



INTERPRETING TWO STORIES OF THE "KITĀB AL-AGĀNĪ": A GENDER-BASED APPROACH

Author(s): Mirella Cassarino

Source: *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 2014, NUOVA SERIE, Vol. 9, The Language(s) of Arabic Literature Un omaggio a Lidia Bettini (2014), pp. 181-193

Published by: Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24640440>

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

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



JSTOR

Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*

INTERPRETING TWO STORIES OF THE *KITĀB AL-AĠĀNĪ*: A GENDER-BASED APPROACH¹

MIRELLA CASSARINO

(UNIVERSITÀ DI CATANIA)



It is well-known that the *Kitāb al-Aġānī* by Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī (IV/X century) is one of the most important works of medieval Arabic literature. It is not by chance that it is defined by the authors themselves and Arabic critics as the “dīwān al-‘Arab” – the archive and memory of the Arabs. The stories it collects, which go from the historical to the anecdotal, from the biographical to the poetic, have been on a textual journey “towards the work and within the work”² through the will and authority of the collector/writer – a journey that places them fully within the literary and imaginative sphere, according to the structural principles typical of the mode of the *adab*.³ This means that whoever seeks to analyse and interpret the narrative texts must avoid the error of always looking at the characters as real people. They are, instead, part of the linguistic organization of the story: they live only in what they do or what they say, in the essential features that are assigned to them and the functions that they carry out. They are meaningful only within a system of characters that, in its turn, is understandable within a precise, albeit complex, cultural system. This is the perspective I have adopted in approaching the representation of female figures in the *Book of the Songs*.⁴ I have chosen not to study the biographies of the artists, musicians or singers to which Hilary Kilpatrick⁵ and, more recently, Pernilla

1 This article takes up and develops a theme that was discussed in a paper presented at the 27th Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants (UEAI) that took place at the University of Helsinki from June 2–6, 2014. It is part of my larger research project called “Representations of Women in the *Book of the Songs*.” I would like to thank Stefania Arcara and Anita Fabiani for their precious suggestions during the writing of this essay.

2 This phrase comes from M. Corti, *Il viaggio testuale*, Turin: Einaudi, 1978, pp. 3–17.

3 For the definition of *adab* as a “literary mode,” see my article “Système, genres et mode dans la littérature arabe classique,” *Synergies Monde Arabe*, 6 (2009), pp. 55–71.

4 The edition used here is that of Yūsuf al-Ṭawīl and ‘Abd Allāh ‘Alī Muḥammad, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1992² (hereinafter *Aġānī*).

5 See her important book, *Making the Great Book of the Songs: Compilation and the Author’s Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī’s Kitāb al-Aghānī*, London – New York: Routledge, 2003

Myrne⁶ have turned their attention, but rather the female “literary” characters, mythical figures and people who, though having truly existed, have entered, for various reasons, myth. I believe that a gender-based approach can make the analysis more productive and original because it forces us to reflect on “difference”, understood as a “social construct”, that has led to the representation of women in particular modes, even in the literary imaginary. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that this type of approach is much more productive in that it allows us to turn our gaze to the construction of masculinity as well as to the particular complex representations of gender for the individual characters. Indeed, as Judith Butler has pointed out,⁷ it is gender that determines sex rather than the other way around or, better said, there is no such thing as true sex difference, only gender difference.

Writing, precisely because it gives rise to a semantically multiple product, must be subject to different interpretations, even at the risk of unheard of or daring “misinterpretations.” If there are now numerous investigations of gender within different aspects of Arab-Islamic civilization – above all those carried out in the historical context, characterized by archaeological excavations that aim at bringing to light women who have had an important role in history⁸ – the same cannot be said for investigations of Arabic literature,⁹ particularly classical literature,¹⁰ in which gender relations still deserve deeper consideration on the

and her article “Women as Poets and Chattels: Abū al-Farağ al-Iṣḥabānī’s ‘al-Imā’ al-ṣawā’ir””, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 9 (1991), pp. 161-176.

