WIVES, WITCHES, AND WARRIORS: WOMEN IN ARABIC POPULAR EPIC

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Dedication

To the women in my life, and to their power, in all its different forms.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the section of my dissertation to which I have been looking forward the most. I have been writing it for years in my head, because from the very start I would not have been able to accomplish this task without the help and support of very many people. To start from the beginning, I would like to thank Joseph Lowry, for offering the experimental class on "Finding Women in Medieval Sources" that led me to the women of the *sīrah*s in the first place, and also for reading an early draft of this research. Next, I would like to thank my advisor Roger Allen, who supported my decision to "go medieval" instead of modern for my dissertation. The rest of my committee, Dan Ben-Amos and Paul Cobb, stuck with me through long periods of silence and then gave me their entire attention when I was finally ready for it. I am very grateful. Linda Greene kept me on track and offered her help even when it was no longer her responsibility, for which I will always be thankful. Remke Kruk and Samer Ali both gave their time and energy to early drafts of this dissertation, and their insights were invaluable.

The University of Pennsylvania Libraries mailed me books, which truly made this project possible, and what I could not get from them, I was often quite shocked to find on the glorious Internet Archive, which had more Arabic books than I ever imagined. But perhaps the greatest help with sources was from Peter and Marianne Heath. Dr. Heath was willing to meet with me even as his health failed, but unfortunately it failed too quickly, and the meeting never happened. His amazingly generous wife, Marianne, then contacted me to offer whatever of his books would help with my research. She told me

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation consolidates the known corpus of the medieval Arabic popular epic (*sīrah shaʿbīyah*) in order to examine the roles of its female characters and how they relate to power. Borrowing from feminist theory, the study takes as its organizing principle the categories of "power-over," "power-to," and "power-with," showing that how a woman is judged for expressing power depends upon how her actions fit into one of these three categories. Moreover, each expression of power tends to be connected to a woman's familial relationships: sexually available women are usually classified as expressing "power-over," while the nonsexual relationships of sisters and daughters exemplify "power-to." The character of the selfless mother represents the ultimate expression of "power-with." By comparing these characterizations to portrayals of women in religious, historical, and *adab* works also created during the Middle Periods of Islamic history, we can conclude that the modern perception of women being confined to the private sphere and thus invisible in medieval Arabic literary production is based on ignorance of their ubiquitous and complex roles in more popular forms of literature.

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Transliteration and Citation

I have used the Library of Congress Romanization system for both Arabic and Persian throughout this text, and have relied upon the Modern Language Association citation style, based on the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed.)

Introduction

Objectives and Corpus

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the roles of female characters in the

Arabic *sīrah shaʿbīyah*, or "popular epic," genre that flourished in the Middle Periods of

Middle Eastern history (ca. 1000-1500 CE).[1] Though studies have been devoted to the

female characters populating the epic and popular genres of other world literatures, their

counterparts in the Arabic popular heritage are still overwhelmingly described as

unimportant and as far less interesting than male characters.[2] This study will challenge

that notion by, first, rescuing from obscurity the women of the *sīrah* genre, who obtain

power in ways that are often quite surprising, and then by analyzing their functions using

a methodology that draws on feminist, folkloristic, literary, and socio-historical

precedents. By recognizing the complexity of how these narratives connect women with

various expressions of power, as well as comparing these expressions with those found in

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[1] In using this periodization I am referencing historians Marshall Hodgson and Jonathan Berkey. Hodgson coined the term "Middle Periods" because "After 945 CE, the most characteristic traits of the classical ʿAbbāsī world…were gradually altered so greatly that we must set off a new major era" (Hodgson 1977, II: 3). He defines the period as encompassing "the Earlier Middle Period, up to the mid-thirteenth century," and "the Later Middle Period, the period after the Mongol conquest had introduced new political resources, and the rather sudden collapse of the previously expanding Chinese economy produced—or reflected—a deterioration in the mercantile prosperity of the mid-Arid Zone" (Hodgson, *Venture of Islam* II: 5). Berkey later clarified and expanded on this idea, setting off these centuries as those that "laid the foundation for the Islamic societies (particularly in the form of the Ottoman and Safavid empires) that followed, and which shaped the Islamic identities of those Muslims who suddenly found themselves faced with the changed circumstances of the modern period" (Berkey, *Formation of Islam* 179). Following Berkey, I will borrow the adjective "medieval" from European discourse to refer to this period, despite differences between the European and Islamic referents.

