolitan environment in which the pursuit of leisure prevailed and high-quality musical entertainment could be found in abundance. ‘Abd al-Rahman II is presented as an “appreciator of women” and an enthusiastic patron of the arts. He was especially fond of music and singing, and took pride in his acquisition and training of highly talented *qiyān*. Various anecdotes in the *Muqtabis* indicate that, although the *qiyān* were technically slaves, their status was prestigious and they were able to access social mobility. This was especially true for those women who embodied the perfect combination of beauty, sexual attractiveness, poetic ability, and quick wittedness—Fadl and

³⁰ Reynolds 14 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 329 (Arabic).

³¹ Reynolds, 14 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 239 (Arabic).

³² Reynolds, 14 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 239 (Arabic).

³³ Reynolds, 14 (English translation); Ibn Hayyan, 329 (Arabic).

³⁴ Hans Wehr: *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Arabic-English)* ed. J. Milton Cowan (Urbana: Spoken Language Services, Inc, 1994), 796.

³⁵ Ibn Hayyan, 306 (translation my own).

³⁶ Ibn Hayyan, 306 (translation my own).

³⁷ Hans Wehr, 120. For more on the use of the word *ghalaba*, see Manuela Marin, “Marriage and Sexuality in al-Andalus,” in *Marriage and Sexuality Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, ed. Eukene Lacarra Lanz. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3-20.

Qalam, for example. The diverse geographic origins of the *qiyān* reinforce the sense that the Cordoban court was economically and culturally competitive in the broader Islamicate and Mediterranean world.

The way in which Ibn Hayyan describes the women of ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s court also serves to advance the broader agenda of the book by establishing al-Andalus as a cultured society in its own right that did not merely copy the styles and trends of the East. *Qiyān* are seen as important transmitters of the musical traditions of Ziryab and active participants in the development of a unique Andalusian musical genre. In addition, the suggestion that a slave woman could invert normative gender and class dynamics by figuratively “enslaving” her master with her charm and attractiveness creates a strong association between the power of female sexuality and the inversion of the normative social order.

Ibn Bassam’s *The Treasury Concerning the Merits of the People of Iberia*

Ibn Bassam was an Andalusī poet and historian (d. 1147), who composed a treatise on the history of the Iberian Peninsula titled *Dhakhira fī mahāsin ahl al-Jazīra (The Treasury concerning the Merits of the People of Iberia)*. Written in the early twelfth century, Ibn Bassam’s *Dhakhira* was compiled during the time when Andalusia’s decentralized *muluk al-tawāif* had reached a state of cultural renaissance.³⁸ His work bears witness to the complexity of the period of the *taifa* states. On the one hand, the *Dhakhira* seems to reflect Ibn Bassam’s anxiety about the fate of Islamic Andalusia. Having fled his hometown of Santarem just before it was taken over by the Christians, Ibn Bassam explains that he wrote the *Dhakhira* while in exile in Seville. He writes, for instance, “God Almighty knows that this work is the product of a period of sadness and dimmed intellect... In Santarem we were well-off and from a family of good standing, whereas now I have to move from place to place begging for a livelihood.... Eventually I arrived in Seville in a very wretched state... I stayed in Seville for several years, resigned to solitude and poverty.”³⁹

Despite his melancholy views of his own life, however, the fact that Ibn Bassam was an accomplished *adīb* who hearkened from Santarem rather than from one of the major cities highlights the decentralized cultural renaissance of the *taifa* period. As al-Hijari, one of Ibn Bassam’s contemporaries commented, “Andalusian literary circles had not expected that someone from Santarem, a battlefield in the remote west, would emerge and produce a work akin to garlands around the neck of Time.”⁴⁰ The surprising fact that someone from the “remote West” could produce a work of such high caliber was apparently evidence of the unprecedented flowering of literary culture in the peripheral regions of al-Andalus.

The complex historical context in which the *Dhakhira* was produced is further evidenced by the fact that Ibn Bassam laments the fall of his hometown to the Christians, while also anticipating its liberation by the Almoravids. Even as he describes his exile from Santarem and his “wretched” position in Seville, he writes optimistically about the “approaching breath of relief” brought about by the advances of the Almoravid military leader Ibn Abi Bakr. Anticipating that the Almoravids will restore Santarem to the Muslims, Ibn Bassam dedicates the *Dhakhira* to Ibn Abi Bakr. The act of compiling an anthology focusing on notable literary figures

³⁸ Reynolds, 15.

³⁹ Quoted in Amin Tibi, “Ibn Bassam al-Shantarini and his Anthology *al-Dhakhira*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 3 (1999), 313.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Tibi, 315. Al-Hijari continues, “We have not seen in Cordoba or Seville or other major cities... anyone who came out to defend the luminaries of his age or to work as hard as [Ibn Bassam] did in compiling the best of their verse and prose... *Al-Dhakhira*’s prose is proof of the high caliber of his achievements.”

situates Ibn Bassam in a genre that dates back to earlier, tenth century historiography. In terms of its content, however, the *Dhakhira* deals with the people and events of the post-Umayyad *taifa* context, focusing on the best poets of the eleventh century. Meanwhile, the underlying tone of the book is forward-looking and optimistic, anticipating the arrival of the Almoravids. The *Dhakhira* thus manages to span three distinct time periods, representing the *taifa* period as a bridge between the past chaos of the *fitna* and the future promise of Almoravid military redemption—a liminal time of adversity and optimism, of fragmentation and cultural florescence.

Like Ibn Hayyan, Ibn Bassam was very interested in highlighting the literary accomplishments of his fellow Andalusians and using their accomplishments to push back against the idea that the Eastern Islamic world was the only legitimate source of literary and cultural production.⁴¹ He decried the fact that his fellow Andalusians were enamored with the culture of the East, writing, “if a crow croaked in that part of the world or a fly buzzed on the far borders of Syria or of Irak [sic], they would prostrate themselves as if before an idol.”⁴² His anthology of eleventh-century Andalusian poets and litterateurs is intended to simultaneously counteract the perception of Eastern cultural superiority within al-Andalus and to disseminate information about the highly accomplished Andalusian litterateurs to external audiences. Ibn Bassam is, as Amin Tibi puts it, “full of admiration for, and pride in, the literary output of Andalusians.”⁴³

Ibn Bassam’s emphasis on the unusual skills and attributes of the eleventh-century *qiyān* is especially noteworthy. One particularly interesting anecdote in his text suggests that some *qiyān* were not only skilled performers, but also had been trained in physical sciences, Qur’anic recitation, and the manufacture and use of weaponry. According to Dwight Reynolds, Ibn Bassam’s *Dhakhira* indicates that the twelfth century was a “golden age for the training of *qiyān* and a period in which Andalusian *qiyān* were sometimes skilled in a remarkably diverse set of fields, including not only the performance arts, but also the physical sciences, Qur’anic recitation, and even weaponry.”⁴⁴ In his discussion of Hudhayl Ibn Razin, founder of a small kingdom in Aragon, Ibn Bassam mentions the ruler’s patronage of musicians, ownership of *qiyān*, and his willingness to pay exorbitant sums of money for highly trained *qiyān*. Ibn Bassam writes that Ibn Razin was “among his peers the prince who spent the most money on purchasing musical instruments, clothing and *qiyān*... In one case, he paid 3,000 dinars for an extraordinary *qayna*, whom he purchased from a certain Ibn al-Kattani.”⁴⁵ He was apparently criticized “by other princes for the high prices he was willing to pay, perhaps because by doing so he drove up the market” for *qiyān*.⁴⁶

Ibn Bassam’s detailed description of Ibn Razin’s extraordinarily high-priced *qayna*—though perhaps exaggerated—nonetheless sheds light on the characteristics that he and his contemporaries associated with the ideal, archetypal *qayna*. Ibn Bassam enumerates the alluring

⁴¹Wadad al-Qadi, “Biographical Dictionaries: Inner Structure and Cultural Significance” in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, edited by George Nicholas Atiyeh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 103. Wadad al-Qadi describes the way in which Ibn Bassam builds on Ibn Hayyan to make this point: “Ibn Bassam, in the introduction to his *al-Dhakhira fi Mahasin ahl al-Jazira*, quoted Andalusia’s great historian, Ibn Hayyan, in his rebellion against servility to the traditions of the East, and after that he went on to record the biographies of his Andalusian contemporaries from the litterateurs in the rest of the book.”

⁴²Quoted in Charles Pellat, “Ibn Bassam,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed.

⁴³Quoted in Tibi, 313. Notably, Ibn Bassam declares that al-Andalus was an isolated and remote enclave of Islamic culture—“behind them and in front of them lie only the Ocean, the Christians, and the Goths.” For Ibn Bassam, the ability of the Andalusian litterateurs to conjure up a flourishing culture of literature and refinement, especially when surrounded by such inhospitable and uncultured neighbors, made their accomplishments all the more exceptional.

⁴⁴Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 15.

⁴⁵Ibid, 15, quoting Ibn Bassam, 70-71.

⁴⁶Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 15.

qualities and impressive repertoire of skills belonging to Ibn Razin's *qayna* in the following passage:

She had no peer in her class, no one had seen [a woman] more cheerful, more gracious of movement, gentler of gesture, sweeter of voice, better in singing, more excellent her in writing, more skilled in calligraphy, more refined in manner, and more possessed of all that is good and could be desired. She was free from grammatical error in all that she wrote or sang, with a thorough knowledge of medicine, and her conversation extended even to natural history, the anatomy of the internal organs, and other things about which even many of those who claim to be specialists in those fields do not know well. [Her skills included] the manufacture of weapons [*al-thuqāf*—lit. the art of straightening of weapons such as lances, spears, and javelins], as well as fencing and sparring with swords, spears, and sharpened daggers, and other entertaining pastimes [*wa-ghayr dhālika min anwā' al-li'ab al-muṭriba*]. In this, no-one had ever heard of any who was her like, her equal, or her match. To complement her, [Hudhayl] purchased many beautiful female slaves, famous in Qur'anic recitation [*tajwīd*], whom he sought from every direction. His *sitāra* [orchestra] was the most glorious of all of the 'petty kings' of al-Andalus.⁴⁷

Ibn Razin's *qayna* boasts an impressive résumé that stands out as unusual for a woman of the Middle Ages, even within the ranks of the highly trained *qiyān*. In addition to her excellence in more characteristically feminine activities—such as singing and calligraphy—this *qayna* is presented as an expert in the traditionally masculine fields of medicine, natural history, manufacturing weaponry, and competing in some sort of fencing activity. If Hudhayl Ibn Razin purchased female Qur'an reciters to “complement her,” it would seem that she also recited Qur'an. Ibn Bassam does not merely indicate that she *participated* in these varied activities; he specifically states that she *excelled* in them, and her knowledge reputedly surpassed even that of specialists in the fields of medicine and natural history.