- 6 See *Narrative, Gender and Authority in ‘Abbasid Literature on Women*, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2010.
- 7 For the study of gender, queer theory and the politics of sexuality in culture, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990; Ead., *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge, 2004.
- 8 There have been many studies on this issue. L. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993. For an updated bibliography, see G.R.G. Hambly (ed.), *Women in the Medieval Islamic World. The New Middle Ages*, vol. 6, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998, A. Afsaruddin, “Reconstructing Women’s Lives: Gender and the Poetics of Narrative in Medieval Biographical Collections,” *The Muslim World*, 92 (2002), pp. 461–80, Lucia Sorbera, “Leadership femminili dal *dar al-islam* alla *global umma*,” *Contemporanea: Rivista di storia dell’800 e del ’900*, 14/2 (2011), pp. 302-12.
- 9 For modern and contemporary literature see, for example, S.S. Mehrez, *Translating Gender in Egypt’s Culture Wars*, Cairo: American University, 2009.
- 10 Among the available studies on Arab literature which include premodern texts, see the volumes: *Verse and the Fair Sex: Studies in Arabic Poetry and in the Representation of Women in Arabic Literature*, ed. F. de Jong, Utrecht: University Utrecht Press, 1993; *Writing the Feminine. Women in Arab Sources*, eds. M. Marin and R. Deguilhelm, London – New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002, and *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, eds. K. Babayan and A. Najmabadi, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2008.

part of critics and must be investigated separately from the real sphere regarding the “experience” of women and with different categories. In an article on sexuality in medieval Islamic society, Maria Giovanna Stasolla has pointed out this gap, arguing that:

In the end, there remains a doubt that the reality presented by the *adab*, particularly the *Kitāb al-Aġānī*, under the influence of its laughter, pleasure, poetry and music, is rather a counter-reality. It is difficult to verify the extent to which the actual story can be connected to such a presentation or its revisions. In the same vein, the short story, and especially Hārūn al-Rašīd’s cycle in the “Thousand and One Nights,” beyond its erotic-sentimental contents which have exerted a greater hold on the imagination of the readers, more softly evokes traces of the violence, poverty, and cruelty of the urban reality of the time: an inquiry in this sense has not yet been attempted, though it is desirable that one should happen in the near future.¹¹

Certainly, and here I reveal in advance some of the conclusions I will reach, it is necessary to point out how the vision that has determined certain representations of the female figure in the literary imaginary has been a vision with strong connotations towards the masculine. As we will see, this is demonstrated by the forms of some representations and language that are used. To illustrate this I will analyse two stories of the *Kitāb al-Aġānī*, “The Story of Hind bint al-Nu‘mān and Zarqā’ al-Yamāma” and “The story of al-Zabbā’ and the king of ‘Irāq”.

Hind bint al-Nu‘mān and Zarqā’ al-Yamāma

The second volume of the *Kitāb al-Aġānī*, introduced by a typical reference to the denial procedure of the author who puts faith in the voices of previous transmitters, contains the story of Hind bint al-Nu‘mān,¹² the daughter of the last Christian king of al-Ḥīra,¹³ and of Zarqā’ al-Yamāma.¹⁴ This is a pre-Islamic

11 M.G. Stasolla, “Sessualità e società nel mondo islamico medievale (Baghdad, VIII–IX secolo),” in *Comportamenti e immaginario della sessualità nell’Alto Medioevo, Atti della Settimana di studio (Spoleto, 31 marzo–3 aprile 2005)*, LIII, Spoleto: Fondazione CISAM, 2006, p. 302 (the English translation is mine).

12 On Hind bint al-Nu‘mān, see al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūġ al-dahab wa-ma‘ādin al-ġawhar*, Bayrūt: Dār al-Qāri’, 2007², vol. 2, p. 36 (hereinafter *Murūġ*); ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Baġdādī, *Ḥizānat al-adab*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām Hārūn, al-Qāhira: al-Ḥānġī, 1977, vol. 6, pp. 70–71 (hereinafter *Ḥizāna*); G.H.A. Juynboll, “Siḥāk” [Lesbianism], in *Encyclopédie de l’Islam (=EI)*, n. ed., vol. 9, 1998, pp. 588–589.

13 al-Nu‘mān ibn al-Mundir, who ruled from approximately 580 to 602. See I. Shahīd, “al-Nu‘mān (III) b. al-Mundhir”, in *EI*, n. ed., vol. 8, 1995, pp. 121–122.