[2] Peter Heath and Malcolm Lyons, two of the most prominent scholars on the *sīrah* genre, are among many guilty of this. See the following chapter, on "Background," for more details on these and other works impacting this study.

more elite and historical narratives, it is clear that views on the agency of women in medieval Islamic culture were quite complicated.

As Dwight Reynolds rather romantically puts it in his groundbreaking study of modern *sīrah* performances, "a sīra is literally a traveling, a journeying, or a path…it is used to designate a history, a biography, or even a mode of behavior or conduct" (Reynolds, *Heroic Poets* 5). More literally, the term can be translated as "biography," and most of the narratives given this designation do indeed follow the lives of one or several heroes from birth to death. Though today the only way to access most *sīrah*s is in written form (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is the only example of a *sīrah* whose performance has been recently observed by scholars),[3] we know that they were originally performed orally, intended to be read aloud even after they were written down, and most likely moved back and forth between oral and written over time. They contain both poetry and prose, though most are largely prose (again, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* is an exception), and for the most part are anonymous, though some falsely attribute their narration to famous historians. Their heroic content, vast length, and the sense of community that they foster often lead scholars to class them as part of the epic genre, but the many obstacles that the heroes have to overcome in the name of love are similar to those of other genres, such as English romance or French *chansons de geste*. In elevating historical characters to superhuman heroes they are like ancient legends, and in their largely prosaic and pseudo-historical narration they resemble Icelandic sagas. Their episodic nature, recurring characters and

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[3] See Bridget Connolly's *Arabic Folk Epic and Identity* (1986) and Dwight Reynolds' *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes* (1995) for examples of this.

themes, and dramatic narration evoke the generic bases of modern soap operas. This genre-defying quality is part of what makes the *sīrah*s so interesting to scholars of popular literature.

For a project of this scope, it is important to define a corpus of texts. Scholars do not agree about which narratives count as *sīrah*s and which do not. For example, one of the most prominent scholars of the genre, Peter Heath, includes *The 1001 [Arabian] Nights* collection in the genre. He bases this on its many stylistic similarities with other *sīrah* tales, suggesting its origin as a cycle of oral tales, as well as its traditional disparagement by critics and elite litterateurs (Heath, "Styles" 413). However, in my view the *Nights* collection is different enough in its structure and intent to be excluded: its frame story, containing many otherwise unconnected stories, is a flexible container collecting many amusing tales. This is very different from the chronological, cyclical, and episodic progression of the biographical *sīrah*s, which not only follow the life of a single hero, but are usually, if loosely, based on historical events. Disparagement by elite critics is a particularly unconvincing link to a genre, and especially since the *Nights* has been studied in detail elsewhere, I have not included it here.

Instead, I have consulted Malcolm Lyons' encyclopedic three-volume publication *The Arabian Epic* in forming my corpus. In this publication, Lyons collects, summarizes, and amalgamates the tropes of ten of the best-known and universally-acknowledged *sīrah*s: *Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah ibn Shaddād, Sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybars, Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah, Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh ibn al-Malik Ḍārāb, Qiṣṣat al-ʿAmīr Ḥamzah al-Bahlawān, Sīrat Banī Hilāl, Sīrat al-Malik Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, Sīrat Sayf al-Tījān, Sīrat*

ʿAlī al-Zaybaq, and *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim*. I have added two more narratives to his list: *Sīrat Iskandar*, an Arabic version of the popular romance of Alexander the Great that exists in several languages and cultural contexts, and the *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh*, which is currently unpublished but whose contents are summarized in Antje Lenora's 2011 dissertation, "Der gefälschte Kalif."

The first certain historical reference to any of the aforementioned stories mentions *Sīrat ʿAntar, Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah, and Sīrat al-Iskandar*. It comes from the mid-twelfth century, though it is almost certain that some form of the tale cycles existed before that in purely oral format (Reynolds, "Other Sīras" 320). Because it is nearly impossible to know precisely when these tales were composed, and because their subject matter and styles were constantly revised and embellished by various storytellers over time, a point that I will discuss further below, a pure chronological organization would be neither convincing nor particularly helpful. Following Dwight Reynolds, therefore, I think it is most useful to introduce the narratives by the time period and geographical location that they adopt as their setting.

First are the pre-Islamic cycles. Both *Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh*, whose eponymous hero is the son of the Achaemenid king Darius II (reigned 423-405 BCE), and the aforementioned *Sīrat Iskandar* purport to cover early Persian history. *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, which purports to cover the life of a Himyarite Yemeni king, is based on pre-Islamic Arabian history, as are *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim. Sīrat Amīr Ḥamzah* straddles both pre-Islamic Persia and Arabia by portraying a Meccan prince who marries an Iranian princess and travels through many foreign lands.

