

*“No, this is not its name”*

Anatomy of the Joke  
 Women Teach Men in the  
*Thousand and One Nights*



Then she washed herself under the belly, around the breasts, and between the thighs. Then she rushed out, threw herself in the porter's lap, and asked, "My little lord, what is this?" "Your vulva," said he, and she gave him a blow with which the hall resounded, saying, "Fie, you have no shame." "Your womb," said he, and her sister hit him, saying, "Fie, what an ugly word!" "Your clitoris," said he, and the other sister boxed him, saying "Fie, fie, you are shameless." They kept at it, this one boxing him, that one slapping him, another hitting him, another jabbing him, repeating, "No, no," while he kept shouting, "your womb, your cunt, your pussy." Finally he cried, "The basil of the bridges," and all three burst out laughing till they fell on their backs. But again all three slapped him on the neck and said, "No, this is not its name." (73–74)<sup>1</sup>

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1. For the Arabic text, please see appendix B. The Arabic edition of the *Nights* used is Muhsin Mahdi's, the edition Husain Haddawy uses for his English translation, which I use here. Transliterations of Mahdi's Arabic text throughout this chapter are my own. For an explanation of the system used, consult appendix A. I thank Professor Julio Cortés for his invaluable assistance in transliterations. In cases where the text is not cited directly, page numbers will be given, Arabic first. For ease of reading, I omit diacriticals from proper names in the *Nights*.



In this scene from the *Thousand and One Nights*, an exchange between three sisters from Baghdad and the poet they have hired, laughter is literally focused on the woman's body, but it is the words to describe female anatomy more than the body itself that take center stage. As in the *Decameron*, the scene interrogates the relationship between sexual language and humor, but more than feminine modesty, it is masculine knowledge, the porter's inability to get the name right, that is at issue.

In the "Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies," three wealthy sisters in Baghdad during the reign of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (reigned 786–809) invite the porter they have hired for the day to join them in merry-making. After they have eaten many delicacies and drunk much wine, one by one, each sister removes her clothing, plunges into a pool, emerges, and sits on the porter's lap. Each sister then points to her sexual parts and asks the porter, "What is this?" When the first sister asks him to name her parts, she and her sisters scold, slap, and hit him as each answer he gives is judged incorrect: "your womb," "your vulva," "your clitoris" (*rahimuki*, *farjuki*, *zanburuki*). She reveals the correct name: "the basil of the bridges" (*al-ḥabaqu al-jusūr*). The second sister poses the same question, again punishing the porter for the anatomical terms he proposes. Finally he cries out, "The basil of the bridges," using the term he had learned for the first sister's anatomy. All three sisters laugh so hard they fall on their backs. He is slapped some more and informed that the correct name is "the husked sesame" (*al-simsim al-maqshūr*). When the third sister asks the same question, he tries both "basil of the bridges" and "the husked sesame," but after receiving numerous blows and pinches, he is finally told that the name is "the inn of Abu Masrur" (*khāni abū masrūr*).<sup>2</sup> The porter then decides to play their game, and after he, too, has made them try to name his anatomy correctly, tells them the nickname he has invented, to which the sisters respond with gales of laughter.

This scene raises several new questions about the relationship between women and laughter in medieval texts. What knowledge or pleasure do

2. The three metaphors have sexual connotations. Basil was considered an aphrodisiac, and beautiful women in the *Nights* are sometimes compared to a "stalk of sweet basil." I have not, however, found an explanation for the "bridges." Sesame was a valuable commodity as well as a symbol of fertility. The inn surely refers to the vagina, and *masrūr* means "happiness." Abu Masrur could refer to several possible historical figures. The caliph's eunuch is also called Masrur, although there is no evident connection between the two in the story.

men gain from jokes women tell? What happens when the outsider who is the butt of the joke himself becomes the one making the joke? How does laughter about male and female genitalia relate to attitudes toward sexuality? How does the presence of the female narrator, Shahrazad, whose own story frames that of the three sisters, shape the response of the men and women who read or heard this tale? In what way do the particularities of medieval Arabo-Islamic culture shape the representation of women’s laughter differently from that in medieval European culture, and what might we learn about laughter in medieval Europe in turn?

It should first be noted that despite their cultural differences, the European and Arab worlds shared significant intellectual and literary traditions. Arab medicine and philosophy drew from the Greeks, and Aristotle, the first Western theorist of laughter, was to become known as “The Philosopher” in the Arab world; indeed, some of the misogyny in Arabic discourse is his legacy. The thirteenth-century essayist al-Jawbarī, for example, in his essay on female ruse and trickery, cites Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Islam incorporated many stories and practices from the Judeo-Christian tradition, including some of its misogyny.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the influence of Arabic literature on European literature is well documented, although debates about the extent of this influence continue.<sup>5</sup> The anonymous tales of the *Nights* themselves had considerable influence on the European narrative of the Middle Ages after being brought to Spain through Petrus Alfonsi’s twelfth-century Latin collection, the *Disciplina clericalis*. A French fabliau may in fact be inspired by the “Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies.”<sup>6</sup>

3. Al-Jawbarī, *Le Voile arraché*, 242.

4. Robert Irwin, in *The Arabian Nights*, 76, notes the futility of trying to locate the misogyny within certain tales of the *Nights* as Arabic in origin: “As a frame story, in various later and distorted forms, it was much imitated in Persian literature and then in Arab literature, so that the misogyny of the Pythagoreans came to mingle with that of the ancient Buddhists and Hindus in the Arabian tales of the *Nights*.” On the shared heritage of misogyny in the various cultures of the Mediterranean, see Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 25–37.

5. Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, has documented the influence of Arabic literature on medieval European literature ranging from troubadour poetry to Dante and Boccaccio. See also Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Medieval England*.

6. In the fabliau, “Des .III. Chanoinesses,” three women invite the male poet (not a porter) to their residence, where they bathe, drink wine, and eat sumptuous delicacies. They ask the poet to tell them stories that will make them laugh (Montaignon and Raynaud, *Recueil général*, 3:137–44). A miniature preceding the fabliau in the manuscript (fol. 84vo of the Arsenal manuscript) shows the three canonesses naked in three bathtubs on a curtained platform. The poet is sitting, holding a cup and a bone from a fowl or ham. Like the three

There are also many examples of possible Greek and Roman prototypes for stories in the *Nights*, so that European stories and Arab stories may resemble each other because they share a common source.<sup>7</sup> These shared traditions are significant and explain why Arabic and European literature take up many of the same antifeminist themes. It might also be added that Arabists, like scholars of the European Middle Ages, have begun to examine the ways in which women in the medieval Arab world may have wielded more influence in public life than negative pronouncements on women might suggest.<sup>8</sup>

A significant difference between the discourses on women in the two cultures is worth noting. Whereas Christian clerical writing on women, which informed even the primarily secular classics of European literature, debated whether woman was good or evil, to be praised or blamed, and correspondingly whether marriage was to be embraced or scorned, in medieval Islam, it was largely accepted that men would marry.<sup>9</sup> There are numerous quips about undesirable wives, or about the difficulty of satisfying multiple wives, but more often texts treat the question not of whether to marry, but how to ensure a wife's chastity and keep peace in the household. In addition, divorce, although not always sanctioned to the same degree by Islamic texts, was a common practice, and not seen as incompatible with an upright pious life. A troublesome wife, therefore, could be expeditiously removed from a man's household. Moreover, a Muslim man, particularly one of means, could also take any number of concubines, and the culture of the singing girls, those women whose charms, whether literary, musical, or sexual, could be bought or sold, shapes the representa-

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Baghdad sisters, the three women, as canonesses, live in their own community apart from men, which they use to justify their bawdiness: "Nous n'en poons estre accusées, / Car nous sommes en lieu secré" 191–92.

7. Irwin discusses Greek and Roman prototypes (*The Arabian Nights*, 72–73) and specific examples of stories from the *Nights* that made their way into Europe from the Middle Ages to the present (92–102).

8. See the essays in the recent addition to the New Middle Ages series, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, edited by Gavin R. G. Hambly.

9. Bellamy, "Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature," 32. James Bellamy notes that although one can find some arguments for celibacy in earlier periods of Islam, most Islamic jurists are in favor of marriage, particularly since the prophet Muhammad had four wives. Al-Ghazālī, the philosopher/theologian turned Sufi mystic, writes in his *Kitāb adāb al-nikah* (Book on the etiquette of marriage) (A.D. 1096–1106) that marriage is fitting for some and abstinence fitting for others (47–77).

tion of women’s wit and laughter in interesting ways.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the seclusion of women in upper-class Arab households, and a generally greater degree of segregation according to gender, were also factors that should be taken into account when considering how the jesting of the three Baghdad ladies might have been understood by Arab readers.

### *Manuscript Traditions and Audiences for the Nights*

Assessing audience reception of texts, difficult enough for the European texts I have been considering, is even more difficult in the case of the *Thousand and One Nights* because of the oral circulation of various cycles and the curious history of manuscript transmission. A version of the *Nights* existed as early as the ninth century, evidenced by a paper fragment entitled *Kitāb ḥadīth alf layla* (Book of the tale of the thousand nights), which appeared to be the title page of the manuscript. A tenth-century writer later describes the collection, noting that it was a translation of the Persian *Hazar Afsaneh* (A thousand stories), which contained Persian, Greek, and Indian tales. The stories gradually developed other cultural layers—the Iraqi layer, best illustrated in the cycles of stories in Mahdi’s edition, and an Egyptian layer. The result, the *Alf Layla wa-layla*, is a collection of stories of diverse cultural origin that were Arabized and Islamicized.