14 She is a semi-legendary figure in the ancient Arab tradition, famous for her extraordinary visual powers. She belonged to the Ṭasm tribe and was given in marriage to a member of the Ġadīs tribe. See al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīḥ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. De Goeje, 15 voll.,

story that has some variants, as often happens in cultures originally with oral transmission.¹⁵ This is demonstrated by Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī himself who refers to two different, though complementary, episodes that come from different sources.¹⁶ In the first version, the author focuses on the story according to which Muġīra ibn Šu‘ba,¹⁷ having become governor of Kūfa after being nominated by Mu‘āwiya, travels to visit Hind to ask her to marry him. The woman, who lived in a convent,¹⁸ presented her refusal by making reference to her withered beauty and youth, a response that goes well beyond a simple denial and reveals her intelligence and resolute character:

You only seek to boast of having come into possession of the realm of Mundir by marrying its daughter. In the name of he who you worship, is this not what you seek?¹⁹

The second part of the story refers to Zarqā’ and is presented as a sort of supplement to what has already been told. It allows for the completion of the story and explains some details of the previous part of the tale: the reason why Hind lived in a convent. Here is its interesting opening:

Hind loved Zarqā’ al-Yamāma, who was the first Arab woman to love another woman. As regards the latter, they say that she was able to spot an advancing army at a distance of some thirty miles.²⁰

Leiden: Brill, 1879, vol. 1, pp. 771-774; Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-‘Iqd al-farīd*, ed. Barakāt Yūsuf Habbūr, Bayrūt: Širkat wa-Dār al-Aqram, 1999, vol. 3, p. 75 (hereinafter *‘Iqd*); I. Shahīd, “Zarkā’ al-Yamāma,” in *EI*, n. ed., vol. 11, 2005, pp. 498–99. This figure has characteristics similar to those of another legendary figure with which she is sometimes confused: Hind bint al-Ḥuss al-Iyādiyya. In his commentary on verse 32 of Nābiġa’s *qaṣīda* dedicated to al-Nu‘mān, the philologist al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 213/828) argues that the poet is referring to Hind bint al-Ḥuss, whereas another contemporary commentator, Abū ‘Ubayda (d. 209/824–825) claims it is Zarqā’ al-Yamāma. On this issue, see M.S. al-Ālūsī al-Baġdādī, *Bulūġ al-‘Arab fī ma‘rifat aḥwāl al-‘Arab*, ed. M.B. al-Aṭārī, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d. (reprint of the 1896 ed.), vol. 1, pp. 339–42.

15 Two different versions of this story of love between women can be found in ‘Alī ibn Naṣr al-Kātib, *Ġawāmi‘ al-ladḍa*, ed. S.D. Ḥawwām, trans. S.D. Ḥawwām and A. Jarkas, Toronto: Aleppo Publications, 1977, p. 88; Zamaḥṣārī, cited in al-Ālūsī al-Baġdādī, *Bulūġ al-‘Arab*, vol. 2, pp. 341–42.

16 Abū al-Faraġ al-Iṣfahānī emphasizes the difference between the two versions, stating: “wa qad rawā ‘an Ibn al-Kalbī ġayr ‘Alī b. al-Šabbāġ fī Hind”. See *Āġānī*, vol. 2, p. 125.

17 On this character, see *Āġānī*, vol. 2, p. 124, n° 2, and al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūġ*, vol. 2, pp. 35–37.

18 On this place and its founding, see A. Talib, “Topoi and Topography in the Histories of al-Ḥira”, in *History and Identity in the Late Antique Near East*, ed. P. Wood, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 123–147.

19 *Āġānī*, vol. 2, p. 124. This and all subsequent translations of this text are by the author.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

Despite the fact that *Āḡānī*'s writing is dedicated to Hind, Abū al-Faraḡ al-Iṣfahānī dwells, probably following his sources in this, on the legendary story of Zarqā', who lived in an oasis east of Ḥiḡāz, and who would often, thanks to her powerful eyesight, work as a sentinel. One day an enemy tribe decided to attack her tribe and to sack their settlement. Fearing Zarqā's famous supernatural powers, they made their advance hidden behind tree trunks and leaves that they had cut for this purpose. When, at the end of the day, her kinsfolk asked her, as they usually did, what she had seen, she replied, "I see trees that advance". Zarqā's vision was underestimated, and she was even derided for having made the statement. The following morning, however, the settlement of Ġadīs was surprised by the enemies who looted and massacred them.²¹ Zarqā' herself was captured, her eyes were put out and it was discovered that her optic nerves were black in colour. When asked about this she replied that she used antimony as make up. Here is the epilogue to the story:

Zarqā' died some days later. When Hind heard the news, she turned to religion, she wore sackcloth and had a monastery built, which took its name from her and where she lived until she died.²²

Myths, as is well known, are not at all innocent. They are inscribed in the language and the imaginary of their culture of provenance and represent sexual difference through images geared to perpetuate a certain ideology. The world, as Roland Barthes said, provides the myth with a historical reality, and the myth restores a natural image of this reality.²³ The text reported by Abū al-Faraḡ al-Iṣfahānī, thus written down by him in the tenth century but having been in circulation long before this, contains elements, "traces" that reveal a very different logic compared to that running through many narrations of the Islamic epoch relating to women. I will indicate, in a synthetic manner, some of these elements. Of undoubted interest is the fact that Hind receives Muḡīra alone and that she expresses her own denial with great firmness. Furthermore, the reference to Hind's eternal love for Zarqā', the love of a woman of noble Christian origin for another woman belonging to a tribe, reveals how (note how the same mechanism

21 This episode presents various similarities to the famous scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. One of the prophecies of the three witches is that Macbeth will not be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to his castle on Dunsinane Hill, which he and his men think would be impossible, thus that he is invincible. However, the enemy army attacks by using the same subterfuge described in the Arab story: by camouflaging themselves with leaves and branches that seems, from a distance, to be an advancing forest. Thus Macbeth's castle is conquered and he is killed.

22 *Āḡānī*, vol. 2, p. 125.

23 See R. Barthes, *Miti d'oggi*, Turin: Einaudi, 1984, pp. 222–23, and J.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskij, *Tipologia della cultura*, Milan: Bompiani, 1975, pp. 83–109.

of attribution appears in the West) the origin of homosexuality “must” be sought in an “elsewhere”, in our case in the Christian world. That is to say, there is a need to stress the idea that it has been, so to speak, “imported”: it is Hind, or the noble Christian woman from the realm of the Lakhmids, who loves Zarqā’ who, it is explained, was “the first Arab woman to love another woman.”²⁴ In her interesting article about lesbianism, when she refers briefly to this love story, Sahar Amer writes:

Even though it is impossible to ascertain the veracity of this account, the fact that it continued to circulate through the Islamicate World is sufficient to demonstrate that lesbianism was thought to be far more than a medical condition and a simple sexual practice. In the *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, this lesbian love story is praised and presented as evidence of the greater loyalty and devotion that women have for their female partners compared to heterosexual men’s attachment to women.²⁵

I believe, contrary to what Amer has written, that the homosexuality attributed to Hind has here the flavour of an accusation.²⁶ These observations are corroborated, in my opinion, but what is asserted by other Arab authors who dwell on the “external” origin of homosexuality. It is enough to think of Ġāḥiz, according to whom it spread in the Islamic world in the Abbasid epoch, following the lifestyle of the Khorasanians.²⁷ It is not superfluous to specify, furthermore, that the tribes of the Ġadīs and the Ṭasm belonged to the category of the ‘Arab al-bā’ida, the extinct Arabs, and that the three centuries that separate Hind bint al-Nu’mān from Zarqā’ clear the Lakhmid princess of the accusation of lesbianism, which was completely rejected by ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Baġdādī.²⁸ It is interesting to observe,

24 On homosexuality in classical Arabic literature, see: S. Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, New York: Routledge, 2007; J.W. Wright and E.K. Rowson (eds.), *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; S. Amer, *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures*, Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 2008. For an anthropological and sociological approach, see: S.O. Murray and W. Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, New York: New York University Press, 1997; S. Habib (ed.), *Islam and Homosexuality*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010; J. Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. See also Juynboll, “Siḥāk”, in *EI*, vol. 9, pp. 588-589.

25 S. Amer, “Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 18/2 (2009), pp. 214-236: 219.

26 Irfan Shahīd notes: “À la première époque de l’Islam, les mauvaises langues professionnelles, se référant à la princesse lakhmide de Hīra, Hind bt. al-Nu’mān (début VIIe s.) accusaient Zarqā’ d’avoir été lesbienne” (“Zarqā’ al-Yamāma”, in *EI*, n. ed., vol. 11, p. 499).