Sīrat Sayf al-Tījān is the only known *sīrah* with an entirely fictional geographical setting, and covers one-hundred-and-twenty-year life of its hero, beginning during the reign of the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Marwān (d. 705 CE). A *sīrah* that features prominently in my study, *Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*, straddles the late Umayyad caliphate (Dhāt al-Himmah's first mentioned ancestor is also said to have been born during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik) and early ʿAbbāsid caliphates. Finally, *Sīrat al-Ḥākim bi-Amrillāh* and *Sīrat al-Malik al-Ẓāhir Baybars* take Fāṭimid and Mamlūk rulers as their heroes, while *Sīrat ʿAlī al-Zaybaq* follows a roguish protagonist based in Mamlūk Egypt. *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* covers the migration of its famous eponymous tribe through North Africa between the tenth and twelfth centuries.

These cycles could, of course, be organized into alternative categories. The most famous of the narratives are tribal and rural, possibly reflecting nostalgia for a freer, more adventurous past than the urban environments in which they were composed. Other narratives are urban, and glorify tricksters who can navigate the gritty streets of the city with panache. Storytellers often attempt to give Persian narratives a different flavor from the Arabian ones, and some stories allow for greater contact with foreigners than others. Peter Heath, expanding upon Edward Lane's observations of storytellers actually performing these tales in Egypt around the turn of the twentieth century, prefers to categorize the *sīrah*s into four separate styles depending on how rhymed prose and poetry are utilized in the texts (Heath, "Styles" 419). In my research, I have found that female characters tend to change very little from *sīrah* to *sīrah*, so I was able to look at power dynamics across the entire corpus. However, hopefully the above categorizations provide

a short introduction to the subject matter of the tales. For more detail, Lyons' *The Arabian Epic* contains detailed summaries.

In terms of editions, I have attempted to obtain the same versions of the narratives to which Lyons refers in *The Arabian Epic*, so as to expedite the conversation between our works. This is a choice with a major drawback: it necessarily excludes countless other versions of the narratives, both in print and in manuscript form. Because of the mutable nature of the tales, each edition can carry significant differences in almost every aspect. A detailed publication history for each narrative is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I hope that future studies of individual narratives will be able to go into greater detail on the differences between female characters in different versions of the same tale. Lyons does not offer a great deal of information about the editions he used, but I was assisted in this task by Remke Kruk's 2014 book *Warrior Women of* Islam, in which she goes into somewhat greater detail about the bookshops that also tended to act as publishers for these often cheaply-made publications. In the end, I could not find every edition that Lyons consulted, particularly *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, *Sīrat Baybars*, and *Sīrat Ḥamzah*. For *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, however, I have followed Lyons in citing the "part," since the pagination starts over for each one. The edition I used is a reprint, with slightly different pagination, of the earlier edition Lyons used. In one case, even though I did manage to find the edition Lyons used, I cite it somewhat differently. The edition of *Sīrat 'Antar* we both used is split into twelve volumes (*mujalladāt)* and fifty-eight parts (*ajzā'*), bound in six bindings. Lyons' references, while mislabeled "part," actually refer to the "volume." Thus, my references are actually the same as his, but are not labeled "part"

because they refer to the *mujallad* rather than the *juzʾ*. I have followed his practice in citing Hamilton's partial translation for the beginning of the narrative, and then turning to the Arabic edition for the remainder. I have also followed Lyons' example in consulting two versions of the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*: the *Taghrībat Banī Hilal* and the longer *Sīrat Banī Hilāl al- Kubrá*. Though I cite them separately, I will nto distinguish between storylines because the narratives follow very similar arcs and characterizations. For *Sīrat Iskandar*, I have relied upon the folio-by-folio translation of the manuscript in Faustina Doufikar-Aerts' study. References are to the page numbers of her work. For *Sīrat al-Ḥākim*, references are to the page numbers of the summaries in Lenora's dissertation. References to the rest of the narratives are by volume and page number. All of the editions, translations and précises to which I refer are listed in their own sections at the front of my bibliography.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I will look at the corpus of female characters in the *sīrah*s as a whole. I will use examples to show the different ways in which they exercise power over their lives, their families, and, consequently, over the narratives in which they are found. And yet, I will explicitly avoid creating a dichotomy between "strong" women and "weak" women, as it is both inaccurate and theoretically unsustainable in any detailed feminist analysis. As Margaret Mills puts it in her classic article on the combination of folklore and gender studies,

> One thing gender studies can add to the notion of social groups is the experiential decentering of social membership. Thus group membership for any one person becomes a Venn diagram of intersecting and superimposed circles of

> interaction…all involving alternative shared rules systems upon which assumed alterative shared solidarities are played out (176).