There is some indication later in Ibn Bassam's text that al-Kattani, the slave merchant who sold this particular *qayna* to Ibn Razin, was less than scrupulously honest. Ibn Bassam accuses him, in fact, of being a “sly dog” who “used artful means” and “falsehoods” to exaggerate the skills of his *qiyān* in order to sell them at a higher price. What follows in the *Dhakhira* is a clearly hyperbolic and self-promoting statement issued by al-Kattani about his abilities to train his slave women in a variety of impressive pursuits: “I am capable of calling forth [intelligence] from stones, to say nothing of what I can do with dullards and ignoramuses! Consider that I have in my possession four Christians [*rūmiyyāt*] who were but yesterday ignorant, and now are learned, wise, schooled in logic, philosophy, geometry, music, skilled in the use of the astrolabe, in astronomy, astrology, grammar, prosody, literature, and calligraphy... This is the greatest testimony that I am indeed unparalleled in my era.”⁴⁸ The claim is obviously hyperbolic, and Ibn Bassam expresses his skepticism about the reliability of al-Kattani's claims. Nonetheless, as Reynolds explains, the interesting aspect of passage “lies in the fact that *what* he is boasting about are the scholarly merits of these *qiyān*—the breadth of their knowledge and education—rather than their looks, their voices, or their musical repertory.”⁴⁹

Overarching Narrative

Ibn Bassam's text sheds light on the status of the *qiyān* institution in the later *taifa* period, indicating that *qiyān*-owners of the twelfth century were willing to pay exorbitant sums of money for highly trained women. Notably, he mentions Ibn Razin's highly trained *qayna* whose training included, in addition to the standard proficiency in singing, literature, and calligraphy, expertise

⁴⁷ Translated by Dwight Reynolds, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

in medicine, natural history, weaponry, and Qur'anic recitation. That al-Kattani chose to highlight these particular talents suggests that there was a “market for *qiyān* who had such skills.”⁵⁰ In fact, Reynolds concludes that there was a period of time during the twelfth century in al-Andalus when it was possible—and profitable—for a *qayna* to develop skills in fields typically dominated by men. Some of the female slaves of this era, he writes, “had reason and opportunity to develop their minds and scholarly skills, and...their owners had motives (financial, among others) to allow them to do so.”⁵¹ This discussion of unusually highly trained *qiyān*, in turn, helps Ibn Bassam prove the legitimacy of Andalusian literary, artistic, and musical production and courtly refinement, allowing him to challenge the assumption that the established urban centers of Baghdad and Damascus were culturally superior to the burgeoning provincial enclaves in the “remote West” of al-Andalus.

Ibn Bashkuwal's *Book of the Continuation*

Ibn Bashkuwal was a scholar and jurist (d. 1183) from Cordoba. His *Kitab al-Sila* (*The Book of the Continuation*) is a massive biographical dictionary of prominent Andalusian scholars. As indicated by the title, it builds on the work of Ibn al-Faradi, the historian who pioneered the genre of biographical dictionaries in Al-Andalus two centuries earlier.⁵² Ibn Bashkuwal's work was, in turn, continued by another Andalusian scholar, Abu Ja'far Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Gharnati, whose *Kitab Silat al-Sila* (*The Book of the Continuation of the Continuation*), picks up where Ibn Bashkuwal leaves off. As Wadad al-Qadi explains, an author who wrote a “continuation” would “take the biographical dictionary or a predecessor, possibly, but not necessarily with the predecessor's criteria, and, write his own biographical dictionary, including the biographies of the people who lived in the period between the predecessor's time and his own.”⁵³

As a genre, the “continuation” first emerged in the Maghreb and al-Andalus, and Ibn Bashkuwal is considered its pioneer. Al-Qadi points out that the genre of the “continuation” dovetailed with the project of establishing the legitimacy of Andalusian scholarship and artistic production. She writes, “by using the ‘continuation’ format to record the biographies of the religious scholars up to their respective times, what Ibn Bashkuwal [was] doing was to precisely highlight the Islamic West's continued tradition of original scholarship, and on its own; hence the relationship between the appearance of this phenomenon in the genre of the biographical dictionaries...in the Islamic West.”⁵⁴ By framing a book as a “continuation,” the author is able to situate the book as the inheritor of a preexisting tradition, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and authority of the text and its contents.

Adding to the 1400 entries on famous male figures, Ibn Bashkuwal concludes his work with 17 biographies of notable female scholars who lived from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries.⁵⁵ Three more profiles of female scholars can be found in al-Gharnati's continuation.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A. Huici Miranda, “Ibn Bashkuwal,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed.

⁵³ Al-Qadi, 103.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The biographies of these 17 women have been translated into English by Mohamad Ballan in his academic blog on the history of al-Andalus, and with Mr. Ballan's permission I am quoting his translations. For reference, I have also included the page numbers for the original Arabic in the *Kitab al-Sila*. For Mohamad Ballan's translations, see: M. Ballan, “Prominent Andalusian Women: A Short List from Ibn Bashkuwal's *Kitab al-Sila*” *Ballandalus* (blog), March 6, 2014. <https://ballandalus.wordpress.com/2014/03/06/prominent-andalusian-muslim-women-a-short-list-from-ibn-bashkuwals-kitab-al-silla/>. For the original Arabic see: Ibn Bashkuwāl, *Kitāb al-Šila* (Cairo: Dār al-Miṣriyya li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama, 1966), 691-696.

The female scholars profiled in the *Kitab al-Sila* belong to a wide range of different categories. Some, for example, are the sisters, mothers, and wives of prominent male figures.⁵⁶ A significant number of the women in Ibn Bashkuwal's account, however, are described not merely in relation to their male relatives but according to the professional roles they held. Lubna of Cordoba, for example, [was] the palace secretary of the caliph al-Hakam I.⁵⁷ Similarly, Ghaliba was known as "the Professor,"⁵⁸ and Maryam "would teach literature to women."⁵⁹ Among the women in the *Kitab al-Sila* are also a few former slaves, such as Radiya, the slave girl of the caliph Abd al-Rahman III, who eventually manumitted her,⁶⁰ and "Layla, who was "the freed-woman of the vizier Abu Bakr b. al-Khatib."⁶¹ Other women in Ibn Bashkuwal's account, however, do not seem to have had such clearly defined roles—they are neither related to eminent individuals nor "attached" to particular courtly offices, but are instead identified merely by the skills that they had developed most thoroughly. Women of this sort include individuals like Safiyya bint 'Abd Allāh al-Rabī, "a great woman of letters and poetry" with "good calligraphy skills."⁶² Maryam bint Abī Ya'qūb al-Faysūlī al-Shalabī is described in a similar manner: "She was a renowned and eminent poet and litterateur who would teach literature to women."⁶³

Ibn Bashkuwal's entries also reveal that women excelled in numerous different branches of Andalusian scholarship. Collectively, the women in Ibn Bashkuwal's biographical dictionary are experts in the fields of literature, grammar, poetry, calligraphy, Islamic theology, math, and other sciences. Women wrote books, composed poems, delivered speeches in the courts of the caliphs, memorized the Qur'an, and disseminated the teachings of prominent male theologians. While a number of the women in the *Kitab al-Sila* are described as experts in one particular discipline, there are others, such as the famous Lubna of Cordoba, whose talents were especially diverse: "Lubna, the palace secretary of al-Hakam ibn 'Abd al-Rahman...excelled in writing, grammar, and poetry. Her knowledge of mathematics was also immense and she was proficient in other sciences as well."⁶⁴ Ibn Bashkuwal concludes, "there were none in the Umayyad palace as noble as she."⁶⁵ That Lubna of Cordoba excelled in such a wide range of academic disciplines reflects the multifaceted nature of education in medieval al-Andalus, a world in which scholars were expected to master all the "sciences"—which included literature, poetry, philosophy, religion, and mathematics, as well as the fields more commonly associated with science in the modern world, such as astronomy, medicine, and physics.⁶⁶

Given that Ibn Bashkuwal was primarily concerned with religious scholars, women who studied religion occupy a prominent place in Ibn Bashkuwal's text. A woman named Ghaliba bint Muhammad, for example, is among the women in the *Kitab al-Sila* who transmitted the works of notable male Hadith scholars: "Ghaliba...was of Andalusian origin and narrated Hadith

⁵⁶ One female religious scholar, Fatima, is identified as the mother of the "eminent professor" Abu al-Qasim bin al-Taylasan. See Ballan, "Fatima;" (English translation) Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic). Another woman by the name of Khadija was the wife of the renowned jurist 'Abd Allah b. Asad (Ballan, "Khadija" (English translation); Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic). See also Ibn Bashkuwal, 691, 692, 694, 696.

⁵⁷ Ballan, "Lubna;" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 692 (Arabic).

⁵⁸ "Ballan, "Ghaliba (English translation);" Ibn Bashkuwal, 691 (Arabic).

⁵⁹ "Ballan, "Maryam" (English translation);" Ibn Bashkuwal, 694 (Arabic).

⁶⁰ "Ballan, "Radiya" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic).

⁶¹ "Ballan, "Layla" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic).

⁶² Ballan, "Safiyya" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic).

⁶³ Ballan, "Maryam" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic). See also: Ballan, "A'isha;" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 692 (Arabic); Ibn Bashkuwal's description of A'isha b. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Qādim is very similar to his description of Lubna. "She was from Cordoba. The famous historian Ibn Hayyān made mention of her and said: There was none in the entire Iberian peninsula in her era that could be compared with her in terms of knowledge, excellence, literary skill, poetic ability, eloquence, virtue, purity, generosity, and wisdom."

⁶⁴ Ballan, "Lubna" (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 692 (Arabic).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Lubna of Cordoba: The Islamic Golden Age," narrated by Kamila Shamsie, *The Essay*, BBC Radio, August 5 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03vd5xt>.

from Asbagh bin Malik, the ascetic.”⁶⁷ Another woman reportedly studied *hadith* with her father and learned the *Sahih Bukhari* from the famous scholar Abu Dharr ‘Abd Allah bin Ahmad al-Harawi and “from several other illustrious scholars in Mecca.”⁶⁸ Several other women scholars are singled out for having memorized the Qur’an—women like Hafsa, who “mastered seven readings of the Qur’an and also memorized many books of hadith,” and scholars like Fatima, who studied under a great Sufi ascetic.⁶⁹ Female religious scholars also helped disseminate the teachings of specific individuals and theological schools by learning and transmitting the works of leading male theologians.⁷⁰

Ibn Bashkuwal does not exclusively focus on women who transmitted religious knowledge from male theologians, however. In fact, many of the women in the *Kitab al-Sila* earn their place in the text through their outstanding contributions to more secular academic fields. The most famous of these is the aforementioned Lubna of Cordoba, the palace secretary during the reign of al-Hakam II.⁷¹ Lubna, however, is actually one of three palace secretaries featured in *Kitab al-Sila*. The second, Mazna, was “the palace secretary of the caliph ‘Abd al-Rahmān III...[and] among the most knowledgeable and skilled women.”⁷² Fāṭima, the third *katiba* in Ibn Bashkuwal’s biographical dictionary, was known as “an eminent secretary [who] lived for a very long time, over 94 years, and spent most of that time engaged in writing long epistles and books. She wrote well and was quite eloquent in speech.”⁷³ To fully appreciate the nuances of Ibn Bashkuwal’s presentation of these female scholars, it is important to note that in medieval al-Andalus terms like “secretary” and “copyist” connoted far more academic expertise and prestige than in modern English usage. A *katib* in the court of al-Hakam II was not responsible merely for replicating knowledge that already existed. Rather, copyists, librarians, and royal secretaries were actively engaged in the process of commenting on, annotating, and adding new material to the texts they encountered.

Ibn Bashkuwal makes a point of highlighting the accomplishments of the exceptionally prestigious female scholars whose contributions to Andalusian poetry he considered to be unparalleled. Of the infamous poetess Wallāda bint al-Mustakfī, he writes, “Wallada...was a great litterateur and poet, very eloquent in speech, skilled in verse, and would keep the company of other litterateurs and poets. I heard one of my shaykhs, Abū ‘Abd Allāh ibn Makkī (may God have mercy upon him), describe her excellence and knowledge. He told me: there is no one to equal her in honor.”⁷⁴ His description of another brilliant Cordoban poetess, ‘Ā’isha, is similarly glowing. Quoting Ibn Hayyan, he declares, “There was none in the entire Iberian Peninsula in her era that could be compared with her in terms of knowledge, excellence, literary skill, poetic ability, eloquence, virtue, purity, generosity, and wisdom. She would often write panegyrics in praise of the kings of her era and would give speeches in their court.”⁷⁵ As these examples

⁶⁷ Ballan, “Ghaliba” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 691 (Arabic).

⁶⁸ Ballan, “Khadija” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 694 (Arabic).

⁶⁹ Ballan, “Hafsa al-Salami” (English translation).