27 See P. Avery’s “Islam”, in *Sociolegal Control of Homosexuality: A Multi-Nation Comparison*, eds. D.J. West and R. Green, New York – Boston – London and Moscow: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002, pp. 109-118, and S. Amer’s “Medieval Arab Lesbians”, p. 218, n. 8.

28 See *Ḥizāna*, vol. 6, pp. 70-71.

in any case, that the love story between the two women is represented as a great example of devotion and loyalty in opposition to the blindness and arrogance of men (one of whom, hungry for power, thinks he can be cunning and will not be unmasked by the woman from whom he intends to take the realm, while the others, also arrogant and unbelieving, fail to see the truth in Zarqā's words and effectively bring about the tribe's ruin).

Again, I must remark how a certain type of semiosis, a feature of the mythological world, manifests itself in the narration through the process of naming or renaming.²⁹ The Arab woman is called Zarqā' (with blue eyes) to indicate her peculiar trait (her "visual" capacity, allusive to great intelligence, intuitive capacity and circumspection) that connotes her personality, her activity and her strength.³⁰ Furthermore, *post mortem*, her name undergoes a process of specification that underlines the link, highlighted by Arabic grammarians, between proper name and the category of determinateness. Proper names are words that, by their very semantic nature, possess the property of determinateness from their origins.³¹ She is known as Zarqā' al-Yamāma, or Zarqā' from the region that was named after her following her death. In a situation of this kind, in which a new name is given to a place that probably had another name, we can also talk of an act of creation or of foundation myth. From a mythological point of view, a new situation is approved (the enemies invade the territory of the tribe of Zarqā') attributing a new name to a new place. Indeed, the attribution of a "determinate" name to a mythological space grants the space itself precise borders and the character of limitedness. That this is linked, in the narration examined here, to the particular story of a woman of extraordinary powers is significant both on the ideological and typological planes: in the pre-Islamic social order, women held power and carried out all activities within society together with men; furthermore, Arabic pre-Islamic culture was characterized by an orientation towards mythological thought that Islamic culture would no longer have, although it did inevitably preserve some traces of it. It is enough to think that Abū al-Faraġ al-Isfahānī and the authors of the sources that he used have omitted an important detail regarding Hind bint al-Ḥuss (who is often confused with Zarqā'), a detail that the Islamic sensibility had evidently already dropped, i.e. her possible half-supernatural origin because she descended from a *ġinn*. This detail is interesting as testimony of the relationship, present in the cultures around the

29 Lotman and Uspenskij, *Tipologia della cultura*, p. 86.

30 See S.P. Stetkevych, *Transgression and Redemption: Cuckolding the King. Al-Nābighah al-Dhubyānī and the Pre-Islamic Royal Ode*, in *The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy: Myth, Gender and Ceremony in the Classical Arabic Ode*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002, pp. 1-47: 38.

31 See G.M. Gabučan, *Teorija artiklja i problem arabskogo sintaksisa*, Moskva: 1972, p. 32.

Near East, between the female and the divine, which we also find traces of in the story of Saġāḥ, the prophetess.³² It seems that Hind bint al-Nu‘mān and Zarqā’, in the name of a feature that is consubstantial with the mythic form – that can fix a plurisecular process of evolution in the symbolism of the single event – recount the moment of the passage towards a patriarchal culture.

Furthermore, an aspect of Hind and Zarqā’'s story that cannot be neglected is the association of the female with the corporeal.³³ Her beauty faded and her partner lost, Hind retires to a convent and wears a habit; she covers her own body, thus closing herself off from the world. Hind's act of closing herself off from the world receives more emphasis in the versions of the same story that are provided by Zamaḥṣarī and Ibn Naṣr. Indeed, they make reference to the fact that the woman cuts her hair. Now, it is well-known that hair is an ornament which implies a close relationship between nature and culture. It is, in fact, an extension of the body that becomes, not by accident, a relationship tool, a means of communicating non-verbal social, religious and magical-mystical messages. By resorting to this important natural decoration, women can express their seductive abilities and, therefore, their sexual “availability.” Hind's gesture assumes a double task: cutting her hair and entering into the monastic world, thus separating herself from her previous life.