This idea of multiple, overlapping, intersecting, and sometimes competing identities informs my methodology for this study, which aims to problematize the categorization of female characters into "strong" and "weak" by analyzing the entire spectrum of women, from princesses to slaves, old women to young virgins, and assertive to passive, in the large corpus of *sīrah* literature. By examining the intersection of multiple identities with multiple expressions of power, the complexities of gender representation in a popular, public form of entertainment come to the fore. The following three chapters of this dissertation will treat the specific intersections of the two most important determinants of female power in the *sīrah*s: kinship and power.

How exactly the word "power" should be defined has been debated, largely by philosophers but also by historians and anthropologists, since at least the late 1950s. The main division historically has been between the camp of people who believe power is the act of exercising one's will over others, and those who define it as the *potential* to exercise one's will in any way. These two groups are often referred to in modern scholarship as the "power-over" and "power-to" camps. Later in this argument, feminist scholars introduced a third metric: "power-with." Perceived as a uniquely feminine form of power, power-with deals with a communal situation like a family, tribe, or society, and the ability to lift up the collective society. We will discuss these definitions within the coming chapters, but suffice it to say that for this study I see no need to choose one of these three definitions, preferring to see them all as aspects, or what I will call "expressions," of power. In fact, we can see all three in female *sīrah* characters: women

expressing "power-over" dominate others, usually men. Characters expressing "power-to" wish merely to live their lives differently from their assigned societal roles, which the narratives allow under certain circumstances. Finally, those who exhibit "power-with" transgress societal boundaries for the benefit of their community or family.

The most important access point to any of these types of power in the *sīrah*s is a woman's familial relationships with men. The mere fact that the Islamic world was ruled by a series of dynasties (most of which claimed some sort of line of descent from the Prophet Muḥammad) for much of its history speaks to the importance of kinship in Islamic history, but there are other cultural structures that reveal it as well. As Julia Bray puts it in her 2011 article "The Family in the Medieval Islamic World," "Family ought to be treated as a major topic in Islamic history, since it plays a major cultural role. It urgently needs reconceptualizing, either on its own terms or on new ones" (737). As she points out, usage of kinship ties in medieval Islamic society is widespread, from seemingly small points like the ubiquitous patronymics in Muslim names, to the overarching structures of society, like the familial dynasties that dominated not only ruling families but also other occupations, such as the vizierate, the chancery, the practice of medicine, mathematics, and other sciences (736).

Historians and biographers from the Islamic Middle Periods also showed an awareness of the importance of family ties by writing countless biographical dictionaries tracing the lines of descent and contemporary familial connections of prominent people, and by organizing histories by ruling dynasty. In Ibn Khaldūn's (d. 1406) famous introduction, or *Muqaddimah*, to his work of history, the *Kitāb al-ʿIbar*, he theorizes

about the cyclical and degenerative nature of civilization. He describes the superiority of "uncivilized fighters" by describing the idea of *ʿaṣabīyah*. Defined as solidarity within "a closely-knit group of common descent," he claims that this quality allows such a group to perform superiorly as a military body because "everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else)" (Ibn Khaldūn I: 206; Rosenthal I: 97). In looking at the most famous women in Islamic history (we have little access to the lives of the less famous), one thing that unites them all is that they possessed and cultivated familial ties with powerful men. Whether as daughters, like Muḥammad's oldest child Fāṭimah, mothers, like the caliph al-Muqtadir (d. 932 CE)'s mother Shaghab, or wives, like Shajar al-Durr, wife of the Ayyūbid Sultan al-Ṣāliḥ al-Ayyūb, intimate associations gave these remarkable women the platforms they needed to exhibit their talents and exercise their influence in politics, economics, or religion. The closer the tie, the more freedom the woman had to follow her own inclinations. In general, the *sīrah* literature sticks closely to this historical trend: the closer women are to their male family members—especially the heroic members—the more agency they are given in the narrative. They may act as trusted advisors to heroic husbands or sons, or manipulate their fathers into letting them choose their spouse (or avoid marriage altogether). They may go on long journeys alone, opt to stay in their native cities rather than following their husbands on endless military campaigns, or fight alongside their men on those campaigns, depending on their inclinations.