⁷⁰ Ballan “Tawiya” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 696 (Arabic). Tawiya (also known as Habiba), for example, “learned and transmitted many of the works and books of the eminent scholar ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Barr directly from him. She also learned and transmitted many works of Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad bin ‘Umar al-Udhri al-Dala’i.” See also the entries on Khadija b. Ja’far b. Nusayr b. Tammar al-Tamimi (Ibn Bashkuwal, 693); Maryam b. Abi Ya’qub al-Faysuli al-Shalabi (Ibn Bashkuwal, 694), Radiya (Ibn Bashkuwal, 693).

⁷¹ Ballan, “Lubna” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 692 (Arabic).

⁷² Ballan, “Mazna” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 692 (Arabic).

⁷³ Ballan, “Fatima” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 693 (Arabic).

⁷⁴ Ballan, “Wallada” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 696 (Arabic).

⁷⁵ Ballan, “Aisha” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 696 (Arabic).

indicated, it is the intellect and virtuosity of women like Lubna, Fatima, and ‘A’isha that most captivates Ibn Bashkuwal’s attention.⁷⁶

Some of the women in the *Kitab al-Sila* seem to be equally notable for both their religious piety and their intellectual acumen. The image of the “pious scholar” is evident in the figure of ‘Ā’isha bint Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Qādim. Ibn Bashkuwal writes, for instance, that in addition to being well known for her “knowledge, excellence, literary skill, poetic ability, [and] eloquence,” she was also famous for her “virtue, purity, generosity, and wisdom.” He continues, “She was an avid collector of books, of which she had a very large amount, and was very concerned with the pursuit of knowledge. She was also very wealthy and died chaste, without having ever married.”⁷⁷ In his continuation of Ibn Bashkuwal’s text, al-Gharnati describes a freed-slave girl named Layla as the “most superior woman of her era in knowledge and understanding of various sciences.”⁷⁸ He goes on to explain that it was the combination of her knowledge, magnanimity and piety, “which led the chief judge (*qadi*) of Granada” to marry her.⁷⁹

Overarching Narrative

Ibn Bashkuwal, like many other Andalusian litterateurs, was passionate about highlighting the validity of Andalusian scholarship and drawing attention to the distinctly Andalusian artistic and intellectual tradition that developed independently from that of the East. He strengthens this claim by including biographies of notable women scholars; the virtuosity of these women attests to the exceptional abundance of intellectual activity in al-Andalus. Indeed, it becomes apparent from the *Kitab al-Sila* that highly skilled female intellectuals could be found in nearly every academic discipline, from poetry to mathematics to Islamic theology. Moreover, Ibn Bashkuwal did not shy away from the idea that women could be intellectually gifted and pious at the same time. This nuanced portrayal is striking, considering that medieval narratives about women—not only in the Islamic world, but in Western European Christian contexts as well—frequently present women as larger-than-life figures who are either extravagantly pious or flamboyantly secular. More often than not, medieval women were assigned to one of two radically separate categories—that of the ascetic-saint (Rabia al-Adawiyya, for example), or the sexualized temptress (as seen in the story of the “Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad” from the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights*). The fact that Ibn Bashkuwal and al-Gharnati allow the women they describe to embody both intellectual talent and piety complicates this binary depiction of femininity that permeates medieval narratives about women.

Al-Tifashi’s “A Pleasure to the Ears, On the Art of Music”

Ahmad al-Tifashi (d. 1253) was a thirteenth-century writer born in northeastern Algeria who later relocated to and wrote in the East.⁸⁰ He is best known for his book on gemstones and for his anthology of erotic poetry and jokes, the *Promenade of the Hearts*. Among his works is also multi-volume encyclopedia titled “Unerring Method for the Intelligent to Perceive with their

⁷⁶ For more examples, see the Ballan’s translations of the entry on Fatima b. Yahya b. Yūsuf al-Maghāmī who was “amongst the most knowledgeable, most magnanimous and wisest individuals in her era,” (Ibn Bashkuwal, 691); Mazna, the palace secretary of the caliph ‘Abd al-Rahmān III, who “was among the most knowledgeable and skilled women,” (Ibn Bashkuwal, 692); Safīyya b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Rabī. “a great woman of letters and poetry [with] good calligraphy skills,” (Ibn Bashkuwal, 693); and the freed slave woman Radiya, who is said to have “excelled in reading and writing” (Ibn Bashkuwal, 693).

⁷⁷ Ballan, “Aisha” (English translation); Ibn Bashkuwal, 696 (Arabic).

⁷⁸ Ballan, “Layla” (English translation).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Reynolds, “*Qīyan*,” 20.

Five Senses.” Although much of this encyclopedia is now lost, one of the remaining fragments includes two short chapters on the “art of music.”⁸¹ In these chapters, al-Tifashi describes the distinct style of Andalusian music and traces its development from the ninth century through the thirteenth century. He discusses the involvement of slave women musicians in the development of Andalusian music, describes the process by which *qiyān* were imported, trained, and sold, and he praises their ability to evoke powerful emotional responses from their listeners. As Reynolds observes, “like the authors of so many of the other surviving works about al-Andalus...[al-Tifashi] was an Andalusian who was writing for an Eastern readership.”⁸² Once again, al-Tifashi belongs to the cohort of Andalusian scholars who strove to assert the legitimacy, independence, and sophistication of the culture of the Islamic West.

Al-Tifashi begins his discussion of music in al-Andalus with a few comments about Andalusian music in pre-Islamic times and the suggestion that the Umayyads brought order and refinement to the unsophisticated musical culture of pre-Islamic Iberia. stating that “the songs of the people of Andalus were, in ancient times, either in the style of the Christians, or in the style of the Arab camel drivers, although *they had no rules to rely on* until the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty.”⁸³ This comment evokes the broader idea (espoused by the authors of several other works profiled here) that the Umayyad presence in al-Andalus brought a culture of refinement to the Iberian peninsula. This process centered around a cultural transfer from East to West, to which al-Tifashi alludes when he suggests that during the time of al-Hakam I (796-822), singers trained in Medina arrived in al-Andalus and taught local musicians the Eastern style.⁸⁴ Additionally, like Ibn Hayyan, al-Tifashi presents Ziryab as the “foremost expert” in this art, noting that he came to the court of ‘Abd al-Rahman II in 822 and introduced into al-Andalus the style he had learned from the famous Baghdadi musician Ishaq al-Mawsili.⁸⁵

Al-Tifashi quickly turns his focus toward the emergence of a distinctly Andalusian musical style that emerged from a medley of diverse influences. He asserts, for instance, that the singer Ibn Bajja invented a musical style “found only in al-Andalus.”⁸⁶ Al-Tifashi writes, “Ibn Bajja, the most illustrious expert appeared and secluded himself for several years with skilled singing girls, where upon he improved the *istihlal* and the *‘amal* and combined the songs of the Christians with those of the East, thereby inventing a style found only in al-Andalus, toward which the temperament of the people inclined, so that they rejected all others.”⁸⁷ Al-Tifashi’s observation that Ibn Bajja “secluded himself with skilled singing girls” is noteworthy, as it places *qiyān* squarely in the middle of development of a distinct Andalusian musical tradition.

Having established the emergence of a unique Andalusian music tradition, Al-Tifashi further elaborates on the role of slave women musicians in the development of Andalusian music. Quoting the musician Abu l-Hasan al-Waqqasi, he explains, “Slave girls and masters of the instrumental art have made marvelous and moving additions, *ad libitum*, to the charming poems which are sung at this time, consisting of notes that delight their hearer.”⁸⁸ He goes on to provide more specific details, noting, for example, that the “marvelous and moving additions”

⁸¹ An English translation of this text can be found in Benjamin M. Liu, and James T. Monroe. *Ten Hispano-Arabic Strophic Songs in the Modern Oral Tradition: Music and Texts*. University of California Publications in Modern Philology, vol. 125. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 36-44.

⁸² Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 20.

⁸³ Liu and Monroe, 42. Emphasis added.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* On page 37, Al-Tifashi mentions the selling of *qiyān*, noting the geographic range through which they were sold: “The [slave girls] are sold from Seville to all the kings of the Maghrib and Ifriqiya.”

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

attributed to the *qiyān* center around the practice of infusing poetry and music with emotion and introducing instruments such as the *oud* (lute), the oboe, and the tambourine.⁸⁹ As these statements indicate, al-Tifashi's understood the emergence of Andalusian music to be heavily contingent on the contributions of slave women performers. In addition, he indicates that the *qiyān* did not merely replicate new ideas developed by male singers, but that these women were themselves actively involved in recreating Andalusian music. In discussing the involvement of singing slave girls in Andalusian music, al-Tifashi also provides information about the process of training *qiyān*, describing older women as transmitters of tradition: "Today, this form of singing is especially prevalent, among Andalusian cities, in Seville, where there are expert old women who teach singing to slave girls they own, as well as to salaried half-Arab female [*muwalladat*] servants of theirs."⁹⁰

Al-Tifashi provides detailed information about the extensive repertoire and varied talents of the typical Andalusian *qayna*. "Among the singers of al-Andalus," he writes, "both men and women, there are those who can sing five hundred songs, one after the other, or close to it."⁹¹ Building on his assertion that singers of both genders boasted impressive repertoires of songs, al-Tifashi reports that he once witnessed a singing girl who sang a poem so long that "two hours passed while she sang [one] line alone."⁹² Not only is it important for a *qayna* to master a large number of songs, but she must be able to select a song that is appropriate to the occasion for which she is performing: "[A slave girl] is never sold without an accompanying register containing all [of the songs] she has memorized...among them are rapid poems suitable for a beginning, and slow poems which experts in the art of music sing only at the end...such songs and their like are sung only by outstanding experts."⁹³ Finally, al-Tifashi also informs his readers that a singing girl must have "elegant handwriting" and she must be able to prove her mastery of the Arabic language.⁹⁴ What is particularly striking about this last observation is the implication that many of the most impressive *qiyān*—whose talents hinged entirely on their facility with language and words—were not native Arabic speakers. As any student of Arabic can confirm, mastery of the Arabic language is no small feat. The fact that the *qiyān* needed to attain a degree of mastery and linguistic dexterity that permitted them to successfully compose poetry and songs within a regimented structure of rhyme and meter makes their accomplishments even more impressive.

Al-Tifashi is more emphatic than other chroniclers that the monetary value of the *qiyān* hinged not on physical appearance but on musical talent. In fact, he states, "Each of those slave girls is sold for one thousand Maghribi *dinars*; either more or less, *according to her singing, not [for the beauty of] her face*."⁹⁵ Further adding to the notion that the value of a *qayna* was contingent upon her repertoire and skills in singing is al-Tifashi's discussion of the fact that the *qayna* was often sold "with a warranty [on the register of songs she is purported to know], the absence of which necessarily lowers the price of the sale."⁹⁶ The necessity of offering a warranty to guarantee that the slave girl could actually sing the songs she claimed she knew indicates that there may have been an incentive on the part of slave merchants to inflate the value of their *qiyān* by exaggerating their repertoires. This situation, in turn, further confirms the idea that the value

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 37.

⁹¹ Ibid, 42.

⁹² Ibid, 37.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 37. (Emphasis added.)