The popularity of the collection was so immense upon its introduction into Europe that scores of Europeans went in quest of “complete and authentic” versions that would contain the full one thousand and one nights (Galland’s Syrian manuscript—probably fourteenth century—the basis for Mahdi’s edition, contained less than three hundred). This quest led to the incorporation of tales that were not authenticated as part of the original collection of tales and the outright fabrication of tales that editors then included in their new “complete” editions.<sup>11</sup> It is thus difficult to ascertain which specific stories men and women in a particular region of

10. The Qurʾān allows Muslim men to have intercourse with “the slaves whom ye have acquired” (Sura 4:3, 4:24). That medieval Arabs found Christian monogamy to be curious is illustrated in an anecdote about a Christian physician to the caliph Mansūr who was given three slave girls when his wife was reported to be ill. He angrily refused, noting that according to his religion, a man can take only one wife (Bürgel, “Love, Lust, and Longing,” 103).

11. For a thorough account of the manuscript and translation history of the *Nights*, see Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 9–62.

the Arab world at a particular time would have known. Scholars agree that because the stories told in the *Nights* by and large reflect urban life, they were probably known mostly to urban audiences, both educated and uneducated. Whereas the educated might read to each other in private gatherings, the uneducated were likely to have heard the tales from a storyteller in a public marketplace or in the booths of professional storytellers.<sup>12</sup>

The oral circulation of the tales over an extensive temporal and geographical range also means that it is difficult to determine the precise authorship of the *Nights*, sometimes known as “the book without authors.”<sup>13</sup> Although the compilers of the tales—such as the hypothetical thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Syrian reconstructed by Mahdi in his edition—were probably men, it is possible that women influenced the shape of some of the tales. Some scholars have in fact suggested that women were the privileged audience of the *Nights* because in the Arab world fanciful stories (*khurafa*) like those in the *Nights* have traditionally been seen as suitable only for women and children, whereas poetry and forms of narrative considered more serious are associated with men, a tradition that persists today in some regions.<sup>14</sup>

Other scholars, although they agree that women were among the *Nights*' audiences, believe that their presence was somewhat problematic. Mahdi claims that women in the courts of Baghdad and Cairo read the *Nights*, but that this was frowned upon (presumably because of the ribald content of many tales).<sup>15</sup> Some scholars argue that the presence of women was particularly problematic in the case of mixed audiences. In twelfth-century Andalusia, the tales were told in the public marketplace, a source of much concern to a market inspector who warns of the dangers of unaccompanied women entering the booths or homes of storytellers and fortune-tellers.<sup>16</sup> Most scholars tend to assume that if women heard the stories, it was in strictly female company. Richard Burton, the nineteenth-

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12. On audience and transmission of the tales, see Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 121; and Pinault, *Story-telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*, 13.

13. For example, Gerhardt, *The Art of Storytelling*, 39; and Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 42–62.

14. On the traditional distinction between tales told by men and tales told by women as it pertains to the *Nights*, see Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 118. On the persistence of this tradition in the Arab world today, see El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, xlv–xlviii; and Webber (who discusses Tunisia), “Women’s Folk Narratives and Social Change,” 310–16.

15. Mahdi, introduction to *The 1001 Nights*, 3:206 n. 87.

16. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 109.

century translator of the *Nights* into English, tried to counter any squeamishness among his European readers by noting that sexually explicit scenes such as the one between the porter and the three ladies were no more obscene than certain scenes from Shakespeare and that, in any case, they were not recited before mixed audiences.<sup>17</sup> In Burton’s time the *Nights* were probably not recited publicly in mixed company, for beginning with the sixteenth century, storytelling was eventually removed from the marketplace to coffeehouses, from which women were (and often still are) excluded.<sup>18</sup> Although the medieval Arab marketplace may have offered more opportunities for men and women to hear the tales in mixed company, Burton’s conclusion that they were not recited before mixed audiences certainly reflects what we know about the segregated nature of storytelling in much of the Arab world today. In his research on storytelling in Egypt, Hasan El-Shamy found that women generally get their stories from other women in their families, often their mothers, and that husbands often have no knowledge of the stories that women in their family tell.<sup>19</sup> Like Dunbar’s fictional portrait of married women joking about sexual matters together, anecdotes about Hubbā, an older woman expert in such questions as various sexual positions, frequently showed her joking with her daughters and other women, and there is also evidence that in Muhammad’s time, female jesters would entertain women, whereas male jesters would entertain men.<sup>20</sup>

*Great Is Woman’s Cunning: Shahrazad and the  
Ambivalence of Female Eloquence*

But morning overtook Shahrazad, and she lapsed into silence. Then Dinarzad said to her sister Shahrazad, “Sister, what a lovely and entertaining story!” Shahrazad replied, “What is this compared with what I shall tell you tomorrow night if the king spares me and lets me

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17. Burton, *Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments*, I:93 n. 2.

18. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 110.

19. El-Shamy, *Folktales of Egypt*, 213 and 216.

20. For anecdotes reported about Hubbā, see Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ*. As Fedwa Malti-Douglas notes, Hubbā, called the “mother of mankind,” purveys sexual knowledge, especially to women (*Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, 45–46). On female jesters, see Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World*, 65.

live!” The king said to himself, “By God, I will not have her put to death until I hear the rest of the story. Then I shall do to her what I did to the others.” (135; 74–75)<sup>21</sup>

It has become a commonplace among readers of the *Nights* that Shahrazad’s endless spinning of tales is a survival strategy through which she manages to save her life by proving to the king that her wonderful stories are worthy of his keeping her alive. It is less often acknowledged that Shahrazad is telling stories to save the lives of all unmarried women, not just her own. The communal, rather than individual, nature of her project is made explicit in her statement to her father, the king’s vizier: “I would like you to marry me to King Shahrayar, so that I may either succeed in saving the people or perish and die like the rest” (66; 11). This mission is recalled for readers continuously throughout the *Nights* as the above passage, with variations, is repeated at the end of each of the thousand and one nights, so that far more than a simple device of linking stories together, Shahrazad serves as a nexus of three intertwining threads concerning the representation of women in the medieval Arab world: eloquence, sexuality, and cunning.

While there are few examples of known women in medieval Europe whose witticisms have been recorded, there are, surprisingly, quite a few in the medieval Arab world, although since they come to us primarily from male-authored texts, it is difficult to know how accurately they reflect what the women actually said. On the whole, there seems to have been less hostility toward women’s speech in the Arab world; this may be in part due to the fact that ‘A’isha, Muhammad’s favorite wife, was revered for her knowledge, and the hadiths she transmitted (traditions about the life of Muhammad) were highly valued.<sup>22</sup> In addition to her eloquence, ‘A’isha was said to have a sharp wit. When God told Muhammad he could marry as many women as he wished, she is said to have remarked sarcastically, “Allah always responds immediately to your needs.”<sup>23</sup> Such sarcastic retorts against

21. For the Arabic text, see appendix B.

22. Opposition to ‘A’isha’s position of power in the Muslim community stemmed far more from political factionalism than hostility to her being a woman, although it is interesting to note that Christian accounts of rumors of ‘A’isha’s alleged adultery emphasize not only her lack of chastity, but Muhammad’s alleged complicity in her affair, thus using the story to discredit Islam as sexually decadent. For a discussion of Western accounts of ‘A’isha, see Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past*, 96.

23. Quoted in El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 131.



husbands and other men were known from other women in the Arab world such as Sukayna, great-granddaughter of Muhammad.<sup>24</sup> A thirteenth-century North African erotic manual also tells anecdotes of women who rebuff unwanted suitors with their sharp and witty retorts or humiliating tricks. In one example, a man looking for an adulterous liaison approaches a woman and says he would like to sample her to see whether she is tastier than his wife. She replies that he should simply ask her husband, who has already tasted both of them.<sup>25</sup> Ibn Abī Ṭāhir’s *Kitāb balāghāt al-nisāʾ* (Book of women’s songs) contains several anecdotes in which women shout sexual insults at their husbands.<sup>26</sup> Although poetry was generally the privileged domain of men, there were several notable exceptions such as Humayda bint Nuʿmān ibn Bashīr, who composed invective poems about her husbands, or the Andalusian female poets Wallāda, daughter of a caliph, and Nazhūn bint al-Qalāʾī, contemporary of the twelfth-century poet Ibn Quzmān, both of whom wrote scathing, and sometimes obscene, verse about suitors or rival (male) poets.<sup>27</sup>

Although such wit among women appears to have been tolerated, and perhaps even welcomed in some cases, it was not likely to have been a trait commonly encouraged in wives. In his *Book on the Etiquette of Marriage*, the philosopher al-Ghazālī instructs husbands to jest and play with their wives, but only as a strategy to preserve harmony in the household.<sup>28</sup> An explicit warning against witty wives is found in the Tunisian al-Nafzāwī’s

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24. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 192–94. Franz Rosenthal’s collection of anecdotes about Ashʿab translated into English include several in which Sukayna plays tricks or makes jokes (*Humor in Early Islam*, especially 69–73, 81–82). See also Ulrich Marzolph’s catalog of humor in Arabic literature, *Arabia Ridens*.

25. Al-Tīfāchī, *Les Délices des coeurs*, 85. Al-Tīfāchī died in 1253, and was either of Algerian or Tunisian origin. The anecdotes in which women rebuff suitors are actually contained in a chapter on women who engage in love affairs on their own initiative (rather than through an intermediary), and several of the anecdotes show women tricking their husbands. Given this indiscriminate mix, it would seem that women’s control over their pleasures (whether sexual or comic) was the focus of the author’s concern.

26. Ibn Abī Ṭāhir, *Balāghāt al-nisāʾ*, 149 and passim.

27. Schippers, “The Role of Women in Medieval and Andalusian Arabic Story-Telling.” Her sources include the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. It is interesting to note that invective poetry (*biḡāʾ*) was an esteemed genre in medieval Arabic poetry, but a genre generally associated with men, evident in Nazhūn’s remark during a barbed exchange with a male poet: “Although I am a woman by nature, my poetry is masculine” (146). Women were generally associated with the more somber genres of the *rithāʾ* or *marthiyā* in which women mourned their men killed in battle.