The next question, then, is how to delineate female relationships to men. The main relationships with which we will be engaging in this study, and which we will be

using to organize our three chapters, are divided into sexual and nonsexual relationships, with motherhood being granted its own category due to its uniquely important status in the *sīrah*s. I have found that the characters representing different types of relationships tend to exemplify one of the three expressions of power described above. The chapters to come will examine how female characters perform these expressions of power, as well as how these different aspects of power are portrayed morally by the narratives. In this examination, I conclude that power-with is portrayed as the most morally acceptable form of female power, while a woman practicing power-over always suffers severe consequences, a sure sign that her activities are considered unacceptable in the worldview of the tale's composers. Women practicing power-to are portrayed more ambivalently: sometimes the tale allows such activity, but it is only temporary and must eventually be judged to fall into either the "power-over" or "power-with" category. Sexually available women (marriageable virgins, wives, and widows or divorcees) tend to represent fear of a power-over scenario, where their attractiveness and intimate access to men raise the specter of female domination. Power-to is exemplified by sexually unavailable women: sisters and daughters. Their relationships with their powerful brothers and fathers are portrayed as necessarily platonic, but emotionally close: as minimally threatening characters closely associated with the reputations of their male relatives, they are, at least temporarily, allowed the freedom to live their lives in unconventional ways. The character of the mother is the ultimate example of power-with: women transgressing boundaries for the sake of others, whether it is their children or their community, are rarely condemned in the universe of the *sīrah*s.

There has been a substantial body of research from anthropologists on kinship (*nasab*) in Arab societies, though unfortunately less so in historical literature, despite the clear importance of such ties. Terminology from anthropology is, therefore, essential to delineate familial ties.

Women with sexual or potentially sexual relationships, whose roles will be examined in the first chapter, include a wife (*zawjah*), and potential wife, classed either as a virgin (*bikr)* or previously married (*thayyib*). Some terms refer specifically to Arab kinship structures: for example, in most Arab tribal societies, "endogamous patrilateral parallel cousin marriage" is the preferred marital match: in other words, a man marrying his father's brother's daughter. This keeps wealth within the family, and also allows for the maintenance of certain bloodlines (Atran 661). For this reason, the terms *bint ʿamm* (paternal uncle's daughter) and *ibn ʿamm* (paternal uncle's son) are common in the *sīrah* literature, as the ideal romantic situation. The importance of this concept can also be seen in elite literature. For example, in the collection of trickster tales known as the *Maqāmāt al-Hamadhānī*, a story about a boastful man begins with the man describing his wife. She is artistic, an excellent cook, and beautiful, but mostly, "It is a mark of a man's good fortune that he should be given a lawful helpmeet and that he should be aided by his spouse, and especially when she is of his own clay. In near relationship she is my paternal uncle's daughter, her clay is my clay, her town is my town, her paternal uncles are my paternal uncles and her origin is my origin." (al-Hamadhānī 117-118; trans. Prendergast 89-90). That description is accorded much more space than the boastful man gives to any of her other virtues. However, as we shall see reflected in the *sīrah*s, exogamous

marriage was also widely practiced among the upper classes, mostly to foster alliances between tribes or empires.

The final concept relating to sexual relationships with women that is important for understanding the first chapter is polygyny. In the Qurʾān (*Sūrat al-Nisāʾ*), it is said that men can "Marry those women that please you, two or three or four," so it is apparent that the practice is allowed (*The Qurʾān* 4:3). However, the same verse cautions that "if you fear that you will not be just, then only one or those your right hand possesses" (4:3). Since slaves and concubines were not counted as wives, sexual congress with them was considered licit, but they were not included in the need for equal treatment. Because of this caveat, as well as economic considerations, there is some argument among modern historians over how common the practice of polygyny actually was in the Islamic Middle Periods. For example, in Mohamad Abdun Nasir's study of Ibn Taymīyah's (d. 1328) *fatwá*s (legal opinions) on polygamy, he concludes that, "unlike prevalent divorce that received his greater attention, rarely were problems concerning polygamy posed to him. This indicates that polygamy was not as pervasive as divorce at the Muslim communities in Syria and Egypt of the thirteenth and fourteenth century" (322). The two cases he does address suggest that Ibn Taymīyah found injustice inevitable when a man had multiple wives. Yosef Rapoport's study of divorce in Mamlūk society corroborates this, in finding that polygamy was only rarely mentioned in biographical dictionaries, and then it was always mentioned as a cause of divorce (31).