⁹⁶ Ibid.

of the *qiyān* was tied primarily to their capacity for exceptional musical performance rather than their physical attractiveness.⁹⁷

Overarching Narrative

This particular excerpt from al-Tifashi's larger encyclopedia focuses specifically on the history and evolution of Andalusian music. Throughout the chapter, he emphasizes the creation of a distinctly Andalusian musical tradition that represented the convergence of Eastern Islamic styles and Western Christian motifs. Even taking care not to project modern clichés about *convivencia* and cultural exchange in medieval Islamic Spain, it is clear that al-Tifashi is describing a process of convergence and fusion that could only have taken place in al-Andalus. Given that he was writing to Eastern audiences, this narrative allowed al-Tifashi to infuse his work with a sense of Andalusian exceptionalism. Echoing Ibn Hayyan, al-Tifashi indicates that *qiyān* played an important role in developing this distinct musical tradition, and he highlights their role in improving various musical styles, instruments, and performance practice. His assertion that "slave girls and masters of the instrumental art have made marvelous and moving additions, *ad libitum*, to the charming poems which are sung at this time, consisting of notes that delight their hearer" conveys this idea in an unusually direct manner.⁹⁸ Furthermore, he insists that the value of a *qayna* hinged on the quality of her singing, rather than the "beauty of her face."

Al-'Umari's Paths of Perception Among the Realms of the Great Cities

Al-'Umari was born in Damascus in 1301 and came to hold a position in the chancery of the Mamluk administration. He was reputedly "obstinate and outspoken" and "quick to make enemies of the people with whom he dealt."⁹⁹ As a result, he was fired from his position in the chancery, but he earned a reputation as a brilliant writer.¹⁰⁰ Al-'Umari's multivolume *Masalik al-Absar fi Mamalik al-Amsar (Paths of Perception Among the Realms of the Great Cities)* is primarily designed to comment on various aspects of Mamluk government, but the first volume focuses on Islamic court culture generally, with an entire section dedicated to singing and music in al-Andalus and the Maghreb.

The fact that a Syrian administrator would include such detailed information about the court culture of al-Andalus may at first seem puzzling. As it happened, however, Damascene elites "had a strong inclination towards *adab*," and al-'Umari's accounts of music, singing, and poetry in the Islamic West would likely have been of great interest to his Syrian contemporaries. Of his eighteen entries on Andalusian singers, eight biographies specifically focus on the *qiyān*. Al-'Umari's text is informed by earlier, anonymous sources describing the lives of singers and musicians in al-Andalus. This text focuses on the early period of the Cordoban court and offers biographical accounts of earliest *qiyān* in Al-Andalus, during the rule of al-Hakam I (796-822).¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Ibid, 38. Additional evidence that musical talent upstaged physical beauty lies in the fact that *qiyān* sold with their own entourage of accompanists were significantly more expensive: "Sometimes she is an expert in all instruments, and in all kinds of dance and shadow play, and comes with her instrument, along with [an entourage of] slave girls to beat the drum and play the reed for her. She is then called a 'consummate' artist, and sold for many thousands of Maghribi dinars."

⁹⁸ Ibid, 43.

⁹⁹ K.S. Salibi, "Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Umari," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed.

¹⁰⁰ Salibi, "Ibn Fadl Allah al-'Umari."

¹⁰¹ Reynolds, "*Qiyān*," 2. Quotations from al-'Umari are a mixture of translations by Reynolds in his article on the Andalusian *qiyān*, and my own translation efforts, with the assistance of Dr. Mukhtar Ali at Claremont McKenna College and Talyah al-Sahli, a student at Pitzer College. The nature of the translation will be identified in each footnote.

In nearly all of his references to the *qiyān*, al-‘Umari’s *Masālik* describes these women as exquisitely beautiful, and their beauty is often compared to graceful animals, lovely flowers, and other impressive natural features. For example, the *jariya* ‘Aziz is compared to a young gazelle—one of the classic metaphors for female beauty in Arab culture—and Fatik’s beauty is compared to an exquisite flower.¹⁰² By far the most ubiquitous image used to express the beauty of the *jariyat* in al-‘Umari’s biographical dictionary is the full moon, which, like the gazelle, is one of the paragons of feminine beauty in the Arabic poetic lexicon. According to al-Umari, the *jariya* ‘Aziz is so beautiful, that “if she removed her veil, the full moon itself would be veiled.”¹⁰³ Bahja, like ‘Aziz, possesses a beauty so potent that she “puts the sun to shame, and so veils with its twilight.”¹⁰⁴ This imagery of the beautiful *jariya* unveiling herself and thereby displacing the radiant beauty of the sun and the moon is repeated time and time again throughout the biographies of the *qiyān*. There is a sense that feminine beauty has the capacity to alter the laws of nature, as conveyed in al-‘Umari’s statement about Su’ada: “When she comes into view, the unveiled full moon is veiled, and the appearance of the sun pales.”¹⁰⁵

Al-‘Umari’s descriptions of beauty are infused with imagery that suggests female authority. It is frequently implied that women have the power to disrupt the laws of nature; by extension, then, they must also exert a powerful influence over the hearts of infatuated men. The women in al-Umari’s descriptions are active participants in the world around them, and the men they meet are consistently awestruck by these overpowering women. Al-‘Umari’s entry on the second ‘Aziz exemplifies this kind of description and is worth quoting at length:

She seduces the eyesight and confounds the tongue with dumbfoundedness. The archer, when he lays eyes on her, loses his bow, and her purity calls into question even the innocence of the newborn gazelle, and it is as if the prey is killed before the hunter. The pain of the heart’s yearning is enflamed merely at the sight of her languid eyelids....the doves learn their song from the sound of her footsteps...it is her temperament which indicates that there is lightning in the clouds, and the whales themselves quake more than the branches of the trees. Her affectations are a governing property on things that already have those properties—her speaking makes the mute muter. [Al-Hakam] could not bear her absence and could not bear her wandering about, because he thought that her breath was his breath, which extends life and was the cause of his existence.¹⁰⁶

Naturally, this passage reveals less about the *reality* of al-Hakam’s relationship to ‘Aziz than it does about the narrative al-‘Umari chooses to create about the nature of feminine beauty. Al-‘Umari’s choice of imagery and language dramatically establishes ‘Aziz as the master of al-Hakam’s emotions, suggesting that he saw her as the vital source of his existence. On a subtler level, al-Umari also uses a dramatic rhetorical strategy for describing ‘Aziz’s beauty. Rather than suggesting that she resembles the entity that typically connotes “beauty” in metaphoric imagery, al-‘Umari inverts the comparison, asserting that ‘Aziz surpasses the very exemplars of beauty. Instead, ‘Aziz herself becomes the quintessential model for beauty and grace. It is in service of this idea that he suggests that “the doves learn their song” from the sound of ‘Aziz’s own footsteps. His comment that ‘Aziz’s presence acts as a “governing property on things that

¹⁰² Al-‘Umari, *Masālik*, 465 and 480. For example, “وكنات زهرة زهراتها و ثمره اسراته”

¹⁰³ Al-‘Umari, 465. “لو أماطت نقابها البدر لتلقم” (Translation my own).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 470. “تخلج الشمس فتتبرقع بالشف” (Translation my own).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 499. Al-‘Umari also writes that Muhja’s beauty would “illuminate the moon in the event that it should go dim” (473), “تجلو القمر إذا غاب,” and that Fatim’s “beauty would shimmer like the sun shimmers from behind the clouds, and she herself appeared to illuminate the full moon” (479) “شف كما تشف الشمس وراء الغمام وتبدو بدو البدر التمام” (Translation my own.)

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 368. Thanks to Mukhtar Ali for assistance with translating and interpreting the meaning of this passage.

already have those properties”—that “she makes the mute *muter*,” for example—further underscores the notion that her presence destabilizes the immutable laws of nature themselves.

Despite al-‘Umari’s portrayal of women like ‘Aziz as overpowering in their irresistible physical attractiveness, there are also many instances in which the women profiled in the *Masalik* are notable for their intellect, wit, and the quality of their performances rather than their beauty and sex appeal alone. In most cases, the initial description of physical beauty is followed by commentary about their intellectual strengths and artistic talents. In his entry on Muhja, al-‘Umari remarks that the other women could not comprehend her brilliance and cleverness.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, he observes that ‘Aziz is “intelligent, courteous, clever and a great teller of anecdotes.”¹⁰⁸ Another *jariya*, Raghd, is described as a highly talented singer and a very refined woman, and al-‘Umari reports that her excellent performances brought happiness to her audiences during the tumultuous end-times of the Umayyad era in Andalusia; she revived the spirits of her audiences and enlivened gatherings, her presence illuminating the *majalis* “like the light of a burning candle.”¹⁰⁹

Al-‘Umari further emphasizes the intelligence of the *qiyān* by highlighting their ability to compose a piece of poetry spontaneously and set it to music immediately. In his entry on the second ‘Aziz, for instance, we are told that she composed a poem on the spot, and then successfully set the newly created poem to music, upon being ordered to do so by al-Hakam I.¹¹⁰ It is apparent from this text that al-Hakam I frequently asked his *qiyān* to compose poetry or set a poem to music spontaneously. In fact, the caliph so enjoyed the spontaneous creations of his slave women singers and poets that he constructed contests in which his women competed for the best poetic or musical composition. For example, al-‘Umari recounts al-Hakam’s creation of a singing competition in which he challenged his *qiyān* “to compose a song using a love poem by one of the ‘Arab lovers of ancient times’ that would communicate the poet’s situation to him and bring the poet’s state into his own heart.”¹¹¹ When the *qayna* Bahja wins the competition, al-Hakam I was “ecstatic and declared, ‘This is what I have been striving and searching for!’”¹¹² Al-‘Umari pays close attention to these competitions, and by highlighting the moments in which the *qiyān* earn praise and notoriety for successful competitions, he draws attention to their intellectual prowess and the prestige they gained through their creativity and quick-witted intellect.

Building on his description of the intelligence of Andalusian *qiyān*, al-‘Umari recounts an episode in which an Iraqi *qayna* acted as the instructor of a free male poet/singer from al-Andalus. In this account, the Iraqi *qayna* introduces the male court singer, Sulaym, to special Iraqi singing styles, which he integrates with his pre-existing knowledge of Christian styles to create a distinctly multicultural, Andalusian musical genre. Al-‘Umari writes, “al-Mughira, son of al-Hakam, was brought an Iraqi singing-girl who had been selected for him from the women’s quarters [. . .] She taught him [Sulaym] [Iraqi] singing [*ghinā*] until he became proficient and he [then] added the Iraqi singing to what he had gathered [from the Christians]. There occurred sessions between the two of them in the gatherings of al-Mughira more delicate than dawn breezes and more aromatic than fragrant trees.”¹¹³ By reporting on this encounter, al-‘Umari

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 473. “إلى ذكاء وفطنة لا تقتنحها خواطر النساء.” (Translation my own.)

¹⁰⁸ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 6 (English translation); Al-‘Umari, 466 (Arabic).

¹⁰⁹ Al-‘Umari, 483 (Translation my own).

¹¹⁰ Reynolds, 6 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 476-77 (Arabic). For another instance of al-‘Umari praising the intelligence of the *qiyān*, see the entry on Fatik on page 480.

¹¹¹ Paraphrased by Dwight Reynolds, 10.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Reynolds, 10-11 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 486-88 (Arabic).

depicts a world in which the movement of the *qiyān* across the Mediterranean world facilitated the intermingling of musical styles from different communities and regions, leading to the development of new musical traditions. All of this hinges on the inversion of the normative master-slave relationship, whereby the Iraqi *qayna* becomes the teacher of the male singer.

The *qiyān* in the *Masalik* occupy a position of intimacy with al-Hakam I not solely through their attractiveness, but also through their ability to display empathetic intelligence and a predisposition for emotional sensitivity. Al-Hakam only spent time with his *qiyān* in an environment of intimacy and seclusion from the public eye. In fact, al-‘Umari notes that “al-Hakam never partook of pleasures except in secret, nor did he indulge in drink except behind a curtain, nor did he gather drinking-companions except within his private quarters, nor did he compete in wine-drinking except within his closest circle, for fear of the scandal of being found out and due to his aversion from having this become known.”¹¹⁴ He immediately follows this statement with a description of a festive occasion in which the caliph spent a long night “suggesting songs to [‘Aziz] and to the rest of his female singers, tossing down [cups of] wine in private, until night had cracked the glass of day, and satiation appeared in his eyes.”¹¹⁵ Significantly, ‘Aziz and the other *qiyān* are not considered “outsiders,” and their presence does not violate his privacy. The fact that the caliph does not feel compelled to maintain his public image around his singing girls speaks to the position of intimacy and proximity they occupied.