28. Al-Ghazālī, *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam*, 94–96.

early-fifteenth-century erotic manual, *al-Rawḍ al-ʿāṭir* (The perfumed garden), which describes the ideal wife thus:

She will not be given to much laughter or frivolous talk nor to much coming and going to the houses of neighbors. . . . She will not seek the close friendship of other women but will be at ease with and put her trust in her husband alone. . . . She will complain little, neither will she cause offence. She will relax and laugh only in the intimacy of her husband's company and will give herself to him alone, even though she were to die of forbearance.<sup>29</sup>

Like the proper European lady, the Arab wife should talk little, refrain from wandering about, restrain her merriment, and mold her disposition to suit that of her husband. The chapter on women to be avoided, by contrast, describes she who laughs too easily, talks too much, and goes in and out of the house, explicitly condemning laughter as a sign of sexual debauchery: “A raucous woman with a loud laugh is unattractive. It has been said that if a woman is often seen joking and fooling around then she is a slut.”<sup>30</sup> Bodily decorum and chastity are linked with the behavior of the mouth, characterized by restrained speech and moderate amusement. Arab writers in fact explicitly connected the woman's mouth with her vagina. A large mouth signaled a large vagina; this woman was to be avoided in favor of a smaller-mouthed woman with a narrower vagina who would presumably give men more sexual pleasure.<sup>31</sup> Al-Nafzāwī's treatise continues to be available at low cost in the *medinabs* of the Arab world today, and so it is not surprising that the contemporary Egyptian physician and writer Nawal El Saadawi recalls that when growing up she was told not only to avoid laughing, but to keep her eyes down, her legs closed, and her mouth shut.<sup>32</sup>

While wives were anxiously supervised and monitored, more license was accorded other women particular to the medieval Islamo-Arab world—the singing girls kept to amuse the men of elite urban culture. In his study of the *Nights*, Irwin notes that

29. Al-Nafzāwī, *Perfumed Garden*, 18; *al-Rawḍ al-ʿāṭir fī nuzbāt al-khāṭir*, 47.

30. Al-Nafzāwī, *Perfumed Garden*, 32; *al-Rawḍ al-ʿāṭir*, 75.

31. Ait Sabbah, *La Femme dans l'inconscient musulman*, 48.

32. El Saadawi, *Hidden Face of Eve*, 9–10.

it is often the singing girl (*qaina*, pl. *qiyan*) who is provided with the wittiest lines and the most appropriate verses. The stories of “Harun al-Rashid and the Two Slave-Girls” and “Harun al-Rashid and the Three Slave-Girls” commemorate the bawdy wit of these accomplished entertainers. In historical fact, singing girls were much in demand at the court of the Abbasid caliphs and in the houses of other rich men, particularly as after-dinner entertainers and as a female counterpart to the learnedly witty *nudama*, or cup-companions.<sup>33</sup>

Since the singing girl was either a freeborn performer whose talents could be purchased or a slave who was property rather than a spouse in whom the honor of the family was invested, the entertainment she provided, whether in sex, singing, or storytelling, was not threatening to men’s control over women, and it is perhaps for this reason that her wit was granted greater license. Such latitude may similarly have been accorded to European prostitutes, although there is little evidence to document this. By contrast, anecdotes about the witticisms recounted by Arab singing girls are numerous in the *Nights* and also in the *adab*, encyclopedic collections of anecdotes or essays that document an elite male culture in which maintaining female entertainers testified to a man’s wealth and status.

Although many of the anecdotes involve women’s witty retorts that put men in their place, most often they revolve in some way around the woman’s body so that women are associated, as in European discourse, with corporeality. This is most evident in the *adab* where women are discussed in chapters that treat various bodily deformities. For example, in his chapter “The Book of Women,” Ibn Qutayba includes material on various body parts of both sexes as well as general physical characteristics and physical handicaps. Such an amalgam in a chapter purporting to discuss women suggests that women are defined by the body itself, and a deficient or abnormal one at that.<sup>34</sup> The general tendency of Arab authors to put women at the ends of their *adab* works furthermore reinforces their status as marginal, trivial, even laughable. The last chapter of Abū Tammām’s *Ḥamāsa* is entitled *madhammat al-nisāʾ* (blaming women), yet not all of the eighteen poems even concern women. The poems are largely light and humorous, probably meant to contrast with the more serious preceding

33. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 172–73.

34. Malti-Douglas, *Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, 30.

sections, the playful (*hazl*) following on the serious (*jidd*) as is customary in medieval Arab poetics; the implication of the chapter's title is of course that women, who are criticized chiefly for their physical appearance, are not serious subjects for the writer.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, as Fedwa Malti-Douglas has noted, a distinctive feature of *adab* anecdotes is the way in which the wit of the slave girl also serves to redefine the value of her body in some way. One such example is found in the work by al-Tha'libī, the *Latā'if al-lutf* (The witticisms of courteousness). In it, the narrator, in the person of the *adab* master himself, al-Jāhiz (776–869), recounts: "I inspected a slave girl and said to her, 'Do you play the *'ūd* well?' She replied, 'No, but I can sit on it well.'" The joke plays on the double meaning of the *'ūd*, a stringed musical instrument, but also a stick, rod, or pole, allusions to the male member. The witty slave girl thus turns her potential purchaser's question about her value into a joke in which her sexual charms are traded for her musical talents. In another anecdote, a caliph, again planning to purchase a slave girl, asks, "Are you a virgin or what?" The girl replies, "Or what, O Emir of the Believers." The anecdote concludes with the caliph laughing and purchasing the girl. Malti-Douglas notes that it is the man who initiates the exchange by asking the girl to state her status as an object worthy of purchase, but that the girl one-ups him by seizing on the man's avoidance of naming her lack (not being a virgin) by turning it into a witticism that "counteracts her physical deficiency, which might normally disqualify her from purchase. Wit neutralizes a lack in the female body, a lack related to a woman's sexual behavior."<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that all of these anecdotes end with the witty woman being purchased by the male. Although her witticism has potentially deflected views of her deficient body onto the superior quality of her intelligence, her body and the pleasures it offers (whether sex or laughter) can be bought and sold.<sup>37</sup>

When read within the context of the witty and bawdy singing girls or

35. See Van Gelder, "Against Women, and Other Pleasantries," which includes a translation of the last chapter of the *Hamāsa*. In another article, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature," Van Gelder discusses the pairing of jest (*hazl*) and earnest (*jidd*) in medieval Arabic texts. Like their European counterparts, Arab authors justified their use of humor and jesting as a way to keep their readers engaged but cautioned that moderation should be observed.

36. Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 34–36.

37. For jokes about and narrated by slave girls, also see Abū 'l-Qāsim's *Hikāyat* (Anecdotes), which represents the Baghdad of the early eleventh century.

slave girls, Shahrazad's eloquence is highly ambivalent, and highlights several sources of tension within Arab discourse on women. While many readers have emphasized the narrative pleasure Shahrazad provides the king with her stories, it must be acknowledged that her body, too, is in the service of the king. In some manuscripts, the epilogue of the *Nights* indicates that over the course of her storytelling, Shahrazad has given birth to three sons, and is eventually married to the king. Shahrazad is thus a hybrid, both a kind of singing girl enlisted for palace entertainments and a faithful and patient spouse useful for constant companionship and producing male heirs to the throne. Her storytelling services ultimately serve a different goal than that of the singing girl, however, for her goal is not to amuse the king, but to educate him out of his misogyny. The prologue of the *Nights* tells the story of how King Shahriyar and his brother, King Shahzaman, because they were both cuckolded by their wives, came to believe that all women are evil. When King Shahzaman finds his wife in the arms of a kitchen boy, he concludes, "al-nisā' mā 'alayhim i'tiqād" (57) [Women are not to be trusted, 4]. Later, when the brothers encounter a woman who has cuckolded her *'ifrīt* (demon) captor, they both conclude that no woman can be trusted, vowing never to remarry, a pledge that unites them in a homosocial bond against women. This asocial behavior is remedied by Shahrazad, who cures the king of his extremism, and it could be said that she represents the force of renewal, her creative and life-giving stories paralleling her life-giving motherhood that overturns the violence and destruction of patriarchy gone awry.<sup>38</sup>

More than a nurturing mother figure, however, Shahrazad possesses great learning, intelligence, and cleverness. The prologue notes that she "had read the books of literature, philosophy, and medicine. She knew poetry by heart, had studied historical reports, and was acquainted with the sayings of men and the maxims of sages and kings. She was intelligent, knowledgeable, wise, and refined. She had read and learned" (66; 11). Significantly, however, she needs more than this knowledge to accomplish her goal. She must call upon her uniquely feminine skills in the art of deception. Her narrative strategy of deferring the endings of her stories is designed to leave her male listener yearning for more. Shahrazad plots with her sister exactly how they will carry out their narrative project, like a director staging the movements of a play. Before her father, the vizier,

38. Faris, "1001 Words," 815–16.

sends her to King Shahrayar, she explains to Dinarzad, “When I go to the king, I will send for you, and when you come and see that the king has finished with me, say, ‘Sister, if you are not sleepy, tell us a story.’ Then I will begin to tell a story, and it will cause the king to stop his practice, save myself, and deliver the people” (71; 16). In order to set the plot in motion, once in bed with the king, Shahrazad puts on a show of tears so that he will allow her to send for her sister, who will then ask her to tell her first story. The putting on of tears was considered one of women’s tricks by al-Jāhiz in his treatise on singing girls and thus links Shahrazad to this long tradition in Arabo-Islamic writing about the cunning of women, in which women’s dual sins of lechery and deceit are paired, as they are in the examples of the Wife of Bath, Dunbar’s women, and the fabliaux where women use their cunning to conceal their adulterous liaisons.<sup>39</sup>

Such examples in the Arabic tradition include al-Jawbarī’s thirteenth-century *Kitāb al-mukhtār fī kashf al-asrār wa-hatā al-astār*, in which he relates a “true-life” story told to him by a male friend of how a woman had sex with her lover in her husband’s house before his very eyes. Al-Jawbarī concludes that since trickery is an innate talent in women, men should beware of all women.<sup>40</sup> Alī al-Baghdādī’s *Kitāb al-zahr al-aniq fi’l-bus wa’l-tā’niq* (The book of the delicate flowers regarding the kiss and the embrace), written for the early-fourteenth-century Mamluke court, includes a discussion of the wiles of women (*kayd al-nisā’*), particularly the tricks they use to deceive their husbands and lovers. Al-Nafzāwī’s work, although ostensibly an erotic manual, also includes a chapter “Women’s Tricks” (*makā’id al-nisā’*), especially wives who deceive their husbands. In the *Nights* themselves there is an entire cycle of stories on the theme, “The Craft and Malice of Women.”<sup>41</sup> Fears about female sexuality are also

39. In the *Epistle on Singing-Girls* [Risālat al-qiyān], al-Jāhiz describes the guile of the singing girl who “weeps with one eye to one and laughs with the other eye to the second, and winks at the latter in mockery of the former; she deals in secret with one, and openly with the other, giving the former to understand that she really belongs to him and not to the other, and that her overt behaviour is contrary to the promptings of her heart” (34). This topos of weeping out of one eye and laughing out the other of course recalls European descriptions.