Regarding Zarqā’, the punishment that is inflicted on her tragically affects her eyes, the part of her body that is most frightening and impressive, the part that defines her supernatural power because it allows her to have extraordinary visions. Her head and her soul are raped,³⁴ the wealth of that “corporeal knowledge” that belongs to Zarqā’'s ancestral knowledge is taken. It seems almost as if the story describes a sort of foundational moment for the power and wielded by men and for the passage from the ancestral world, to which the two women belong, to a different socio-political system.

Al-Zabbā’ and the king of ‘Irāq

The *Aġānī* contains another interesting story based on a powerful woman of noble origin, Zabbā’ (Zenobia, d. 274), queen of Tadmur (Palmira).³⁵ Her story

32 See *Aġānī*, vol. 21, pp. 36–41.

33 See F. Malti-Douglas, *Women's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arab-Islamic Writing*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

34 On the metaphorical meaning of the eye (which Zarqā’ is violently deprived of) in classical Arabic Literature, see A. Kilito, *L'occhio e l'ago*, Genoa: Il Melangolo, 1994.

35 See *Aġānī*, vol. 15, p. 308. This story also has variants. Among the sources see Ibn ‘Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd*, vol. 3, p. 110; M. Piotrovsky, “Arabskaja versija istorii caricy Zenobii (al-Zabbay)”, *Palestinskij Sbornik*, 21 (1970), pp. 170–184; D.F. Graf, “Zenobia and the Arabs”,

must have struck the imagination of the Arabs to the point of its remaining fixed in pages of extraordinary strength and beauty that testify, among other things, to the particular process of mythologization that this figure underwent over the centuries. The Arab-Islamic sources, which neglect the “Roman” aspect of the events, recount that she was the daughter of a certain ‘Amr b. al-Zarib, sovereign of Ġazīra and of a part of the Bilād al-Šām, killed in battle at the hands of Ġaḍīma, Tanukhid king of al-Ḥīra.³⁶ Indeed the invention of the story in the Arab-Islamic tradition hinges on the theme of Zabbā’s revenge, a fundamental value in the pre-Islamic epoch. Al-Zabbā’ wanted to avenge the death of her father. It is told that, to avoid being captured by the Arab armies, she had a tunnel dug that connected her palace with that of her sister, and she would use it every time she felt threatened. On the advice of her sister, she made a proposal of marriage and unification of their realms to Ġaḍīma. Attracted by the offer and unaware that the woman was setting a trap for him, he responded to the invitation:

Ġaḍīma was imprisoned and led in chains to Zabbā’, who welcomed him by showing her sex covered with hair and said: “Do you really want the sex of a bride?” “No,” he replied, “it would be better to have that of an ignoble and shameless slave.” Then the man said to himself, “My end is signaled, the earth is dry and I see the signs of betrayal.”

She retorted, “It’s not a question of razor and barber, but a sign aimed at certain people!”

Then she ordered her servants to hold his arm and, after having him sit on the leather rugs she had had brought, she had the veins of his forearm cut and collected the blood that came out in a container. After this she exclaimed, “Oh Ġaḍīma! Not one drop will be wasted: I will [drink] your blood as a cure for my madness [*fa-innī urīduhu li-l-ḥabl*].”³⁷

The theme of women’s astuteness is certainly present in this story,³⁸ which, through the decision taken by the two sisters, recalls cunning, traps, deceit and

in D.H. French and C.S. Lightfoot, *The Eastern Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford British Archeological Reports, 1989, pp. 145-167; A. Arioli, “Al-Zabbā’: La versione di Ibn al-Athīr”, in E. Equini Schneider (ed.), *Septimia Zenobia Sebaste*, Roma, 1993, pp. 143-147.

36 On the origin of this story in the Arabic context and on a new interpretation of Zenobia, see F.A. Pennacchietti, “Riflessioni sulla tradizione araba relativa a Zenobia”, in *Im Dialog bleiben. Sprache und Denken in den Kulturen des Vorderen Orients. Festschrift für Raif Georges Khoury*, eds. F.F. Musall and A. Al-Mudarris, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011, pp. 3-12.

37 *Ġānī*, vol. 15, p. 308.