The *qiyān* are expected to carefully perceive and empathetically respond to the emotional needs of their masters. In one incident, al-Hakam I goes out into the countryside for a springtime excursion, leaving behind one his favorite courtesans. As al-‘Umari writes, “he had left Hayn behind and therefore lay awake that night—his eyelids never tasting sleep, nor his eyes touching slumber.”¹¹⁶ Seeking comfort and consolation, al-Hakam “sent for his female musicians to entertain him during the night with their singing.”¹¹⁷ In a state of emotional distress, the ruler turns to his *qiyān*. It is the duty of the *qayna* in this situation to demonstrate her empathetic intelligence, to compose a poem or select verses that convey the exact emotion afflicting her master. ‘Aziz, for example, “grasped the emotional state of her master” and, knowing exactly what “anguished him” selected several verses from a well-known poet, set them to music, and performed for the caliph.¹¹⁸

‘Aziz is not the only *qayna* in al-‘Umari’s collection who saves the day by guiding her master through an emotional crisis. This dynamic is a recurring theme throughout the *Masalik*. There are, in fact, several accounts very similar to the story about ‘Aziz’s ability to help al-Hakam cope with his dejection at having left behind his favorite courtesan. In another episode, for example, one of al-Hakam’s concubines “had asked for and received permission to go on an excursion to a pleasure palace outside the city, [and] he soon began to rue his decision and missed her terribly.”¹¹⁹ Noticing his distress, a *qayna* named Bahja, “felt what was in his soul” and set to music several verses from the poet al-Buhturi. When she finished, the Emir proclaimed, “It is as if you were the very heart in my breast.”¹²⁰ Another instance of a *qayna* stepping in to solve her master’s emotional crises is evident in Al-‘Umari’s comments about ‘Abd al-Rahman II’s infatuation with a particular slave girl who belonged to a free woman. Having fallen passionately in love with her, he was deeply saddened that she was not one of his

¹¹⁴ Reynolds, 7 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 466 (Arabic).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 8 (English translation).

¹²⁰ Reynolds, “*Qiyān*,” 8 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 467 (Arabic).

concubines. In his despondent state, he calls upon his *qayna*, Radah, to advise him. Radah manages to intervene in the situation and obtains permission from the free woman for ‘Abd al-Rahman to purchase her slave girl. Intriguingly, it is not the all-powerful Amir who seizes the slave girl with his authority, but the slave woman who intuits her master’s state of mind and uses her negotiating skills to unite the *amir* with the object of his desires.¹²¹

Al-‘Umari indicates that the ability of a particular *qayna* to empathize with and respond appropriately to the emotional state of her master was the most valuable and impressive talent she could use to earn favor and prestige. Al-Umari recounts Al-Hakam I’s enthusiastic reactions to a performance by ‘Aziz that struck a chord of resonance in his heart: “Al-Hakam was so deeply moved that he got off his cushion and said: ‘By God, O ‘Aziz, how perceptive you are about the places of affliction and how knowledgeable you are about the locations of complaint!...You are more worthy of [the poem] than [the poet] is, for you brought it forth as if it were a description of the state we are in!’”¹²² Similarly, al-‘Umari references Muhja’s composition of a song using verses by Abu Tammam that deeply moved the caliph. He writes, “al-Hakam trembled with pleasure so much that he almost fell off his dais and he said to her, “You have done well, by God, and so beautifully! You have surpassed that which my soul desired.”¹²³

Al-‘Umari indicates that the women who respond flawlessly to the caliph’s emotional needs not only receive praise and admiration, but also earn monetary rewards and a place of honor among the caliph’s favorite women. Al-Hakam rewarded particularly outstanding *qiyān* by conferring on them other forms of non-material rewards—such as extra affection, attention, and promotion to higher, more prestigious and intimate positions. After ‘Aziz composed and set to music a poem that especially pleased al-Hakam, for example, he “transferred her to the elite of his concubines and the mothers of his children, and she remained thus, until she died, his companion in his bed and on his pillow.”¹²⁴ According to al-‘Umari’s account, what al-Hakam valued most in his *qiyān* was their ability to sense his mood and compose poems that resonated with his emotional state.

Some of the *qiyān* successfully used their position of proximity and intimacy to pursue their own agendas. In one episode described by al-‘Umari, for example, ‘Abd al-Rahman is about to leave on a journey, which means leaving behind his favorite *jariyat*. He invites Radah to come with him on a short excursion before he leaves. Radah agrees, but only on the condition that all of her friends come along as well. Desperate for her company, ‘Abd al-Rahman has no choice but to let everyone come along for an excursion. It is interesting to observe the way in which Radah uses her privileged position as ‘Abd al-Rahman’s chosen *jariyah* to leverage benefits for all of the other *jariyat* as well.¹²⁵ The story of another *jariyah* who managed to engineer an escape back to Baghdad further illustrates the shrewd tactics used by some of the women of court to advance their own agendas.¹²⁶

¹²¹ Al-‘Umari, 490-491.

¹²² Reynolds, 6 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 466 (Arabic).

¹²³ Reynolds, 9 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 476-77. (Arabic). In the second account of a *qayna* named ‘Aziz, al-‘Umari describes al-Hakam’s response to ‘Aziz’s spontaneous composition, noting that “her poem pleased him greatly and he bestowed and lavished upon her gifts. Then he ordered her [to set it to music], so she composed a melody for it and sang it to that melody all that night while he [drained] cups one after the other to it and urged her on until the red of the [rising] sun set the coal of the night ablaze.”

¹²⁴ Reynolds, 8 (English translation); al-‘Umari, 476 (Arabic). It is interesting to note in this account that ‘Aziz was promoted to an “elite” position typically reserves for the “umm walad.” The fact that ‘Aziz is promoted *as if* she were an *umm walad* suggests that one of the most celebrated accomplishments of a slave woman was to bear a son to her master. For more examples of this dynamic, see 466 and 476-77.

¹²⁵ Al-‘Umari, 495-96.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 505.

Overarching Narrative

Although al-‘Umari wrote in the fourteenth century, the *Masalik* provides information about the earliest era of *qiyān*-ownership during the rule of al-Hakam I in the ninth century. Perhaps as a consequence of his distance—temporally and geographically—from the ninth-century Andalusian slave women, the figures al-‘Umari describes exude a mythical level of perfection. His descriptions elevate the beautiful *jariya* to a level of beauty that surpasses even the most exalted reference points for exquisiteness. Al-‘Umari does not focus exclusively on their beauty, however. We are also told of the remarkable intelligence and refinement these women exhibited—women like Muhja possess an “incomprehensible” level of brilliance and cleverness. As in Ibn Hayyan’s *Muqtabis*, al-‘Umari’s emphasis on the perfection of the *qiyān* has the indirect effect of highlighting the emotional and sexual power they exerted over their masters. Al-Hakam I, as he appears in al-‘Umari’s account, seems to have relied upon and deeply valued the perceptiveness of the *qiyān* and their ability to comfort him in times of distress—providing what Reynolds dubs “musical therapy” for an *amir* whose emotions were apparently rather volatile. This relationship of proximity and intimacy frequently allowed the *qayna* who successfully anticipated the needs of her master to collect valuable rewards, prestige, and to exert a degree of subtle influence and power.

Al- Maqqari’s *The Breath of Perfume from the Green Andalusian Branch*

Al-Maqqari was a seventeenth-century historian who wrote a multivolume history of al-Andalus. Born in 1578 in the city of Tlemcen in what is now northwestern Algeria, al-Maqqari later moved to Marrakech and then Fez, where he served as a *mufti* and *imam* at the Qarawiyyin mosque. Political strife in the Maghreb forced him to leave Fez, and al-Maqqari then moved to Cairo and Damascus. Al-Maqqari’s *Nafh al-Tib Min Ghusni al-Andalus al-Rattib* (*The Breath of Perfume from the Green Andalusian Branch*) is a two-volume work. The first volume provides a historical overview of Muslim Iberia. The second volume is a biography of the famous Andalusian poet Ibn al-Khatib, which Al-Maqqari identifies as his primary motivation for writing the *Nafh al-Tib*.¹²⁷ For purposes of this thesis, however, al-Maqqari’s introduction to his biography of Ibn al-Khatib, “an encyclopaedic work on the history and literature of al-Andalus,” is the relevant section of the text. Al-Maqqari was especially interested in demonstrating the glory and splendor of al-Andalus by highlighting the literary achievements of medieval Andalusians. As part of this picture, female poets and *qiyān* are spotlighted in al-Maqqari’s work. Although al-Maqqari lived during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his perspective vividly demonstrates the pervasiveness of the *qiyān* motif as a signifier of imperial glory. Drawing heavily on Ibn Hayyan—who was already looking back on the early centuries of Umayyad Andalusia as a lost “golden age”—depictions of the *qiyān* in the *Nafh al-Tib* are enmeshed within narratives of nostalgia in the post-*reconquista* context of the seventeenth century.

For Al-Maqqari and his contemporaries, the *reconquista* remained a painful open wound and source of humiliation in the Islamic world. He laments the loss of the Iberian peninsula to the Christians, who he deems “treacherous and impious enemies,” and emphatically condemns the *reconquista* and the Christian presence in al-Andalus.¹²⁸ Al-Maqqari mobilizes this text as an assertion of Andalusian resiliency by nostalgically recounting the “unparalleled virtues” of the

¹²⁷ Al-Maqqari, Volume I, 9 and 11.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 4.

people and culture of Umayyad Andalusia. The text is teeming with references to “the aptitude and superiority of the Andalusians” in every imaginable arena.”¹²⁹ Andalusia is presented in al-Maqqari’s text as the “crown jewel” of the Islamic world, a hard-won treasure that held tremendous value—the western “frontier” of the Muslim *umma* that epitomized Arab vigor, ambition, and the successes of Islamic expansion.”¹³⁰

Al-Maqqari’s *Nafh al-Tib* is primarily an explication of Andalusian cultural supremacy. To this end, Al-Maqqari portrays al-Andalus as a cosmopolitan hub that embraced science, learning, and culture from all over the world and attracted distinguished individuals from far-flung lands. He observes, for example, that intellectuals of all stripes from throughout the Islamic world flocked to Cordoba during the reign of Hisham II and al-Mansur: “Many men, distinguished by their talents or renowned for their proficiency in some department of science or literature, visited Andalus under this reign, and were induced, through the liberality of Al-Mansur to fix their residence in Cordova.”¹³¹ In support of his contention that al-Andalus was unrivaled in its positive characteristics, Al-Maqqari indicates that a “love of knowledge” and thirst for learning was a quintessentially Andalusian value, indicative of the superiority of the region’s culture. He writes, for example, that the people of al-Andalus “were the most ardent lovers of knowledge.”¹³² He goes on to assert that the Andalusian people valued learnedness so greatly that anyone not endowed with natural intelligence would do “every thing in his power to distinguish himself, and conceal from the people his want of instruction; for an ignorant man was...looked upon as an object of...contempt, while the learned man...was trusted and consulted on every occasion.”¹³³

Having outlined the general Andalusian propensity for knowledge-seeking, al-Maqqari presents literary culture, in particular, as the pinnacle of Andalusian scholarly achievement. Al-Maqqari notes that Cordova was considered the “library capital” of the Andalusian world and that its inhabitants were renowned for their “passion” for collecting books and creating libraries, to the extent that “any man in power, or holding a situation under government, considered himself obliged to have a library of his own, and would spare no trouble or expense in collecting books, merely in order that people might say...‘such a one has a very fine library, or he possesses a unique copy of such a book.’”¹³⁴ As this comment suggests, an individual could not claim his membership in elite society without cultivating his image as a collector of literature. Not only were elite Cordobans expected to collect literature, but they were also expected to patronize poets and *litterateurs* themselves. “Owing to this,” writes al-Maqqari, “rich men in Cordova, however illiterate they might be, encouraged letters, rewarded with the greatest munificence writers and poets, and spared neither trouble nor expense in forming large collections of books.”¹³⁵ The fondness of the Andalusian caliphs and their courtiers for *adab* culture allowed *litterateurs*, poets, singers, musicians, and other entertainers to attain a degree of proximity to the courtly elite. According to al-Maqqari, “the art of learning [entertaining tales], and reciting them in public, was considered a great accomplishment among literary men, who

¹²⁹ Ibid, 12. Even his discussion of Andalusia’s geographical features contributes to his portrayal of Andalusian superiority. He writes, for example, of Andalusia’s “beautiful climate and mild temperature, which is the same everywhere...[and] the manifold advantages and gifts with which God was pleased to endow it...the fecundity of the ground fertilized by copious rains; the fruits and productions of its soil.”