40. Al-Jawbarī, *Le Voile arraché*, 253–55. The condemnation of women’s cunning is all the more striking when read against the vast corpus of works treating men’s cunning, which loses its negative connotations, becoming the positive figure of the trickster, a figure that enjoyed high status in medieval Arab culture (Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 80). Yet it should be noted that there are also numerous examples of women who trick potential seducers in order to remain faithful to their husbands (Bürgel, “Love, Lust, and Longing,” 111–12).

41. Burton, *Plain and Literal Translation*, vol. 6.

evident in the various traditions concerning female demons, such as Aisha Kandisha, a female demon with pendulous breasts in Moroccan folklore known to assault men in dark places, sometimes through trickery.<sup>42</sup> In the *Nights*, many female characters, particularly genies or spirits, appear ready to unleash their sexuality at any moment upon unsuspecting men, and it is primarily through their cunning speech that they conquer their prey.

This tradition linking women’s sexual excess and deceit can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian scriptures that Islam inherited, such as the story of Joseph in Sura 12 of the Qur’ān, where Potiphar sees that his wife has falsely accused Joseph of seducing her and cries, “inna min kaydikunna, inna kaydakunna ‘azīm” [Surely it is a device of you women. Your device is indeed great! 12:28]. Here, the “device” or “deceit” (*kayd*) of Potiphar’s wife is condemned as a general trait of womankind, for the possessive pronoun *kunna* belongs to the feminine plural, not singular. This Qur’ānic quotation is repeated verbatim in the prologue to the *Nights*, setting up early on the theme of women’s sexual voracity and cunning. When the two brothers witness how the ‘*ifrīt*’s captive woman has managed to cuckold him right before his eyes, they declare: “Inna kaydakunna ‘azīm” (64) [Great is woman’s cunning, 10]. Believing that “[t]here is not a single chaste woman anywhere on the entire face of the earth,” the king swears never to marry and, instead, to kill each woman he sleeps with so that he will save himself “min shar‘ihā wa-makrihā” (65) [from the wickedness and cunning of women, 10].

Shahrazad’s storytelling contests the facile association of women with cunning encapsulated in the paired examples of Potiphar’s wife and the ‘*ifrīt*’s captive.<sup>43</sup> Rather than enlisting her guile in the service of her sexuality, Shahrazad uses her storytelling to counter masculine pretensions to define all women as alike. Whereas Shahriyar makes his claim based on misogynous clichés and on his personal experience, Shahrazad counters this narrow knowledge with the collective experience of many that she has acquired through her learning, “combating the King’s narrow reading of experience [all women do it] with the immense resources of reported lives:

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42. For a discussion of this figure, see Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 42.

43. See the intriguing article by Ashley Manjarrez Walker and Michael A. Sells, “The Wiles of Women and Performative Intertextuality,” which examines how ‘A’isha strategically uses the story of Joseph in her own hadith narrative to vindicate herself against charges of adultery. The authors note that the word *kayd* is itself neutral in the Qur’ān, since God also uses *kayd* to defeat enemies of the faith (67–68).

the line between history and storytelling must be blurred here, as it was in the medieval period itself, to stress a common focus on *life-histories*.”<sup>44</sup> Shahrazad’s dual role as storyteller and historian is evidenced by her knowledge of *akhbār*, which could be translated both as “stories” and as “historical annals,” history often being recounted through anecdotal stories in the Arab Middle Ages.

It is also important to observe the way in which the cunning of women structures the narrative of the *Nights*. The presence of Dinarzad, a figure often overlooked in discussion of the outer frame of the *Nights*, is key to the work’s framing of female storytelling and male listening. It is Dinarzad who initially sets the storytelling in motion by asking her sister to tell a story, and she remains in the bedchamber to hear it, then praising it as lovely, entertaining, or amazing. Shahrazad’s inscribed audience is thus a mixed one: female (Dinarzad) and male (Shahriyar). Dinarzad requests her story as a fulfillment of her sister’s lifesaving project, whereas King Shahriyar listens to fulfill his own desire for narrative pleasure. The audience outside of the framework (the historical reader) is reminded of the gendered readers inscribed in the text and of the stakes involved. The king, oblivious to the sisters’ prior plotting in which he is their prey, becomes the object of scrutiny. Although the women are at the mercy of the king for their lives, the power to structure the narrative is theirs, and by virtue of their guile, his agency is reduced, his role having already been scripted for him. Both a sexual object and a learned and clever narrator, Shahrazad harnesses her putatively feminine gifts in a way that challenges misogynous discourse on women. Beguiling a man for socially productive ends, deceiving through learning and eloquence, Shahrazad conforms to traditional writing on women in her seductive cunning, while countering much of its misogynous assumptions by enlisting her guile to expand men’s narrow vision of women.

### *Vision, Veiling, and Fitna*

In the *Nights*, men’s claim to know women indeed has much to do with the faculty of vision, an aspect that links the verbal arts of Shahrazad with the linguistic play of the three sisters. The prologue, which recounts in almost

44. Grossman, “Infidelity and Fiction,” 120–21.



voyeuristic fashion how King Shahzaman witnesses the cuckolding of his brother, who then has to see for himself, emphasizes the faculty of vision.<sup>45</sup> Just as King Shahriyar and Shahzaman believe they know about women’s deceitfulness because they have seen it with their own eyes, the porter’s knowledge of the three sisters is also distinctly visual. As the porter meets each of the sisters, he gazes upon her stunning beauty, described in the superlative terms of the beauties of classical Arabic poetry: eyes like a deer, teeth like pearls, breasts like pomegranates, and (curiously for the reader not familiar with Arabic poetry) a belly with a navel like a cup that holds a pound of benzoin ointment (128–29; 68–69).<sup>46</sup> The passages emphasize the porter’s gaze upon the women in the verbs of seeing, *ra’ā* and *naẓara*. The porter’s gaze on the female body implies his domination over the three sisters. Joking with the women that they are like a table lacking a fourth leg, then reciting a poem about the pleasures of music, spices, wine, and love, he concludes, “wa-antum talāta taḥtājūna rābi’an wa-yakūnu rajulan” (131) [You are three and you need a fourth, a man, 70].

The porter’s declaration that the women need a man could be said to be symptomatic of the assured gaze of the male who masters his world. Yet the porter’s gaze on the beautiful women is precisely what renders him vulnerable. This is because women in the Arab world have been thought to possess *fitna*, “a fatal attraction which erodes the male’s will to resist her and reduces him to a passive acquiescent role.”<sup>47</sup> This connection between physical beauty and the social riot it can cause is corroborated by the definition of *fitna* as “temptation, trial; charm, charmingness, attractiveness; enchantment, captivation, fascination, enticement, temptation; infat-

45. Malti-Douglas has noted the prevalence of verbs of vision in the prologue, which she argues “call attention to a certain type of male active power, of the subject/looker on the object/looked upon. This is male scopic activity, to use Luce Irigaray’s terminology” (*Woman’s Body, Woman’s Word*, 24). Malti-Douglas is referring to Luce Irigaray’s notion of the penis-eye. Taking Freud’s assertion that the little boy *sees* that the little girl “lacks” a penis, Irigaray connects this original act of looking with the phallogocentric construction of the male as seeing subject and the female as object to be seen. The act of looking is consequently extended to subjectivity itself and the male claim to knowledge (*Speculum of the Other Woman*, 47–48). The association of the gaze with male power in Arabic discourse is also suggested by the fact that the penis is sometimes called *al-a’war* (the one-eyed) or *abū ‘ayn* (he of the one eye), which Malti-Douglas notes (126). See also chapter 8 of al-Nafzāwī’s *Perfumed Garden* for this and other names for the penis.

46. In classical Arabic poetry, a deep navel is considered a sign of beauty (as opposed to an outward-turning navel).

47. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 41.

uation; intrigue; sedition, riot, discord, dissension, civil strife.”<sup>48</sup> This list evokes the socially disruptive power of women’s guile paired with their beguiling beauty, an association reinforced in the stories of the prophet Muhammad’s being enchanted and tempted by beautiful women, which of course parallel stories in the Christian tradition of insatiable women ready to tempt even the most holy of men, including Jesus himself.