38 See L. Perfetti, *Women and Laughter in Medieval Comic Literature*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003. For misogyny in the medieval Arabic-Islamic mental universe, see J. Scott Meisami, *Writing Medieval Women: Representations and Misrepresentations*, in J. Bray (ed.), *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, London – New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 47-88: 52-53.

stratagems. The two plot and conspire in order to inflict a terrible death on Ġaḍīma. But the aspect I wish to draw attention to here is another – the relationship between body and narration. We are evidently far away from the verbal wonders with which, in the *Aḡānī*, reference is often made to female bodies of extraordinary beauty and sensuality. Here, the process that takes place is exactly the opposite: in displaying her unshaven sex to Ġaḍīma, Zabbā' reveals her true intentions. She is not giving herself as a loving bride, but openly reveals the trap and savours the terrible revenge. The gesture of exhibiting a part of her body to Ġaḍīma, her unshaven sex, grants the scene great expressive force. It conveys the atmosphere of death even before the character within the story and the reader outside the story perceive its imminence. The depilation of the body and, in particular, of the pubis is, for women – as Boudhiba teaches us in a famous essay on sexuality in Islam – a very important preparatory act for matrimony and an explicit sign, to use Zabbā's words, of “willingness”. It indeed assumes a double significance: it makes the body ready for sexual relations, contrary to the unshaven sex that is, to the eyes of the partner, deprived of erotic value.

Further, it seems important to highlight how the association of Zabbā's hairy vulva with death refers back to the archetype of the “vagina dentata.” The shaved vulva represents the female body tamed by an androcentric and patriarchal culture, whereas the unshaven vulva represents nature, with the female body perceived as threatening to men. Indeed, it can give life, but it can also take it away, sucking it back inside.³⁹

The unshaven sex is associated, furthermore, in popular culture, with the evil eye. All this is inscribed therefore within a frame of reference that is connected with customs, on the one hand, and superstitions on the other, characteristic of a culture that is profoundly androcentric and in which the “female” is essentially a generator of pleasure thanks to her beauty, her sensuality, her capacity for entertaining (consider the central importance that women's song has in the *Aḡānī* or in the *Kitāb al-qiyān*).⁴⁰

To my mind, it does not seem to be by chance that, again due to the procedure of nomination that I have discussed with regard to Zarqā' al-Yamāma,

39 It is worth noting that the hair around the vagina dentata are symbolically depicted as serpents in other myths of female assassins and killers: Medusa, the Gorgons, the Indian Goddess Kālī are all figures of death. See “Vagina dentata” in J. Chevalier (ed.), *Dizionario dei simboli, miti, sogni, costumi, gesti, forme, figure, colori, numeri*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1988; P. Brunel, *Dizionario dei miti letterari*, Milan: Bompiani, 1995; and J. Kristeva, *La testa senza il corpo. Il viso e l'invisibile nell'immaginario dell'Occidente*, Roma: Donzelli, 2009, p. 38.

40 See al-Ġāḥiz, *Kitāb al-qiyān*, in *Rasā'il al-Ġāḥiz*, ed. Muḥammad Basil 'Uyūn al-Sūd, Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000, vol. 2, pp. 109-136, and *The Epistle on Singing-Girls by Jāḥiz*, ed. and trans. by A.F.L. Beeston, London: Aris & Phillips, 1980.

Zenobia is here known as “The Hairy One”. And this refers not to her hair, but to a much more intimate part of her body.