¹³⁰ Ibid, 17. Al-Maqqari writes, for example, “We consider Andalus as the prize of the race won by the horsemen, who at the utmost speed of their chargers, subdued the regions of the East and West. See also p. 12, (description of Chapter II), p. 13, (descriptions of Chapters III and IV), p. 14 (description of Chapter VIII).

¹³¹ Al-Maqqari, Book VII, Chapter I, page 200.

¹³² Ibid, Book II, Chapter III, 139.

¹³³ Ibid, 139 and 146.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 139.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

were thus enabled to approach the presence of the Sultan, and but their wit and their humorous sallies insinuate themselves into his good graces.”¹³⁶

Not only does al-Maqqari explain that an appreciation for literature, learning, and poetry is widespread in al-Andalus, but throughout the text, al-Maqqari indicates that the people of al-Andalus have an *innate* predisposition toward literature and poetry. In support of this assertion, he explains that Andalusian poetic talent “seemed to be almost innate, so that it was not an uncommon thing to see among them uneducated youth, and even children display those talents in a greater degree than grown up men trained in the paths of learning.”¹³⁷ For al-Maqqari, innate poetic ability was the true mark of intellectual greatness. Young children and women who display great literary virtuosity—because their talents were natural rather than learned and affected—represent the quintessence of prestigious, sophisticated Andalusian literary culture. Al-Maqqari notes, “We have said elsewhere that children in al-Andalus not infrequently exhibited natural talents, and a facility of rhyming, which could not often be met with in people of mature age, or who had the benefits of education.”¹³⁸ Similarly, al-Maqqari describes the witty reply of a young girl who overhears a male poet from another region criticizing the appearance of the Guadalquivir river. The fact that an ordinary girl is able to triumph over a trained poet in the display of wit adds to al-Maqqari’s portrayal of the innate cleverness of the Andalusians.¹³⁹

Al-Maqqari uses information about the development of poetry in al-Andalus to articulate a sense of Andalusian exceptionality. He compares the works of Eastern and Western poets, using this analysis to reiterate the superiority of Andalusian poetry, maintaining that many Andalusian poems “excite the admiration, and provoke the envy, of eastern poets.”¹⁴⁰ Al-Maqqari’s account of the arrival of Ziryab in Cordoba in 822 further supports his depiction of the hospitality and good taste of the Andalusians. By highlighting al-Hakam’s enthusiastic embrace of Ziryab, al-Maqqari indicates that Andalusia is a welcoming and nourishing haven for individuals with a reputation for talent, especially musicians and poets.¹⁴¹ Like al-Tifashi, al-Maqqari uses anecdotes about Ziryab to demonstrate that Andalusian musicians were actively engaged in the development of new musical traditions.¹⁴² In addition, al-Maqqari discusses the development and existence of distinctly Andalusian musical and poetic traditions. He credits the Andalusians with the invention of the *muwashshah*, a special poetic form which, he specifies,

¹³⁶ Ibid, 143.

¹³⁷ Ibid. The *Nafh al-Tib* even has an entire section devoted to establishing that “poetry is an innate gift in children” (156). Al-Maqqari also informs his readers that the Andalusian people have an unusually strong memory: “memory is among the gifts which the Almighty poured most profusely upon the Andalusians, and their history abounds with records of poets and other authors whose retentive powers were really surprising” (144). For more on Andalusian scholarly aptitude, see 148.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 156. Similarly, on page 157, Al-Maqqari writes: “certainly nobody will doubt but that this finishing of hemistiches is highly deserving of praise; had it be executed by a learned man advanced in life, it would not have commanded the greatest attention, but being, as it was, the work of a mere boy, it was a most wonderful performance, and well worthy of remark.”

¹³⁹ Ibid, 155. “A poet from Almeria was once coming down the Guadalquivir in a boat, as he came to that part of the river near Shantobus, where the stream narrows considerable, exhibiting on both sides clusters of pretty buildings and pleasure gardens, with verandas looking on the river, he said singing,--‘I am tired of the river and the boats, as well as those who look on it from Shantobus. / Indeed, were it a paradise, I would not change it for my plantation of sweet basil at home.’ No sooner had he pronounced the last words of the second verse than a girl in one of the houses close to the river put her head out of an arched window, and said to him, ‘From what country art thou, O singer?’ and he answered, ‘I am from Almeria.’--‘And pray what is there so much to be admired which would lead thee to prefer it to the river of Seville [i.e. the Guadalquivir], whose face is salt, and show nape is scabby?’--and this is no doubt one of the most clever answers that can be imagined, since, angry at hearing him depreciate the Guadalquivir, she said ironically the contrary of what the river is famous for; it being notorious to every reader that the waters of the Guadalquivir are sweet to the palate as those of the Nile, and that the mountains of *ar-Rahmah*, which form, as it were, the back of its head, are so full of fig and olive trees, and so studded with vines, that the eyes of those who visit that enchanting spot in the days of relaxation fall on nothing else but verdure. So the girl was right when she gave that answer, since Seville is far superior to Almeria in this respect.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 152.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, Book VI, Chapter IV, 118-119. Al-Maqqari reports, for example, that after Ziryab fled Baghdad he wrote a letter to al-Hakam asking his permission to “come to Cordoba and devote himself to his service.” Al-Hakam “was delighted at the offer, and sent a messenger to appraise Ziryab that he might come whenever he pleased; and that he wished very much for his arrival, and that he would not fail to reward his services as they deserved.”

¹⁴² Ibid, 118.

“has not only been approved of by Eastern critics but adopted and used by their poets, and made the theme of public literary competitions.”¹⁴³

By including Christian and Jewish poets in his narrative, al-Maqqari underscores his argument about the influence of *adab* culture in al-Andalus. He begins by explaining that “readiness of wit and poetical talents” were not “confined to the Moslems, for we find them existing among the Christians and Jews who inhabited Andalus.”¹⁴⁴ Al-Maqqari then suggests that poetic aptitude in al-Andalus reflected the diverse composition of its society.¹⁴⁵ The implication of this statement is that poetic talent in al-Andalus was essentially “in the water,” and that there was something powerfully “contagious” about the culture of intellectualism in al-Andalus; even “outsiders” not traditionally associated with the long history of Arab eloquence and poetic production would be graced by the spark of *adab* culture.¹⁴⁶

Like Christian and Jewish poets, female poets warrant their own special discussion in al-Maqqari’s work, as the depiction of their “unexpected genius” also illuminates the universal reach of literary culture and poetic ability in al-Andalus. Al-Maqqari declares, for instance, “Having proceeded so far in our endeavors to prove the aptitude and talents of the Andalusians for poetry, we should be guilty of negligence, if before terminating this chapter, if we did not say a few words about the wives and daughters of the Moslems [sic] who made themselves conspicuous by their talents and who showed their wit and eloquence in elaborate and ingenious poems.”¹⁴⁷ For Al-Maqqari, talented female poets are useful signifiers of Andalusian exceptionalism because their talent itself is unexpected and exceptional.

Using the brilliance of female poets to illuminate the extraordinary quality of Andalusian literary output, al-Maqqari indicates that female poets are both physically beautiful and intellectually talented. He writes, for example, “Hafsah ar-Rakuniyyah...was equally renowned for her beauty, her talents, her nobility, and her wealth.”¹⁴⁸ He also observes that a poetess named “Bahjah, a native of Cordoba” was equally renowned for her beauty and for her verses.¹⁴⁹ Much like his predecessors who also wrote about the *qiyān* of al-Andalus, al-Maqqari primarily emphasizes the poetic skill of the women being profiled. We learn that “Nazhun the Granadian is...endowed with great tenderness of soul, and a very mild disposition; extraordinary talents for poetry, and a most wonderful memory. She wrote several poems, and made herself famous by the beauty and happiness of her similes.”¹⁵⁰ Two other poetesses, according to al-Maqqari were “famous for their wit, their literary accomplishments, and their talents for poetry.”¹⁵¹

A number of the women in al-Maqqari’s account are praised not only for their talents in poetry, but also for their excellence in other scholarly fields, further emphasizing that these

¹⁴³ Ibid. For more on al-Maqqari’s portrayal of Ziryab, see Dwight Reynolds, “Al-Maqqari’s Ziryab: The Making of a Myth,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11, no. 2 (2008): 155-168.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Maqqari, Book II, Chapter III, 157.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 151.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 158-160. According to al-Maqqari, the poet Ibn Sahl, a Jew, was one of the best poets of his time. Al-Maqqari engages in a extensive speculation about whether Ibn Sahl was really Jewish, or if he had at some point converted to Islam. On the one hand, al-Maqqari seems to want to use Ibn Sahl’s Jewishness to prove the fact that Andalusian refinement was capable of penetrating and manifesting itself brilliantly in all denizens of the Andalusian sphere, even those not born into the legacy of Arab/Muslim poetic eloquence. On the other hand, however, al-Maqqari leaves open the possibility that Ibn Sahl converted to Islam, thereby making it possible to claim Ibn Sahl the *ideal* Andalusian. Either way, the presence of a talented Jewish poet in the sophisticated literary world of al-Andalus reinforces the notion that Andalusian exceptionalism was powerful enough to permeate religious, ethnic, and cultural barriers—whether manifested in the form of an accomplished Jewish poet, or the conversion of the Jewish poet to Islam.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 161.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 163.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 167.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 166. See also Book II, Chapter III, page 165 and 167.

women possess a wide range of talents and skills. One woman, for example, “was taught by her master grammar and rhetoric, in both which branches she soon made such progress as to surpass her teacher. She also shone in prosody, and learnt by heart and wrote commentaries on [two existing texts].”¹⁵² Another woman was “deeply versed in various avenues of literature; she wrote and copied many works, which...were written in a masterly style.”¹⁵³ In addition, Al-Maqqari also notes that some of the notable female poets were also learned in religious traditions—such as Umm al-Hina, the daughter of a *qadi*, who “learned divinity from her father, and was, besides an excellent poetess. She lived at Almeria, and wrote several works on the mode of worshipping the Almighty.”¹⁵⁴

Al-Maqqari often describes the ways in which particularly talented women surpassed their peers and became known as the best poets of their eras. He informs his readers, for example, that the exceptional verses of the poetess Ummatu-l-’Aziz Ash-Sherifiyyah “are sufficient to rank her among the eminent poets of her time.”¹⁵⁵ Another famous poetess named al-Ghusaniyyah is, according to al-Maqqari, “counted among the poets who flourished in the fifth century of the Hijra.”¹⁵⁶ Al-Maqqari also uses this type of comparative analysis to establish the poetess Asma al-’Ameriyyah as “conspicuous among the learned” due to her remarkable talents.¹⁵⁷ Some women are also identified as famous teachers of poetry and repositories of scholarly knowledge. Al-Maqqari quotes a male scholar who reports that he studied under a notable female poet who recalls, “I read under her direction the two above-mentioned commentaries and from her learned the science of prosody.”¹⁵⁸ Likewise, a woman named Mariam earns a place in the *Nafhu-al-Tib* as “a learned and very accomplished woman [who]...taught rhetoric, poetry, and literature, which united to her piety, her good morals, her virtues, and amiable disposition, gained her the affection of her sex, and gave her many pupils.”¹⁵⁹ It is apparent from these comments that al-Maqqari was interested in establishing the prestige and distinction of the scholarly women of al-Andalus.