To protect men’s eyes from women’s beguiling charms, in many Islamic societies, particularly in well-to-do urban households, women have historically been secluded and obliged to cover their body and wear a veil if they should need to venture outdoors.<sup>49</sup> The “Porter and the Three Ladies” reflects this concern with the veiling of women by emphasizing the process of uncovering the women’s bodies. With the shopper, the unveiling is literal: she removes her veil and the porter sees her deerlike eyes. The porter first sees the second sister, the doorkeeper, as the doors are unlocked and swing open. The third sister emerges from behind curtains that are unfastened. Furthermore, as each sister jumps in the pool, the text reminds us that she takes off her clothes, another form of unveiling. True to expectation, the sight of the women’s beauty incapacitates the porter, rendering him passive. He “marvels” (*yatafakkaru*) at the shopper’s beauty. When he sees the second sister, he loses control: “fa-lammā nazara al-ḥammālu ilayhā salabat lubbuḥu wa-ʿaqluḥu wa-salima yaqaʿu al-qafaṣu min ʿalā raʿsihi” (129) [When the porter saw her, he lost his senses and his wits, and the basket nearly fell from his head, 69]. He is so astonished (*ta ʿajjaba ta ʿajjaban*) by the beauty of the women that when he is paid for his services, he remains rooted to the spot.

Furthermore, the danger of looking at women is particularly strong when the other senses are aroused. In one section of his treatise *Risālat al-qiyān* (The epistle on singing girls), al-Jāḥiẓ cautions, citing a hadīth, “Beware of gazing [on women], for it sows carnal desire in the heart, and

48. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3d ed., s.v. “fitna.”

49. While some Islamic cultures have insisted on a complete veiling, others have insisted only on headscarves that cover the hair. In the case of the three sisters, the shopper lifts her veil, not just a head scarf. Veiling was instituted before Islam and was a sign of class distinction, limited to freeborn women. For a discussion of the three principal sources used to justify both seclusion and veiling, see Stowasser, *Women in the Qurʾan, Traditions, and Interpretation*, 90–93. Mernissi derives her discussion of *fitna* from Amin, *The Liberation of Women*, 64, who notes that veiling and secluding women implies a belief in male weakness (31). The notion that women are to blame for the desires they arouse in men who look upon them is also prevalent in the Western tradition, as Howard Bloch discusses in *Medieval Misogyny*, 100.

that is a most grievous temptation for one who experiences it.’ How much the more will this be the case with gazing and carnal desire, when they are accompanied by music and helped along by flirting.”<sup>50</sup> The sisters are not singing girls by profession, but the text links them to the bawdy singing girls in the description of all the sensual pleasures they have prepared: exotic foods, spices and wines for the nose and tongue, singing for the ear, and of course the luxurious bath to please the flesh. They also appear to “flirt” with the porter, which arouses him (133; 72). The verb used to describe the porter’s arousal (*intaba ‘a*) connotes his subjection to the women, coming from the root *taba‘a*, “to impress, to stamp, to tame and domesticate.” And the verb to convey his losing of inhibitions, *inkhala‘a* (from the root *khala‘a*), underlines his loss of control, for one literal meaning of the verb is “to be stripped of one’s clothing.” Both of these verbs are form 7 verbs, the form that conveys passivity, something happening to oneself. The porter, victim of *fitna*, is reduced to passive acquiescence.

At this point, it is worth noting the close phonological relationship between *fitna* and *fiṭna*. While *fitna* denotes chaos, charm, and temptation, the similar word *fiṭna* is defined as “clearness, astuteness, sagacity, perspicacity, acumen, intelligence.”<sup>51</sup> A scene from the *Nights* that leads us to think further about the relationship between *fitna* and *fiṭna* is the well-known episode (not contained in Mahdi’s edition) in which the slave girl Tawaddud outwits the most learned men in the realm.<sup>52</sup> In this story, possibly based on a true account,<sup>53</sup> the caliph, having heard of the incredible knowledge of the slave girl, summons the wisest men of the realm, all of whom are outwitted by her. Tawaddud stipulates that as punishment for their lack of knowledge, the men must take off their clothing! Through her cleverness, Tawaddud disrobes an Islamic scholar, a reciter of the Qur’ān, a physician, an astronomer, and a philosopher. The caliph, Harun al-Rashid, gives her five thousand dinars, but significantly, Tawaddud’s

50. Al-Jāhīz, *Epistle on Singing-Girls*, 31.

51. Hans Wehr *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3d ed., s.v. “fitna.”

52. Burton, *Plain and Literal Translation*, 5:190–245.

53. Tritton, *Materials on Muslim Education in the Middle Ages*, 140, notes the possible truth behind this scene, discussing the many examples of women as teachers in medieval Arabic texts. Also see the *Nights*, “The Man’s Dispute with the Learned Woman on the Relative Excellence of Male and Female,” in which Sitt al-Masha’ikh lectures to students on theology from behind a curtain, arguing that young women are superior to young boys (Burton, *Plain and Literal Translation*, 6:1720). On women in the Arab Middle Ages as teachers, also see Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 113–14.

foremost wish is to be restored to her master, who had offered her as the last of his remaining riches he had squandered. Although her intelligence and wit, like that of the “anecdotal woman” discussed earlier in this chapter, ultimately serve only to turn her into an even more valuable commodity, Tawaddud reverses the paradigm of nakedness and truth, for it is she who is able to gaze upon the men, who are, in each case, reduced to naked silence. Shahrazad then guides the king to understand the relevance of Tawaddud’s story, telling him to take note of “the eloquence of this damsel and the hugeness of her learning and understanding and her perfect excellence in all branches of art and science” (245). Shahrazad invokes the very qualities she possesses as though to remind the king that his reduction of women to aberrant corporeality does not account for their intellect, an asset to any wise ruler who recognizes its value.

### *Lewd/Ludic Lessons*

Although the initial description of the sisters emphasizes their physical beauty and beguiling charms, as the scene unfolds, it is the realm of the linguistic that takes center stage, and the porter will learn, as will King Shahriyar, that women’s desires are not always so easily reduced to the corporeal. As Shahrazad shifts the king’s attention away from the simultaneously pleasurable and threatening female body onto her powers of eloquence, the three sisters demonstrate that the pleasure they are after with the man they have snared in their lair is laughter rather than sex. When the porter first jokingly compares their absence of a man to a table that lacks a fourth leg, citing a poem on fourfold pleasures as his evidence, the women laugh, either pleased by his poetic wit or amused by his inept poetics: “*fā-lammā sami’ū kalāmahu ā’jabahum wa-ḡaḡakū*” (131) [His words pleased the girls, who laughed, 70]. The sisters then proceed to tease him, saying that if he wants to participate as an equal, he will have to pay his share. The mistress of the house quips, “Without gain, love is not worth a grain.” Using the term of affection *ḡabībī* (my love), the doorkeeper adds, “*mā’ak shayun yā ḡabībī, ant shayun mā mā’ak shayun, rūḡ bi-lā shayin*” [Have you got anything, my dear? If you are emptyhanded, go emptyhanded]. In response to the porter’s confident assertion that they need a man to make their pleasures complete, they counter with teasing love talk as though to mock his pretension to know what they need. The fact that the two women

are joking with the porter is evident in the shopper’s admonishment: “kafū ‘anhu fa-wa-allah mā qaṣara ma‘ay al-yawm” (١٣١) [stop teasing him, for by God, he served me well today, 71].<sup>54</sup> He is allowed to stay, his patient service gaining him admission to their party.

It is important to note here that, as in the case of *Frauendienst*, the women are superior in class to their porter, which partially redirects the threat away from gender onto class.<sup>55</sup> The opening description of the porter is in itself comic as the porter follows the shopper through Baghdad, increasing piles of exotic wares loading down his basket as he struggles to keep up. When he complains that, had he known he would be asked to carry such a burden, he would have brought along a mule, the sister, in her position of power, only smiles. Once in the home, his stupefaction is humorous because it points to the incongruity between his humble status as a porter and the luxurious surroundings in which he unexpectedly finds himself. The poetry he recites to the ladies is also incongruous with his status, and would not be so amusing if spoken by the traditional handsome lover of the Arabic lyric tradition.

The importance of class, however, does not lessen the force of the questions the tale raises about gender. The examples of Aisha Kandisha, the ‘*ifrīt*’s captive, and the kings’ own wives seemingly testify to women’s uncontrollable desire for sex to the point that they will trap men into being their partners. The three sisters challenge this theory of rampant female sexuality with their comic anatomy lesson. First it is important to note that the three sisters display their naked bodies before the porter on their own initiative. This voluntary self-exposure contrasts with Freud’s explanation of smut as an “exposure of the sexually different person to whom it is directed. By the utterance of the obscene words it compels the person who

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54. Haddawy’s translation of “kafū’anhu” as “stop teasing him,” is rather loose, but is fitting given the context.

55. Another tale in the *Nights*, “The Sweep and the Noble Lady” also explores the confluence of gender and class in women’s laughter, but is not well developed. In this tale, a street sweeper has been commandeered by a noblewoman for her own purposes: she has intercourse with him, the foulest man in the city, in order to avenge herself on her unfaithful husband. Preparatory to the fulfillment of her plan, the lady has him attended to by three slave girls, who strip him bare in a bathroom, rubbing and shampooing him, and laughing at him all the while. The sweep, as a man of the streets, is both powerless to resist his noble captor and made laughable by the incongruity that his foul odor and bumbling manners create in the majesty of his surroundings (Burton, *Plain and Literal Translation*, 4:125–30). The porter, it should be noted, far from being a captive in the three sisters’ house, stays of his own volition because he is charmed and intrigued by them.

is assailed to imagine the part of the body or the procedure in question and shows her that the assailant is himself imagining it.”<sup>56</sup> By literally exposing themselves to the porter and by making their *own* jokes about their anatomy, the three women invite the porter to look directly at their female difference, as Cixous’s Medusa should be faced head on by the men who fear her. As Sandra Naddaff has noted, “Far from tempering any potential embarrassment or humiliation that might result from uncovering their bodies, the three women are instead proclaiming their difference.”<sup>57</sup>

Yet the emphasis on biology on which such a proclamation of difference would seemingly rely is undercut, for rather than insisting on anatomically precise language, the sisters demand that the porter learn the metaphorical nicknames that their sexual parts have been given. Each time he answers their question “What is this?” with a literal name such as “womb,” “vulva,” or “clitoris,” the women scold and beat him, substituting his literal terms with the metaphorical “basil of the bridges,” “husked sesame,” and “inn of Abu Masrur.” At first glance, it might be assumed that the women are offended by the porter’s use of clinical language, and prefer he use more decorous metaphorical language.<sup>58</sup> The distinction between literal and metaphoric language was a prominent one in medieval Arab rhetoric, particularly in the concept of *kināyah* (usually translated as “metonymy”); according to proponents of *kināyah*, objectionable terms considered ugly, which generally “concern woman, the sexual organs, defecation, various forms of uncleanness,”<sup>59</sup> should be properly rendered by euphemisms. However, to explain the women’s chiding of the porter as an objection to dirty language does not account for their laughter. Although the women do at first insist on metaphorical terms and label the porter’s clinical terms *qabīḥ* (ugly, nasty), the women later use the same kind of clinical terms to refer to the man—“penis,” “testicles,” “prick.” Rather than being offended by clinical language, the three sisters may in fact be making fun of the practice of *kināyah* by *pretending* to take offense. Al-Jāhīz in fact made fun of the prudery of those who cover their faces upon hearing “naughty” words, arguing that God would not have created such words if they were not intended to be used.<sup>60</sup> Ibn Qutayba (d. 889)

56. Freud, *Jokes*, 98.

57. Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 26. Burns, *Bodytalk*, 42–46, sees a similar lesson about female sexual difference in her reading of some French *fabliaux*.