It seems to me, therefore, that tradition has embroidered certain details on the story of Ġaḍīma and Zabbā’ in a not exactly innocent way, using the body of the women and operating with the binominal beauty/ugliness where the latter is related to death. But even the male body is exhibited in the narration in a sort of street show. In the wounds that Zabbā’ has inflicted on Ġaḍīma are the signs, typical of primitive cultures and recognized by entire groups, of that “revenge” that has so struck the Arabic imagination. After all, it is well known just what an important part in pre-Islamic poetry revenge plays. In the narration, the most important image which remains impressed in the reader’s mind is that of the bloody wound inflicted on Ġaḍīma, with him depicted in a dramatic posture. This is the most spectacular sight, most appropriate, together with the Queen’s unshaved pubis, for producing fear and horror. Moreover there is the belief in the healing power of the blood from the “vendetta” that recalls, in my opinion, something ancestral belonging to a complex symbolic aggregate and perhaps reflects the growing divide between the two cultural systems, the pre-Islamic and the Islamic. Zabbā’ announces to Ġaḍīma, impotent spectator of his own terrible end, that she will drink his blood to cure the madness caused by the death of her father. The story, therefore, concludes with another powerful image related to the body. As is known, the body represents a segment of particular conceptions of food that emerge in the form of metaphors.⁴¹ It can be the entranceway for material of salvation (think of the body and the blood of Christ) and, at the same time, of ruinous material. In this case, not only is the vendetta washed with blood, but it is announced that blood will be consumed. The concluding image, featuring a high level of figurativeness, as does the entire story, thus transmits a mixture of pleasure and disgust, of consolation (for the curative power of consuming blood) and of mad pain (for the loss of her father). The mouth is, in the end, the “locus” of the food and the story. Here, body, food and story are included in the same area of the imagination in which contradictory feelings are moulded to powerfully represent the atrocious vendetta and the value that it had in pre-Islamic society. We are therefore in the presence of the Vendetta of Vendettas, as is demonstrated by the proverbs, stories and references to Zabbā’ and Ġaḍīma present in later Arabic folk and literary production.

Conclusions

41 See M. Cassarino, “Il cibo come cultura in una fonte letteraria araba del X secolo”, in D. Bredi, L. Capezzone, W. Dahmash, L. Rostagno (eds), *Scritti in onore di Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti*, Rome: Edizioni Q, 2008, vol. 1, pp. 371-389.

In conclusion, it is not easy to draw true and proper conclusions from this brief examination of two stories from the *Aḡānī*. I will limit myself to presenting some reflections.

Firstly, it seems to me that adopting an approach that uses both traditional narratological analysis as well as anthropological insights and which focuses on categories of “gender” has proved to be very fruitful. This approach has allowed us not only to “unmask” and understand the mechanisms that have led to the different representations of the characters in question, the lesbians Hind and Zarqā’, the representation of Zabbā’, and to highlight their narrative and semantic potential. It also lets us reflect on a symbolic structure connected to binary and hierarchical ways of operating that postulate mechanisms of domination and exclusion. It is enough to think of the utility of a reflection on the “body” and on the meanings that, entirely or in part, it assumes in the literary imagination and in the narrations examined here: Hind’s segregation and the sackcloth, Zarqā’'s eyes and Zabbā’s sex.

We have also been able to see how those I have defined as the collectors/transmitters/manipulators of the stories have operated. Under the influence of the ideology of Islam and hiding behind a process of attribution to others, they have omitted from or added some quite considerable details to the stories. The stories examined and the accusation of lesbianism levelled at Hind clearly show these aspects. The female body is used and represented as a function of male desire. Furthermore, in the comic register (*baṣl*) in the narrations that the *Aḡānī* is made up of, the woman is one of the most “utilizable” of the figures in the text’s hierarchy. Many stories, whether they have a historical, biographical or fantasy-based background, begin with the body. In the end, as Blumenberg has observed regarding the origins of mythical narration,⁴² it was probably a difficult reality characterized by the fear of pain and death that gave life to stories that could not be contradicted by reality but which could be contradicted by other stories. The stories of Hind, Zarqā’ and Zabbā’ are short but rich fragments arising from this process of mythical fabulation which has been unfolding over the course of centuries.

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the representation of some female figures in the *Kitāb al-Aḡānī* by Abū al-Faraḡ al-Iṣfahānī. It examines the strategies through which medieval Arabic literary imagination constructs female characters, both positive and negative, between myth and historical reality. Some women, for instance, possess special powers or influence, such as Zarqā’ al-Yamāma, a lesbian who,

⁴² See H. Blumenberg, *Elaborazione del mito*, Bologna: il Mulino, 1991, p. 30; M. Detienne, *L’invenzione della mitologia*, Torino: Boringhieri, 1983.

thanks to her extraordinary sight, can see the enemy from miles away, or Zabbā', who is able to imprison the king of 'Irāq and drink his blood. Basing itself methodologically on gender studies also in a literary perspective, the paper looks at processes through which a literary language is constructed and androcentricity is institutionalised and at Cultural paradigms justifying such representations of women in pre-Islamic and Islamic times. These aspects will be looked at in connection with themes such as relation between power and the supernatural, the feminine and the divine, and stereotypes concerning sexuality and gender.