While the majority of the women profiled in the *Nafh al-Tib* are free noblewomen from learned families, some of the women in this section are described as slave women who reach great heights of literary prestige. If free women are already useful markers of Andalusian cultural supremacy, then women who *also* happen to be slaves, who must first master the Arabic language, internalize the values of *adab*, and rise above the rest of the *qiyān* to earn a reputation of fame and prestige, must be even better and more compelling signifiers of Andalusian exceptionalism. In this way, the five slave women in al-Maqqari’s account are the ultimate demonstration of the degree to which *adab* culture permeated Andalusian culture, transcending differences in religion, gender, and class. A slave woman named al-’Arudhiyyah, for example, is described as being so learned in grammar and rhetoric that she “made such progress as to surpass her teacher.”¹⁶⁰ The ultimate demonstration of Andalusian superiority embodied by a slave woman occurs in an anecdote about a slave woman who overhears the ruler of Seville, al-Mu’tamid Ibn ‘Abbad, begin a line of poetry, to which she responds with an impressive and

¹⁵² Ibid, 162.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 166. See also the description of Mariam on page 166.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 167. See also 161: “Umm al-Sa’d, daughter of ‘Assem al-Himyari, a native of Cordoba, was learned in sacred traditions, which she held from her father, her grandfather, and others.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 162.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 167.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 162.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 166.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 162. In similar fashion, al-Maqqari writes that Hind, also a slave girl, “excelled in poetry, music, and the lighter branches of literature” (166).

artful reply before the caliph's companion—his minister and a highly literate man—can even begin to respond.¹⁶¹

Overarching Narrative

As a product of the post-*reconquista* sixteenth century, Al-Maqqari's *Nafh al-Tib* is permeated with nostalgia. Al-Maqqari draws heavily on Ibn Hayyan and other medieval Andalusian historians, quoting extensively from their works and integrating their comments into his own narrative to create a carefully constructed account of an idyllic Islamic Andalusia. One of the main ways in which al-Maqqari emphasizes the idyllic nature of al-Andalus is by describing it as a haven for intellectuals. Andalusians, he asserts, have an innate predisposition for learning, especially poetry and *adab*. In service of this assertion, al-Maqqari uses examples of the unexpected genius of Christians, Jews, and women to emphasize the extent to which literary excellence constituted the very essence of al-Andalus. To this end, he provides a number of short biographies of outstanding female scholars, many of whom he describes as the foremost authorities in subjects such as poetry, literature, and religious learning.

From Ibn Hayyan to al-Maqqari: Making Andalusia Great Again

The Umayyad caliphate in al-Andalus, like the 'Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, "peaked" relatively early in its history. As a result of this historical trajectory, a strong sense of nostalgia pervades Andalusian historiography. As early as the eleventh century, Ibn Hayyan was lamenting the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate, the fall of Cordoba, and the fragmented patchwork of the *taifa* states. Already in the *Muqtabis* Ibn Hayyan is wistfully remembering the era of the Umayyad caliphate as a lost ". "

If Ibn Hayyan thought it fit to lament the decline of Andalusian imperial grandeur in the eleventh century, it is no wonder that al-Maqqari offered an even more nostalgic view of Andalusia from his vantage point in the seventeenth century. By the time al-Maqqari was born in 1578, not even the fortified Alhambra of Granada remained in Muslim hands. The *reconquista* was still fresh in the Islamic world's collective memory, and al-Maqqari himself witnessed the expulsion of the last Spanish Muslims in 1609. By his era in the mid-seventeenth century, the image of al-Andalus had become a literary trope denoting the inevitable ravages of time and fate on human institutions.¹⁶² Correspondingly, the flourishing city of Cordoba, with its multitudes of books, poets, musicians, and mathematicians, with its grand caliphs and charming slave women playing distinctly Andalusian tunes on specially adapted lutes, had taken also on a mythical quality, signifying an age of faded imperial splendor.

Although both Ibn Hayyan and al-Maqqari mourn the unfortunate conditions of their respective eras, neither is willing to passively accept that fate is an inevitably malevolent force. Both historians are also deeply invested in using narratives about the past to anticipate brighter futures. As Ralf Elger notes in his discussion of *adab* and historical memory in al-Maqqari's portrayal of the poet Ibn al-Khatib, for al-Maqqari and others like him, "relief from the always menacing destruction by ill fate is not to be attained through pious renunciation of the worldly things...but by heroic deeds, like those of Ibn al-Khatib, by describing those deeds and thus

¹⁶¹ For a description of the full interaction, as well as an excellent discussion of the role of female scholars in al-Maqqari's *Nafhu al-Tib*, see Asma Afaruddin, "Poetry and Love: The Feminine Contribution in Muslim Spain," *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1/2, Special Issue on Muslim Heritage in Spain (1991): 161-162 and 118-129.

¹⁶² Ralph Elger, "Adab and Historical Memory: The Andalusian Poet/Politician Ibn al-Khatib as Presented in Ahmad al-Maqqari (986/1577-1041/1632) *Nafh at-Tib*" *Die Welt des Islams* 42, no. 3 Arabic Literature and Islamic Scholarship in the 17th/18th Century: Topics and Biographies (2002): 290.

preserving their memory through historiography and the *adab* text.”¹⁶³ For Ibn Hayyan and al-Maqqari, as for Ibn al-Sa’i in the East, slave women poets are “culture heroines.” In both narratives, the presence of the *qiyān* tangibly demonstrates the ability of wit, literacy, and elegance to transcend differences in gender, ethnicity, and social status, making them useful signifiers of the depth, pervasiveness, and richness of Andalusian refinement.

¹⁶³ Elger, 291.

Conclusion:

Narrative Construction and the *Qiyān* as Signifiers of Power

This thesis has explored representations of slave women poets in medieval ‘Abbasid and Andalusian historiography. The goal of this exploration has not been to uncover historical realities about the status of the *qiyān* in medieval Islamic society, but rather to outline the creation of a narrative—or more accurately, multiple narratives—about the *qiyān*. By using narrative theory as an interpretative tool for understanding ‘Abbasid and Andalusian representations of the *qiyān*, I am following in the footsteps of the Swedish historian Pernilla Myrne, whose *Narrative, Gender, and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* deftly combines literary theory and gender theory and uses this two-pronged theoretical approach to examine representations of women in ‘Abbasid literature.

Narrative Theory

Quoting the contemporary narratologist Mieke Bal, whose work builds on and reinterprets the foundational concepts of narrative theory developed by the twentieth-century French literary theorist Gerard Genette, Myrne argues that the value of narratology lies in its ability to establish “connections between textual features and social meanings.”¹ She goes on to observe that, although the lives and experiences of individual women cannot be reliably extracted from the Abbasid literature, “language and narrative forms can be examined with the aim to uncover...relations between form and meaning, between forms and women’s textual positions, and between women’s textual positions and gender constructions. These relations, in turn, can help an examination of the gender ideologies in the society in which they were produced.”² This thesis, likewise, operates from the premise that narratives about the *qiyān* cannot be assumed to reflect actual social realities. Nor am I interested in literary forms *per se*; rather I view narratives as indicators of ideas and ideologies, as “conveyors of meaning.”³ Although narratives may not allow us to reconstruct the nature of daily interactions between the caliphs and their *qiyān*, they do help us draw inferences about the ways in which medieval Muslim writers *thought* about these interactions.

The Role of the *Qiyān* in Relation to Power

The act of constructing narratives was closely associated with the act of exercising power, and the deployment of the *qiyān* motif in these narratives frequently helped facilitate the projection of imperial authority. The figure of the *qayna* illuminates and magnifies imperial power in a number of different ways. Firstly, the fact that slaves could be obtained from distant lands demonstrated the economic integration of the Abbasid and Andalusian empires into far-reaching trade networks. Secondly, the ability to purchase a large number of the most highly

¹ Pernilla Myrne, *Narrative, Gender and Authority in Abbasid Literature on Women* (Göteborg: University of Gothenburg, 2010), 21; Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980); Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

² Myrne. 21.

³ *Ibid.*

trained singers, poets, and musicians was indicative of the empire's extensive wealth. Finally, the mere existence of a relationship between "master" and "slave" inherently reinforces the power of the master, and as both slaves *and* women, the presence of the *qiyān* doubly reinforced the power of their owners. Narratives about the *qiyān* amply demonstrate that women's bodies are sites for the performance and display of power.

In a climate in which patronage of the arts was essential to the performance of authority, the *qiyān* were also living proof of their owners' refined tastes and appreciation for elite intellectual culture. Ibn al-Sa'i, for example, provides an account of the 'Abbasid caliph Mu'tamid, who agreed to purchase a *qayna* only after testing her verse-capping abilities. Similarly, Ibn Hayyan describes 'Abd al-Rahman II's "predilection for the best" singers and musicians and notes that he is driven by a continual "pursuit of excellence" to improve the talents of his *qiyān*. Both of these examples demonstrate the ways in which the prestige and talents of the *qiyān* reflect the sophistication of their masters, which in turn determines the extent of their empire's cultural refinement—an important mark of "soft power" in the medieval Islamic world.

The *qiyān* were most decidedly not mere objects for the enjoyment of imperial elites, however. Even when subject to the narrative construction and editorial discretion of the medieval authors who write about them, the singing slave girls refuse to occupy neatly defined roles; they are constantly slipping beyond the grasp of their narrators, moving beyond the "decorative role" they are supposed to play as props to "complete the pleasant scene around great personages."⁴ In fact, the sources offer a compelling counter-portrayal of the women as autonomous subjects who found ways to assert their independence—and even to manipulate situations to their advantage. Over and over again in Ibn al-Sa'i's *Consorts of the Caliphs*, for example, we meet women notable for their exceptionally sharp wits, for their ability to whip up eloquent poetry in the blink of an eye while famous male poets struggle to respond, tongue-tied and humiliated. When Mahbuba improvised a poem that perfectly captured the caliph's mood before the poet 'Ali had even obtained an inkstand and a scroll, 'Ali was "dumbfounded" at being upstaged.⁵ A few pages later, we are introduced to a *qayna* named Nabt who prevails in a verse-capping contest over Ibn al-Tahir, a famous Baghdadi poet. The interaction ends with Ibn al-Tahir storming out of the room in humiliation.⁶ Many of the historical chronicles and biographical dictionaries exhibit subtle variations of this dynamic, featuring interactions in which slave women exhibit an aura of invincibility through their unsurpassed mastery of poetry composition, spontaneous verse-capping, singing, and other forms of scholarly expertise.

At times, the authority and agency of the *qiyān* contradicts normative assumptions about slave-master relationships, gender dynamics, and patriarchal social hierarchies. Recall, for example, Ibn al-Sa'i's description of an incident in which a prominent male poet regretfully clarifies that the reason the work of the *qayna* Fadl resembles his own is not because she is plagiarizing him, but because *he* has been copying *her*. "A nice thought!" Sa'id ibn Humayd is said to have replied, "If only she were getting it from me. No, in fact...my friend, if the most talented and senior state secretaries were to imitate her, by God, it would set a whole new

⁴ Maria Viguera Molins, "Borrowed Space: Andalusi and Maghrebi Women in Historical Chronicles," in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arab Sources*, edited by Randi Deguilhem and Manuela Marín (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 165-180. Molins suggests that women occupied "borrowed space" in the medieval chronicles and biographical dictionaries. I would add that they also managed to manipulate that borrowed space, and that medieval historians wrote the *qiyān* into the record in ways that did not entirely constrain their roles in the narratives.