58. See for example, Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 20–35.

59. Pellat, “Kināyah.”

60. Cited in Pellat’s definition of *kināyah*.

makes this same argument in ‘*Uyūn al-akhbār*: “Should you come across some account referring to private parts, vagina or a description of coitus, you should not, out of piety or piosity, raise your eyebrow and look askance, for there is no sin in mentioning the [sexual] organs.”<sup>61</sup> One is reminded of Jean de Meun’s declaration in the *Romance of the Rose* (through the voice of Reason) that *testicles* in itself is no dirtier a word than *relics*.<sup>62</sup>

The mocking of *kināyah* might have specific implications for understanding women’s laughter as a response to the gendering of sexual knowledge. In the *Decameron*, I argued, Boccaccio’s seven ladies manage to demonstrate that they are not naive about sexual matters while still skillfully preserving their modesty by avoiding sexual language through their wit. Dunbar’s widow, by contrast, boasts about how she pretended to be offended by obscenity, thus underlining men’s anxiety about women’s modesty as mere performance. If in the Arab context *kināyah* associates the obscene and unclean especially with woman, as Pellat’s definition notes, a distinction that is not made so explicitly in European discussions on sexual language, the three sisters’ mimicking or overplaying of the practice of prudery could be read as a resistance to the linking of “female” with “nasty” (*kabīḥ*). Through their feigned disgust, they mock the practice of using euphemisms.

Although medieval Islamic scholars and jurists at times condemned the use of sexually explicit language or inappropriate material, in urban literary circles of the ‘Abbasid period, it was expected that even the most refined of men should have a stock of obscene stories to tell in order to entertain the caliphs and sultans after dinner.<sup>63</sup> These stories were even given a special name that, in effect, put them in their own special genre: *mujūniyyah* (licentious verse) or *mujūn* (obscene stories). This culture has largely been lost, for twentieth-century Arab bureaucrats and writers have censured the obscene sections of the *Nights*, and in 1985 the Egyptian government confiscated an unexpurgated edition of the *Nights*, allowing “only a censored, Islamically ‘correct’ version of the text to be sold.”<sup>64</sup> For their part,

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61. Quoted in Kishtainy, *Arab Political Humor*, 27.

62. See the discussion of this passage in chapter 2, on Boccaccio’s use of sexual humor.

63. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights*, 114.

64. Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 6–7. On censorship of the *Nights*, see also Pinault, *Story-Telling Techniques*, 3. On various sexual behaviors that were proscribed, see Bellamy, “Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature.”

European translators of the tales left out sexually explicit scenes or left sexually explicit terms untranslated. In the “Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies,” E. Powys Mathers gave euphemisms such as “house of compassion” and “the thing” for female sexual parts and simply left the word for the male member (*zebb*) in Arabic.<sup>65</sup> Such choices, of course, totally obscure the sophisticated alternation between literal and metaphorical in the ladies’ linguistic game. Lane omitted the entire scene from his translation, explaining, “I here pass over an extremely objectionable scene, which would convey a very erroneous idea of the manner of Arab ladies.”<sup>66</sup>

What precisely is “the manner of Arab ladies” suggested by the three sisters, and how might it connect to the court culture of medieval Baghdad? If the whole scene can be taken as an example of an elaborate sexual riddle (the smashing mule who grazes on the basil, eats the husked sesame, and crashes into the inn of Abu Masrur), it is then a kind of *mujun*. Yet what is remarkable is that it is the ladies themselves who initiate this exchange and hold the keys to the riddle. In the *adab* examples I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the man approaches the slave girl or singing girl to initiate a purchase. Her clever reply, deflecting his assessment of her defective body onto the value of her wit, is part of a transaction in which the woman’s cleverness is a commodity for a man’s pleasure. In this scene, by contrast, the women orchestrate the entire interaction for their own laughter. The women’s mocking of kināyah announces not only female sexual difference, but female *textual* difference, for they simultaneously expose their female anatomy as though to say it needs no euphemisms and expose the porter’s insufficient knowledge of *their* metaphorical language. Sitting on his lap and pointing to their genitalia, they could be seen as doing what Hélène Cixous punningly describes as women showing their *sextes*, proclaiming their subjectivity, undoing the configuration of woman as dark continent of lack.<sup>67</sup>

Following Cixous, we might say that the three sisters’ “text” is the metaphorical language of their inside joke. They laugh at the porter’s failure to come up with the punch line; he is no longer the privileged subject of

65. Mathers, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night*, 1:73.

66. Lane, *The Thousand and One Nights*, 1:214. On the frequency of sexual wordplay in medieval European literature and contemporary scholars’ resistance to acknowledging it, see Delany, “Anatomy of the Resisting Reader.”

67. “Le Rire de la Méduse,” 47; “Laugh of the Medusa,” 885.



language, for only the women know the rules of the game. Metaphors applied to sexual members were a common feature of medieval Arabic literature, and in al-Nafzāwī's erotic manual, two whole chapters (8 and 9) are devoted to the various nicknames given to men and women's sexual parts. The sister's names are not like these common nicknames, which is why the porter has so much difficulty coming up with them. This difficulty is of course necessary to the mechanism of the joke, with the "ah ha" of the punch line we finally get from the porter's own metaphor. But during the porter's struggle with this realm of metaphor he cannot grasp, their secret code acts as a kind of "feminine syntax," to borrow Irigaray's term, that binds the women together in their laughter at the porter's expense.<sup>68</sup> They are aggressive verbally, physically, and sexually, leading one scholar to remark that "physical beating, verbal drubbing and general shrewish behavior towards the porter are part of the ladies' sexual allure, and provide anticipation of sexual performance."<sup>69</sup>

The women are certainly portrayed as sexually alluring, but their performance, although lewd, emphasizes the ludic. The whole scene does lead readers to expect sexual performance, but that is perhaps part of the game the text plays with us, as the three sisters do with the porter. Shahrazad's interruptions into the text in fact serve to heighten readers' anticipation of sexual performance, pausing at thresholds of imagined climax, such as when the porter arrives at the door, is paid and seemingly about to leave, when the first girl jumps naked into the pool, and when the porter follows. At each turn, the reader anticipates the sexual performance the women's sensuality would seem to promise, but the text, although giving us much laughter and nudity, along with other *foreplay*, does not describe a sexual act. Lest we conclude that this is due to a general tendency in the *Nights* to be vague about copulation, it should be noted, for example, that in describing the treachery of Shahrayar's wife, the text states that the queen's lover "rushed to her, and raising her legs, went between her thighs and made love to her" (59; 5). The original Arabic (*dakhala baina awrākīha*) in fact is a bit more blunt still, suggesting the idea of *penetrating* or *entering* between the thighs. The three sisters' performance is not described in this way. The reader, like the porter, who enters each scene confident that what you see is what you get, discovers that understanding the women's pleasures requires a second look.

68. See the discussion of Irigaray's "feminine syntax" in chapter 1.

69. Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*, 123.

*Female Community and the Male Interloper's Offering*

In the first part of the narrative, the porter observes the women's isolation and lack of men, the reason for which he learns only upon the later arrival of the three dervishes and the caliph Harun al-Rashid and his companions. All the men, in order to receive the sisters' hospitality, must pledge not to ask questions about anything they may witness there, for according to the motto inscribed at the entrance of their house, "Whoever speaks of what concerns him not hears what pleases him not" (136; 76). The men inevitably regret having made this rash promise, for the sights they witness cause them to burst from curiosity. The mistress of the house reveals two black bitches that have been hidden away, beats them, and then cries and kisses them. The doorkeeper sister, as the shopper sister sings a melancholy tune and plays her harp, tears the clothing off her back, exposing deep welts. When the men can no longer keep their tongues tied, and discuss how to find out the secrets, the mistress of the house comes upon them huddled in discussion, and promptly taps three times on the floor, upon which seven servants appear, each holding a sword, and threaten to cut off the head of one of the male visitors as punishment for his violation. However, the women show mercy, allowing each man to redeem his life by telling his story, an evident symmetrical pairing with Shahrazad's own lifesaving narrative.