Chapter two deals with relationships considered necessarily non-sexual: Islamic incest taboos, with the related concepts of *taḥrīm* or *maḥram* (forbidden) relationships,

led to both marriage prohibitions (*taḥrīmāt*) and acceptable close and personal

relationships between the sexes. Prohibited marriages are laid out in the Qurʾānʾs *Surat*

al-Nisāʾ:

> Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters,
> your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's
> daughters, your [milk] mothers who nursed you, your sisters through nursing,
> your wives' mothers, and your step-daughters under your guardianship [born] of
> your wives unto whom you have gone in. But if you have not gone in unto them,
> there is no sin upon you. And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are
> from your [own] loins, and that you take [in marriage] two sisters simultaneously,
> except for what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and
> Merciful. (*The Qurʾān* 4:23)

Because these relationships are necessarily non-sexual in nature, they are theoretically the

only male relations with whom women can remain unveiled and/or alone. Thus, the

relationships are often close and personal. The terms related to these relationships are

daughter (*ibnah/bint*) and sister (*ukht*). The pre-Islamic custom of milk kinship (*riḍāʿ*),

which was carried on through the Islamic Middle Periods, is also a theme to be found in

the *sīrah*s. In this custom, children nursed by the same women are considered

functionally siblings (*ukht/akh min al-riḍāʿa*), and thus forbidden from marrying one

another. In the *sīrah* narratives the relationship is assumed, and thus a man's milk sister is

merely referred to as his sister, or *ukht* (see, for example, the relationship of the

eponymous hero of *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* with his *jinn* milk-sister, described in

Chapter two).[4]

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[4] For a comprehensive study on milk kinship in medieval Islamic society, see Avner Giladi, *Infants, Parents and Wet Nurses. Medieval Islamic Views on Breastfeeding and their Social Implications* (1999).

Finally, the third chapter will deal with a relationship that, despite also being a necessarily nonsexual relationship, deserves its own category: the mother (*umm*). Despite, or perhaps due to, the prevailing patriarchal structures of medieval Islamic society in the Middle East, motherhood conveyed an unusually prominent status to women. Mothers are frequently lauded in the literature, along with commands that they be venerated, and the raising of a successful son (*ibn*) is portrayed as the greatest accomplishment of a woman's life.

Other kinship terms associated with motherhood are terms of adoption. Islamic law prohibits "true adoption," in which a child is integrated into a different lineage (*tabannī*) (Yosef 27). However, the care and raising of orphans was known by a different term, *kafālah*, or "fosterage," and was considered to be admirable, and even an obligation on the Islamic community as described in the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* (Mattson 1).

Comparative sources

I have also aimed in this dissertation to analyze the socio-historical significance of the profusion of female characters in the *sīrah*s. To this end, I turn to Foucaultian discourse analysis, with its focus on structures of power and constructed identities, in analyzing "the historical conditions of the actual existence of statements" (Diaz-Bone par. 5). It is impossible to know how character representation, especially in storytelling forms that were intended for pure entertainment rather than edification, reflected or influenced reality in the absence of historical sources on women with which we must contend in the medieval Islamic context. However, following Foucault, this question is not what concerns me. What is more approachable, and also more interesting, is the fact

that these complex and powerful characters exist, even in the imaginary. As Diaz-Bone

et. al put it,

> One can say that in Foucault's descriptions of the process of discursive analysis
> he first asks which object or area of knowledge is discursively produced; second,
> he asks according to what logic is the terminology constructed; third, he asks who
> authorized it; and finally, he asks which strategic goals are being pursued in the
> discourse. (par. 5)

In this case, the objects are the female characters, the constructing logic is the ethos of the

popular narrative, which was authorized by male storytellers and street audiences (who

were probably mostly male but almost certainly included females). The final question, the

"to what purpose," is what this study seeks to reveal through a parallel analysis of

contemporaneous historical, theological, and moral sources, though in many cases such

evidence is scarce.

There are a few main categories of historical, legal, and literary sources I turn to

frequently as comparative sources on women in the Islamic Middle Periods. First are the

historical genres of biographical dictionaries and historical chronicles. Both of these

genres followed the lives of luminaries: biographical dictionaries tended to focus on

scholars and religious figures, while historical chronicles traced leaders and political

figures. In the first genre, we find, at times, biographies of learned or holy women. In the

second, we find accounts of the women who were closely related to the powerful men

who ruled the Islamic empire, including wives, mothers, and concubines. In terms of

religious and legal works, I turn to books of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafsīr* (exegesis).