⁵ Ibn al-Sa'i, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*. Edited by Shawkat M. Toorawa. Translated by The Editors of the Library of Arabic Literature. Bilingual edition. (New York: Library of Arabic Literature, 2015), 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

standard!”⁷ With this comment, the male poet admits his own comparative inferiority and asserts that Fadl’s literary genius surpasses the brilliance of even the “most talented senior state secretaries.”

There are other, even more dramatic moments in which slave women invert normative power dynamics. For example, Ibn Hayyan’s use of the word “*ghalaba*” to indicate the dominance of slave women over the caliph ‘Abd al-Rahman II may be indicative of an ambient perception that powerful slave women had the capacity to blur conventional gender divisions and invert normative relationships between master and slave. Similarly, al-‘Umari invests the figure of the beautiful *qayna* ‘Aziz with considerable power and authority: she renders her conversation partners speechless, she causes the hunter to drop his bow (al-‘Umari was surely cognizant of the emasculating connotations in that image), she inflames the heart of her admirers, she dims the light of the sun, and she outshines the full moon in beauty.

Before we read too much into these depictions, however, it is important to note that the women in Ibn al-Sa’i’s and al-‘Umari’s narratives possess a very particular kind of power that derives from and ultimately reinforces normative structures of authority. The word “*ghalaba*,” for example, has an ambiguous meaning, and one that is often used to describe “compromising situations” such as “homoerotic love affairs, and positions of dominance that upturn the social order.”⁸ Given this context, Ibn Hayyan’s use of this term might signify male weakness rather than female power. Even so, however, the fact that the figure of the slave woman could be used to *rhetorically* signify male weakness is evidence of a worldview in which the alluring pleasures associated with the figure of a beautiful woman were accompanied by an omnipresent anxiety about the ways in which female sexual power could ensnare and enslave even the most powerful of men, thereby disrupting the proper social order and engendering disorder.

Likewise, in the process of exalting his exquisite slave women for their unsurpassed beauty, al-‘Umari also limits the power these women exert. At first, al-‘Umari’s descriptions of the *qiyān* seem to suggest their dominance over men. In a way, he does invest them with real authority: al-Hakam I, it seems, would have been adrift without the stabilizing presence of the *qayna* ‘Aziz, whose beauty, virtuosity, and empathetic intelligence he could not live without—believing as he did that “her breath...was the cause of his existence.”⁹ At the same time, however, al-‘Umari elevates these women *outside* the realm of nature. The suggestion, for example, that ‘Aziz outshines the sun and the moon casts her as an unpredictable, threatening force that disrupts the natural order of the world. She may have power, but hers is a threatening sort of power, looming ominously like a natural disaster. This sentiment is a recurring theme throughout medieval depictions of the *qiyān*, and it reflects the ambiguity of the position of the *qiyān*, whose designation as slaves set them apart from other women. On the one hand, it allowed them greater degrees of visibility and prestige, but, on the other hand, it also sexualized their existence and limited their power by emphasizing only the inherently threatening nature of female charm.

Ultimately, the way in which medieval historians represent the role of the *qiyān* in relation to power resists straightforward categorization. The *qiyān* embrace a multitude of

⁷ Ibid, 71.

⁸ Heather Ferguson, personal conversation with author, February 9, 2016. See also Manuela Marin, “Marriage and Sexuality in al-Andalus,” in *Marriage and Sexuality Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, ed. Eukene Lacarra Lanz. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13. “Love for slaves is clearly proof of male weakness, and chronicles usually refer to a beloved woman as *al-ghaliba* ‘alay-hi (‘she who dominated him’), stating in this way the inversion of hierarchies between a prince and a slave.”

⁹ Ibn Faḍl Allāh Al-‘Umārī, *Masālik al-abṣār fī mamālik al-amṣār, al-juz’ al-‘ashir: ahl al-ghina’ wa al-musiḳi fī al-mashriḳ wa al-maghreb al-‘arabi wa miṣr al-mahrusah*, ed. Ghattas ‘Abd al-Malik Khashabah and Husayn Nassar (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-al-Wathā’iq al-Qawmīyah, 2005), 368.

dualities—they are slaves, yet intimately connected to elite society; their attractiveness hinges on both their sexuality and their intellect; they are women and yet often become experts in traditionally male fields; officially, they belong to the non-political realm of leisure and courtly entertainment, but, in reality, they are deeply involved in the production of imperial propaganda and manage to exert an indirect—and sometimes direct—form of political power; they can access social mobility and amass great wealth, though they might be transferred from one owner to another as mere property at any time.

These contradictory dualities, however, are precisely what make these sources rich and engaging: they are complex, multilayered texts, and they do not conform to a single, cohesive model for describing the role of the *qiyān* in relation to power. The cracks in the veneer of a consistent narrative make it possible to observe the extent to which ideologies about power and gender dynamics in the medieval Islamic world were actually comprised of fluctuating and contradictory sets of principles and beliefs. To echo Myrne, who invokes Deniz Kandiyoti, a pioneering scholar in the field of gender and Islamic societies, the role of the *qiyān* in relation to power reflects the notion of the “patriarchal bargain.” Even though the *qiyān* were owned by and ultimately subordinated to male elites, their official status as slaves was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Beneath the surface, power relationships were continually being renegotiated, and the *qiyān* were active participants in shaping the terms of their status as elite, highly trained, socially mobile, professional women who belonged the paradoxical category of the “unfree” elite.¹⁰

Al-Jahiz and the *Qiyān* as Floating Signifiers

Al-Jahiz’s *Epistle on the Singing Girls* deserves special attention. Unlike the other authors whose works are examined in this thesis, al-Jahiz is highly critical of the *qiyān* institution. In addition to the fact that al-Jahiz was discussing a different “class” of *qiyān*, as noted previously, his writing of the *Epistle* may actually have been motivated by an interest in promoting Mu’tazilite philosophy more than a desire to condemn the *qiyān* institution. Even if this is the case, however, his decision to use the *qiyān* as the vehicle for conveying this commentary is significant. The *qiyān* are especially rhetorically useful for illustrating two of the fundamental tenets of Mu’tazilite philosophy—the perils of passionate love and the importance reason and moderation.

The usefulness of the *qiyān* as a rhetorical strategy for al-Jahiz’s Mu’tazilism further emphasizes the extent to which these women attained a larger-than-life status in the imagination of the medieval Islamic world. In the narratives of historians like Ibn al-Sa’i and Ibn Hayyan, the *qiyān* of the court embody refinement and *adab* culture; as depicted by al-Jahiz, the institution of the *qiyān* is a dangerous phenomenon, and the “lower-class” version of *qiyān* patronage verges on prostitution and allows the *qiyān*-merchants to financially extort duped admirers. These divergent interpretations demonstrate that the *qiyān* could be invoked as “floating signifiers,” sometimes conveying imperial power and historical nostalgia, while at other times indicating vice and moral depravity. Accounting for historical context provides further clarity: while the other texts profiled in this analysis are historical in nature, looking back and commemorating a past “golden age” with a nostalgic gaze, al-Jahiz was a social critic writing about his own era. His own time—a period of rapid cultural transformation—was also

¹⁰ Glaire D. Anderson, “Concubines, Eunuchs, and Patronage in Early Islamic Cordoba,” in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as “Makers” of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 634.

deeply fragmented by questions and anxieties about the nature of the Muslim *umma*. The process of rapid urbanization, in particular, brought questions about how to interact with people of different classes, races, religions, and genders into sharp focus, provoking an “identity crisis” that inspired critics like al-Jahiz to strike out at institutions that seemed to undermine the appropriate social order.

Narratives of Ambiguity

To observe simply that the motif of the *qiyān* was a floating signifier that could be mobilized for different political and ideological agendas is a rather unsatisfying conclusion. What adds depth to this observation, however, is the subtle fact that the motif of the *qiyān* contains within it numerous overlapping, contradictory voices. Even when the motif of the *qiyān* was used to signify golden age splendor, medieval authors and their contemporary readers could not have failed to recognize that the figure of the *qayna* also signaled an aura of decadence that verged dangerously close to—and often crossed fully into—a lifestyle of impiety and vice. Is it possible that the ambiguity inherent in the figure of the *qiyān* actually lent itself to the specific narratives that the historians of Baghdad and al-Andalus were trying to convey?

There is, of course, a long and ongoing history of men constructing narratives about powerful women that evince a mixture of awe and fear, desire and resentment. The Greeks associated the creation of the first woman, Pandora, with the release of evil and malevolence in the world. Woman, they explained, was a “beautiful evil,” at once alluring and threatening. The biblical narrative of the fall from Eden, in which Eve is the source of original sin, is another classic example of the ambivalent attitude toward women that is ubiquitous in Western philosophy and the Abrahamic religious traditions. Similarly, the Muslim conception of *fitna*, or social chaos, is laced with gendered connotations that date back to Aisha’s failed military campaign in the Battle of the Camel in 655 and the associated civil war that wracked the early Muslim community. Aisha’s public assumption of authority and military command was seen as improper. Based on the assumption that chaos ensued when a woman assumed political control, the notion of *fitna* also came to encompass a more general conception of the link between temptation, social disruption, and the destabilizing power of female sexuality.

A less obvious aspect of the relationship between representations of the *qiyān* and narrative construction in medieval Arabic historiography is that many historical chronicles, especially those describing the ‘Abbasid and Andalusian empires at their zeniths, are themselves suffused with ambiguity about the very notion of the “Golden Age.” Al-Maqqari’s *Nafh al-Tib*, for example, is full of awe and reverence for “Golden Age” Cordoba and the expansion of the Islamic empire. At the same time, however, his nostalgic narrative is permeated with the omnipresent awareness that history is cyclical, and that the idyllic “golden age” was inevitably bound to fade. According to this worldview, historical high points are inherently bittersweet, and society at its apex is inevitably on the brink of collapse. The notion of cyclical history itself is a product of the late medieval Andalusian milieu, set forth in the works of the pioneering fourteenth-century Tunisian historian and sociologist, Ibn Khaldun, who drew his conclusions about the nature of history from his observations of the rise and fall of successive dynasties in North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

The very qualities of luxury and cultural efflorescence that denoted the radiance of “Golden Age” Baghdad and Cordoba were the very features that historians like al-Maqqari associated with the “softening” of imperial authority and the onset of decadence and imminent

decline.¹¹ Highly accomplished, alluring slave women singers are powerful, and while this imagery is useful for conveying imperial grandeur, feminine power implies masculine weakness. In a patriarchal society, masculine weakness is dangerous, destabilizing, and deeply unsettling. Similarly, “golden ages” mark the success and power of empires, but they also denote a certain decadence that can only lead sooner or later to collapse—an idea that brings a certain amount of anxiety to an imperial society.

As the embodiment of the brief, eleventh-hour moment of prosperity and decadence before the inevitable period of decline commenced, the *qiyān* are simultaneously signifiers of imperial authority and harbingers of collapse. Medieval ‘Abbasid and Andalusian narratives about the *qiyān* thus reflect the ambivalent immortalization of a group of powerful women as simultaneously irresistible and threatening beings, whose liminal existence embodied the fine line between vitality and vice, prosperity and destruction, and cultural florescence and decadence.

¹¹ Kennedy, 160. As early as the tenth century, some ‘Abbasid commentators began suggesting that the harem intrigues and the undue influence of manipulative women was a major cause of the declining power of the caliphate. Additionally, references to slave women who “dominate” their masters, for instance, are framed by admiring descriptions of their brilliance and celebratory accounts of their musical talents and literary output. Yet, at the same time, these same references are designed to denounce the weakness of men who allow themselves to be dominated by their women.

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