The women then tell their stories. The doorkeeper, actually the half-sister of the mistress of the house, had been brutally beaten and banished by her husband for having looked at another man. The mistress, in telling her tale, explains that the two black bitches she ritually beats every evening are actually her full sisters. After the death of their parents, the first sister had married, but her husband squandered away all of her money and then deserted her. The second sister also had married and apparently suffered an equally bad marriage, for she too returned home, in an even worse plight. The mistress then explicitly cautioned her sisters against marriage: "Sisters, there is little good in marriage, for it is hard to find a good man. You got married, but nothing good came of it. Let us stay together and live by ourselves" (202; 135). The sisters did not listen, remarried, and after again suffering the same unhappy fate, returned to live with their sister. The mistress eventually fell in love and married, but the two sisters, envious of her happy marriage, murdered the husband. As punishment, they were transformed into black bitches, and through a curse, must be flogged

nightly by the mistress. Although themselves guilty because of their treachery toward their sister, they have twice been victims of men, made clear by their sister's declaration that "it is hard to find a good man." Thus, the half-sister of the mistress as well as her two full sisters have all been mistreated by men, and it is for this reason that all of the sisters now live together without men, thus mirroring the male bond forged by Shahriyar and Shahzaman in their decision never to remarry. Their all-female community may have been reminiscent of actual communities in medieval Arabia, called *ribat*, for women who had been widowed or abandoned by their husbands.<sup>70</sup>

The sisters' attempt to create for themselves their own protective world, in which men are absent, is evident in the motto of silence that insulates their dwelling from the outside world. This continual repetition of the command emphasizes the bond of secrecy shared by the three sisters and also shows the extent to which the arrival of men on the scene poses a threat to their community. Moreover, the metaphorical alterity of their joking language is paralleled by their enigmatic ritualistic displays. While the joking brings them the pleasure of laughter, the rituals allow them to vent the shared sorrows of their past. The particularly female "language" articulated in this reenactment is made evident by the distress of the men, for although they gaze upon the semiotic displays that the women perform in front of them, this scopic activity gains them no access to meaning. Their exclusion from this semiotic realm is reinforced by the fact that each man seeks understanding from the other men. The caliph believes that the men who arrived before him are members of the household and thus understand the women's performance. When the caliph discovers that even the porter does not understand, he concludes that now they are all in the same predicament (145; 84). The homosocial bond of the men's exclusion is reinforced by their misery, for all of the men had been attracted to the dwelling by the promise of delights the household offered, in particular the sounds of music and laughing. This promise of amusement has been utterly destroyed by the women's enigmatic performance, leading the dervishes to comment that they would rather have spent the night on the garbage heaps outside the city than to have witnessed those sights (145; 83). The caliph finally suggests to the other men that they can use physical force to pry the secrets from the women, since there are seven of them and

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70. On these communities, see Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 110.

the women are only three, and lack a man, a pronouncement we have already heard earlier from the porter.

All of the men expiate their intrusion into the women's semiotic world through their own tale. The dervishes each explain why they have only one eye (a return to the vision theme), and Ja'far explains the story of how he, Masrur, and the caliph, have spent the night at the house of a local merchant, enjoying wine and singing girls. The porter's story (the first told) is simply to repeat all of the tasks he accomplished assisting the shopper that morning. This is not much of a story, but the porter has in a sense already redeemed himself by learning to joke according to the women's rules, and in doing so has become one of the household, as the mistress impatiently reminds him when she needs his assistance (79). It is the porter's joke that allows him to enjoy a status different from that of the other male interlopers, for it shows his willingness to match his disposition to theirs, which he demonstrates as he undresses, plunges into the pool, and emerges to sit on the laps of the three sisters to ask them to solve the riddle of his genitalia:

"Ladies, what is this?" They were pleased with his antics and laughed, for his disposition agreed with theirs, and they found him entertaining. One of them said, "Your cock," and he replied, "You have no shame; this is an ugly word." The other said, "Your penis," and he replied, "You should be ashamed; may God put you to shame." The third said, "Your dick," and he replied, "No." Another said, "Your stick," and he replied "No." Another said, "Your thing, your testicles, your prick," and he kept saying, "No, no, no." They asked "What is the name of this?" He hugged this and kissed that, pinched the one, bit the other, and nibbled on the third, as he took satisfaction, while they laughed until they fell on their backs. At last they asked, "Friend, what is its name?" The porter replied, "Don't you know its name? It is the smashing mule." They asked, "What is the meaning of the name the smashing mule?" He replied, "It is the one who grazes in the basil of the bridges, eats the husked sesame, and gallops in the Inn of Abu Masrur." Again they laughed until they fell on their backs and almost fainted with laughter. Then they resumed their carousing and drinking and carried on until nightfall. (135-36; 75)<sup>71</sup>

71. For the original Arabic text of this passage, please see appendix B.

The porter has finally learned his lesson, and the sisters apparently are pleased with their pupil’s progress, for they now see that his “disposition” (*ṭibā’uhū*) agrees with theirs. He mimics almost precisely the words initially spoken by the women: “You have no shame,” “ugly word,” “no, no, no.” And whereas they had slapped, pinched, and punched him, he punishes them with nibbles and bites. It has been suggested that at this moment the porter still shows his imperfect mastery of the women’s linguistic universe, for his metaphor “the smashing mule” is dependent upon those metaphors already established by the women and that “smashing mule” “suggests a kind of deep, abiding, unwillingness, indeed inability, to understand and to change accordingly.”<sup>72</sup>

Viewed more carefully, however, the porter’s response is really a kind of one-upmanship. His metaphor does rely on those of the women, but it *outdoes* those metaphors by combining and even consuming them, for the smashing mule (*baḡhl al-kusūr*) is “alladi yar’ā ḥabaqa al-jusūr wa-yusuffu al-simsim al-maqshūr wa-yubarṭi’u fī khāni abū masrūr.” His metaphor literally consumes theirs, evident in the aggressive verbs he employs: he “grazes” (*yar’ā*) in the basil of the bridges, “eats” (*yusuffu*) the husked sesame, and “gallops” (*yubarṭi’u*) in the inn of Abu Masrūr. It also rhymes with the metaphors of the three sisters: *kusūr*, *jusūr*, *maqshūr*, *masrūr*. The mule’s smashing quality suggests not stubbornness, but brute force. Furthermore, it is possible that the mule had sexual connotations for readers of this story. Erotic manuals of the late Middle Ages in the Arab world frequently recount episodes of women copulating with donkeys or mules because only in this way can they sate their enormous appetites. In one anecdote, it is a porter who discovers this odd proclivity in his wife.<sup>73</sup> If readers did connect the mule to female insatiability, then the porter’s joke is a sly innuendo aimed at the women’s sexuality, a sort of smutty joke, and

72. Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 28–29.

73. Ait Sabbah, *La Femme dans l’inconscient musulman*, 52. For the anecdote, see al-Nafzāwī, *Perfumed Garden*, 60. Al-Nafzāwī also notes that both donkey and mule have enormous sexual organs (55). See also Juvenal’s sixth satire, vv. 322–34. It should be added that beliefs concerning women’s insatiability and preference for large male members lead to numerous jokes concerning men’s fears of their sexual inadequacies. In al-Nafzāwī’s chapter on all the names given for the penis, the nickname *jerk* is described as “Approaching a woman when erect, he is full of conceit at his own strength and virility and seems almost to be saying to her vagina, ‘Today, my rival, I’m going to make you love me!’” Vagina, however, discovers that such boasting is highly unjustified, for “once she finds that he’s inside, she starts laughing . . . ‘You’re just a little jerk! I can hardly feel you!’” (43).

a joke through which he has reasserted masculine control over a female community aberrant in its lack of men.

If the women welcome the joke, it is because it has been offered in the spirit of merrymaking the women themselves have established. In the medieval Arab world, an uninvited guest's wit could often gain him access to a gathering from which he would otherwise be excluded.<sup>74</sup> The porter, likewise, has used his wit as an offering, and it is precisely because of his wit (*kays*), that the shopper urges her sisters, "let him stay tonight, so that we may laugh at him and amuse ourselves with him, for who will live to meet with one like him again? He is a clever and witty rogue" (136; 75–76). This sort of payment or offering of a guest to host suggests the way in which laughter and joking can blur boundaries between insider and outsider, community and interloper. The porter's probing into the women's realm of metaphor in fact produces a kind of intimacy.<sup>75</sup> The word *intimacy* captures both the affection and the tension inherent in any situation where two parties reveal themselves before one another. In this sense joking is very much like a sexual performance: the fear of failure and the thrill of victory are both potential outcomes of the experience for the joke teller, a point not taken up by Freud, who focuses only on the exposure of the object of the joke. But the person who tells the joke simultaneously exposes himself, for if the third party fails to laugh because the joke has been poorly constructed or because the hearer does not share the values implicit in the joke, then the joking subject loses face, exposes *himself* as lacking in wit or good taste, or whatever criteria would, in a successful joke, bind together the teller and hearer.

The three sisters capitalize both on the affection and tension of the joking triangle. In their chiding and beating of the porter, they expose and ridicule his lack of knowledge, just as Tawaddud exposes the ignorance of the male scholars. But they also try to draw him in and help him out. They give him hints as he tries to come up with the correct name, saying "Why don't you say the husked sesame?" or "Why don't you say the inn of Abu Masrur?" as though to give him a chance to deliver the punch line. That the women and the man can eventually laugh together, their dispositions finally at one, offers possibilities not raised by Freud, who assumes that hostility is a key element in a truly amusing joke. He argues that the kind

74. See, for example, Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 36.

75. This point has been made by Naddaff, *Arabesque*, 30–31.

of pleasure to be gained from innocent jokes is "a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearers. . . . A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible."<sup>76</sup> The sisters' gales of laughter when the porter delivers his punch line suggest a joking pleasure principle that is less reliant on hierarchy, more welcoming, capable of bringing the outsider in.