These works of religious legal interpretation must be used with caution, as the world they

describe is often more theoretical and idealized than concrete. However, this also makes

them particularly good sources for determining the ways in which reality may have

transgressed these ideals; as Robert Irwin says when describing one such book, Ibn al-Ḥājj's *Al-Madkhal*, "As one reads about the immense number of practices of which Ibn al-Ḥājj disapproved, one gets a clear picture of what many of his contemporaries actually enjoyed doing" (329). Ibn al-Ḥājj's work is part of a sub-genre of anti-*bidʿa* (innovation) treatises that were popular among reformist scholars in the Middle Periods, and is a source I will use frequently in subsequent chapters (Colby 43). It should be noted that other scholars, notably Fierro (1992) and Berkey (1995) have cautioned against relying too heavily upon these texts in isolation. As Fierro points out, "One needs…to corroborate the existence of every given example by means of other sources (eg. biographical dictionaries, historical chronicles, literary works, etc.)" (239-240). Berkey is clearer as to the reasons why:

> Respect for precedent and authority tended to reaffirm the prestige of tradition in the face of innovation, and thereby enabled the discourse to construct the very reality which it sought to describe. This tendency contributed to the development of distinct genres of writing, both legal and literary, which reproduced themselves periodically and almost automatically…Certainly the anti-*bidʿa* literature formed one such genre. (44)

Both agree, however, that these works can be used responsibly to point at possible attitudes and practices in medieval society (Fierro 240; Berkey 44). For our purposes, the tropes, examples, and dire warnings about the decay of modern Islamic practice tend to rely disproportionately on the practices of women, giving valuable clues to actual behaviors.

Finally, we come to artistic literary works, or *adab*. Many of these do not mention women, or if they do, they tend to follow static tropes, unlike the women in the *sīrah*s. However, the genre that offers the best comparison is probably the collections of trickster

tales known as the *maqāmāt*. The origination of the *maqāmah* genre is generally

attributed to Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Hamadhānī (d. 398/1008), a talented writer who was

known as Badīʿ al-Zamān, or "Marvel of the Age." Though he originally set out to beat

other great littérateurs like Abū Bakr al-Khwārazmī (d. 374/984) at their own games (in

Khwārazmī's case, elaborate epistles), he eventually crafted a new genre, combining the

rhymed prose style known as *saj*ʿ with narratives culled from a wide variety of genres

(Beeston 128). Another great writer of *maqāmāt* was Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qāsim b. ʿAlī Ibn

al-Ḥarīrī (d. 516/1122). As a grammarian, Al-Ḥarīrī developed the genre further in the

realm of complex wit and wordplay, and added examples of often lengthy poetic odes

that are more stylistically complex than those of al-Hamadhānī (Beeston 133). In terms of

subject matter, the *maqāmāt* tended to be "surprise" narratives, where, for example, an

apparent fool (or, for our purposes, a woman, who would appear to belong to the same

category in these works) turns out to be wise, or at least eloquent. Phillip Kennedy

discusses this in detail in his work on this convention, also known as "recognition," or

"anagnorisis."[5] A preoccupation with the urban underworld underlays the anecdotes as

well, as it also does in the urban *sīrah*s. As A.F.L. Beeston puts it, this may have been "a

reaction from the over-refined and over-sophisticated society of the great cities in

ʿAbbāsid times" (Beeston 129). However, as C. Edmund Bosworth painstakingly shows

in his study *The Medieval Islamic Underworld,* the professionalized "beggar class" in

these cities was a very real phenomenon that can be held partially responsible for the rise

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[5] See, for example, Kennedy's 2009 article, "Islamic Recognitions: An Overview," or, for more recent
work, his 2016 book *Recognition in the Arabic Narrative Tradition*.

of the genre as a whole. This narrative genre is helpful for comparison because, though it is also a rare example of medieval Arabic fictional prose that focuses on an "underclass" of Islamic society, its focus on stylistic elements and origins in the elite ʿAbbāsid courts places it in stark contrast to the story-focused, street-performed *sīrah*s that were most likely beginning to be constructed and performed around the same time. Perhaps due to these different audiences, portrayals of women in the *maqāmāt* are relatively rare, and largely feature as "surprise" founts of wisdom or as victims of roguish actions, whereas in the *sīrah*s they play more pivotal and complex roles.

By comparing the *sīrah* literature to these historical and literary sources, my research juxtaposes ideology and fantasy to approach reality. The exercise reveals a worldview in which service to the community outweighs all else, including one's gender. I intend it as a contribution not only to the field of Arabic literature, but also to Middle Eastern cultural history and world literature.