The porter's transition from outsider to insider recalls Ernest Dupréel's argument in the 1920s that the best way to understand laughter is to examine the communal dynamics in which it takes place, for there are essentially two types of laughter: the laughter of exclusion (*rire d'exclusion*), in which one group shows its solidarity by laughing at the expense of an outsider, and the laughter of welcome (*rire d'accueil*), in which a group welcomes with their laughter a member or in which a group itself forms precisely because of its shared laughter.<sup>77</sup> Dupréel notes, however, that the most accomplished or complete kind of laughter is one that moves from exclusion to welcome or that combines both: "We like the person who makes us laugh, and the more pronounced the initial distance separating them from us, the more forcefully we are propelled toward them."<sup>78</sup> Dupréel appears to embrace the potential for union and community that this laughter can enable, a potential realized in the laughter of the three sisters, for while they initially target the port for their own laughter, strengthening their "in-group" unity at his expense, they eventually allow him to join them, lessening the distance between themselves and him. In addition to teaching the porter about their ludic rather than lewd pleasures, part of their lesson appears to concern the power of laughter itself to bring about this new vision of the relationships opened between self and other, where both parties give and receive pleasure. Theirs is a laughter, in Irigaray's words, that is not a "simple reversal of the masculine position," not an act of tit for tat.

This potential for laughter to form community is powerfully suggested in the "Story of the Porter and the Three Ladies," but one whose importance should not be overstated. Wit may be a kind of payment a man can

76. Freud, *Jokes*, 96.

77. Dupréel, "Le Problème sociologique du rire," 228–36.

78. "Nous aimons qui nous a fait rire et un élan nous reporte vers eux, d'autant plus fort que plus sensible a été d'abord la distance marquée entre eux et nous" (Dupréel, "Problème sociologique," 255).

make to join a female community, yet the very notion of an independent female community is not allowed to stand. All five sisters, like Shahrazad, are married off by the caliph (who himself marries the shopper), and their unique world is dissolved upon the imposition of the happy ending. The narrative co-opting of the sisters' female community is made particularly striking by the fact that the curse that doomed the mistress to nightly whip her own sisters can only be undone by the powerful caliph; for him, the genie utters those famous words "your wish is my command," and the man saves the day (218; 149). The three sisters, like Shahrazad, have mastered their male audience, but in turn have been returned to their roles as wives.

*Laughing Bodies: Aisha Kandisha and the Wife of Bath*

Although the eloquence and wit of the women of the *Nights* are ultimately contained in marriage, they do portray an economy of laughter more complex than that of the slave girls of the *adab* corpus, whose wit is a commodity purchased for male pleasure, male laughter. Shahrazad and the three sisters channel sexual desire into the desire for narrative pleasure, and like the plotting between Shahrazad and Dinarzad, the three sisters direct their performance toward a male audience, using their linguistic craftiness as a challenge to men's claims to know women. In their laughter, Arab women have far more in common with their European sisters than they have differences, and this is because both cultures expressed a profound distrust of an alleged female corporeality and the enigmatic power women's sexuality could have over men, a shared tradition that is nicely illustrated by a personal anecdote. When I taught English at a university in Morocco from 1989 to 1991, I was asked several times by my female students (when no male students were around) whether I knew any of the stories about Aisha Kandisha, a figure popular in Moroccan folklore. When I asked who Aisha Kandisha was, my students would only say she was a demon who attacked men and then giggle, only occasionally and obliquely alluding to the sexual nature of this assault. One of these occasions was after I used the Wife of Bath's Tale in a conversation class, anticipating that it would stimulate debate between the male and female students (approximately two-thirds and one-third of the class, respectively). After the indeed lively debate over whether women truly could have dominion over men (which included



many citations of the Qurʾān and various hadiths), several of the female students asked me once again about Aisha Kandisha. Although I did not recognize it at the time, I now see that these women were making a connection between Aisha Kandisha and the Wife of Bath (and the loathly lady of her tale), for both figures are symbols of female domination. It is also clear that tales and jokes about Aisha Kandisha were a great source of pleasure these women shared with each other. Their almost conspiratorial laughter while recalling the stories of the female demon that got the better of men suggests how women still make use of ambivalent figures such as Aisha Kandisha. And that the Wife of Bath's Tale incited so much heated debate in the classroom and led the women in the classroom to think about Aisha Kandisha suggests to me that the questions about the representation of women and laughter in medieval culture that I have explored throughout this study continue to be relevant to women's laughter today.

The representation of women's laughter in the *Nights* does, however, raise issues specific to the medieval Arab context, in which more license is accorded to singing girls than to wives. Shahrazad and the three sisters are ambivalent partly because they are located at the crossroads between the two. Shahrazad begins her storytelling odyssey a virgin, but her sexual knowledge, made clear in her tales, and her carnal relationship to the king throughout, distinguish her from the innocent bride brought blushing to her husband's bed. Not simply sold or given to the king, she actively gives herself for the good of all women in her land, using the verbal arts of female entertainers as her strategy. The three sisters begin their role in the narrative as sexually alluring, paralleling the sensual revelry and bawdy joking of the singing girls populating the *Nights* and *adab* literature. But they are wealthy Baghdad ladies, wielding significant power, both in their generosity to their guests and their harsh threats to the men that might break their secrecy. All the women are eventually absorbed comfortably into the status quo, married to wealthy men and returned to the normal role of wife.

In this way, both Shahrazad and the three sisters blur the boundaries between good girl and bad girl in a way that the women of the European texts do not. The Wife of Bath's frequent marriages are coupled both with her playfulness and sexual exuberance in a way meant to make her amusing to men, perhaps, but surely not to encourage men to marry oft-widowed

women. While perhaps showing the humorous side of being a bad woman, she does not change in her status to become a good woman. Boccaccio's ladies, although their laughter and witticisms challenge a facile dichotomy between sexual wit and modest innocence, do not use sexually explicit language, and it would be hard to imagine Boccaccio arguing on behalf of the propriety of his Florentine noblewomen had they dallied in the bath with one of their servants. While questioning some of the assumptions of what makes a good woman, Boccaccio's ladies are represented consistently as virtuous, and Boccaccio seems rather interested in the mutual pleasures of solace to be enjoyed in mixed company among polite urban circles. Dunbar's wanton women share in the bawdy language of the three sisters, but their sexual joking, while it may be understood as a justified therapy for women's marital woes, also serves to warn against deceitful wives, as the celibate Dunbar succinctly reminds his readers in his ironic closing *demande d'amour*. Farce wives who get the better of their husbands may win sympathy through their complaints of unjust husbands and admiration in the wit they demonstrate in getting the upper hand, but their laughter generally marks anxiety of the husband expected to maintain order in the household. The lady of *Frauendienst* whose haughty laughter serves to mark her disdain is expeditiously dropped by her suitor. Although winning the appreciative laughter of men within and outside of the text, the lady's own laughter marks a separation that keeps her distinctly removed from the man who woos her.<sup>79</sup>

The three sisters, by contrast, are happily married off, and their licentious joking does not seem calculated to warn of any misfortune awaiting their future spouses. Rather, it is their lack of a man that must be remedied, and the serendipitous marriages allow for a peaceful transition from a woman's semiotically and physically isolated community to socially sanctioned and productive life with men.<sup>80</sup> The ways in which Shahrazad and the three sisters blur distinctions between wives and singing girls may also be expressing anxieties about the existence of two distinct models of behavior permitted to each group. A hadith of al-Bukhārī recommends educat-

79. Remke Kruk's discussion of the comically self-humiliating behavior of an overeager suitor in an Arab epic who is spat upon by the unwilling object of his yearning suggests a parallel, "The Bold and the Beautiful," 104–5 and 109. A comparative analysis of disdainful ladies in both traditions could prove fruitful.

80. Fears of women who refuse the company of men may help to explain the anecdotes in *adab* literature describing lesbian sex. See, for example, the *Kitāb balaghāt al-nisā'* of Ibn Abī Tāhir.

ing a slave girl and if possible, eventually freeing her and marrying her, presumably so that her status may be improved.<sup>81</sup>

In his famous, often richly ironic, treatise on singing girls, al-Jāhiz shows considerable concern for justifying the licentious behavior of men in the company of singing girls. Appearing to praise days gone by when men and women flirted and conversed together without blame, he notes that the bedouins "were accustomed to foregather 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, without these taking exception to conduct not in itself exceptionable, provided they felt secure against any misbehaviour occurring."<sup>82</sup> Since such flirting even with married women was tolerated in the past, suggests al-Jāhiz, surely flirting with singing girls cannot be condemned. His attitude toward the girls themselves is ambivalent. He accuses them of feigning love for the master of the house's guests to get at their wallets, but allows that sometimes "this pretence leads [a girl] on to turning it into reality, and she in fact shares her lover's torments" (33). While criticizing the singing girl as innately deceitful, he also makes allowances for her because of the way she has been brought up, surrounded by "idle talk, and all sorts of frivolous and impure conversation, as must hinder her from recollection of God" (34). Moreover, al-Jāhiz devotes considerable attention to blaming the male owner, who exploits the charms of his singing girls to extract more gifts from his guests. He also points to the peculiar logic whereby men attach social disgrace to men who marry free women who have previously been married yet will take as their concubine a slave girl who has been in the possession of many masters. He asks, "Who, however, can [reasonably] approve of this in a slave and object to it in a free woman? (22).

Such a question invites a closer examination of the boundaries between licit and illicit male-female interactions in the medieval Arabo-Islamic literary corpus. That the wit and laughter of the women of the *Nights* trouble the boundaries between entertainer for hire and spouse suggests that this bifurcation was a key factor in the ambivalent attitude toward women in the medieval Arab world. Considering the bifurcated nature of women's status in the Arab Middle Ages may also help to suggest new

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81. Bürgel, "Love, Lust, and Longing," 103.

82. Al-Jāhiz, *Epistle on Singing-Girls*, 16.

avenues of investigation for feminist studies of medieval European literature, where monogamy and misogamy are perhaps playing a more significant role in the representation of misogyny than has yet been examined. Such an investigation would of course entail an enormous range of material, and quality translations of the many Arabic texts on women not yet translated would be invaluable toward this end, as would analyses by Arabists of the wealth of material yet to be investigated from a feminist perspective. Much more stands to be learned by looking at these two traditions side by side, and I hope that my work has served as a small step in that direction.