Background

There have been several scholarly debates about the origins and defining aspects of the *sīrah* genre, notably when and how they were composed, whether they should be considered orally composed literature, and the larger debate of where and whether they fit into the Arabic literary canon. The *sīrah* genre began with stories about the life of the Prophet Muḥammad that were meant to expound upon the context of the Prophet's pronouncements rather than their actual content. These developed quickly into stories meant to entertain as well as to instruct, and began to collect miraculous tales of the Prophet's life. The most famous *sīrah* to this day is a rather fantastical accounting of Muḥammad's life, though I do not include it here because its development, as a holy text, has proceeded differently from those examples of the genre not tied to religious figures.[6] The genre eventually came to represent any literary recounting of the great deeds of Arab or Persian forefathers. From the twelfth to the fifteenth century over a dozen *sīrah*s were recorded and performed widely (Reynolds*, Heroic Poets* 259).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, a chronological timeline of the composition of these tales is impossible. That is largely due to their origins as narratives meant for interactive oral performance, as well as the lively literary culture in which the tales were transmitted freely back and forth between oral and written forms over the course of centuries (Heath, "Styles" 413). In almost every case we have secondary, offhand

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[6] Michael Zwettler's 1984 article, "The poet and the prophet: Towards understanding the evolution of a narrative" traces this development.

mentions of these tales that were written long before our earliest extant manuscripts of them. Konrad Hirschler has made a convincing argument that the *sīrah*s began to be written down, and therefore to achieve greater prominence and exert a greater threat among the scholarly community, during the twelfth century, the dynamic scholarly and writerly culture of which he describes in his book *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands* (164). I have seen no scholar make an argument for a written version of one of these texts that was created before this period, but several do allow for a period of purely oral transmission before this time (Heath, *Thirsty Sword* 28-29).

However, the assumption that the *sīrah*s are primarily oral tales has been challenged in recent years. There is no argument about whether they were orally performed: there are discernable performance notes in several of the texts, the most common being *qāla al-rāwī*, or "the reciter said." As David Pinault has shown in his study of *The 1001 Nights*, this phrase is often used to signal to the storyteller reciting the tale that there is a significant change to come in the narrative, whether from prose to poetry or from one thread of the story to another (108). Konrad Hirschler has argued, however, that the tales existed in both oral and written forms, with storytellers reading them rather than reciting from memory, from the time they begin to be mentioned regularly in other sources from the 12th century. He supports this conclusion through the interchangeability of the words "read," "recited," and "perform" in the scholarly criticisms of these tales, as well as evidence from lending libraries and other practices by which written texts of the more popular epics were obtained (178).

Hirschler does not, however, address the dense concentration of formulaic phrases and rhymed prose in these narratives. These have been key arguments for defining the narratives as oral, following the Oral-Formulaic Theory of Parry and Lord. As defined by Lord in his seminal book *The Singer of Tales*, "Oral epic song is narrative poetry composed in a manner evolved over many generations by singers of tales who did not know how to write; it consists of the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and of the building of songs by the use of themes" (3). The most over-arching of these elements is the formula, which, as Parry described it, is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (Lord 3). Themes and story-patterns are basically larger-scale formulas. The theory states that, by being passed down from person to person and performed by different people throughout the ages, an oral work was slightly different in every performance. However, in societies where this takes place, poets are trained in a certain poetic language, containing common substitutable tropes, phrases, and descriptions which can be inserted into a performance at will (as long as it suits the meter). Parry and Lord's thesis goes on to claim that, in order to be part of this tradition, a poem not only has to be performed orally, but also composed orally, and that one can discover whether or not a poem was orally composed by calculating the percentage of formulas it utilizes (Lord 4). This theory can be used very effectively in the study of Arabic epics, and several scholars (Dwight Reynolds, Giovanni Canova, Bridget Connelly, and Susan Slymovics, among others) have put the theory, along with anthropological and ethnomusicological techniques, to good use studying the one epic

that is still known to be regularly performed, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Hirschler posits that this tale remained orally transmitted for much longer than the other texts (he supports this theory by noting that no manuscripts dated before the eighteenth century still exist, and that scholarly critics in the Middle Periods seemed to have no quarrel with it, as they did with *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*). As such it cannot represent the genre as a whole (183). It is also important to mention that this narrative has a much larger concentration of poetry than the other texts in the genre, thus lending itself more to Parry and Lord's theory, which was after all based on poetic expression.[7] In a 1981 article Gregor Schoeler pointed out that formulaic phrases and rhymed prose alone do not necessarily indicate that a text was orally composed, when other key elements of the Parry/Lord theory are missing from these texts, notably any solid proof of performance (235). In her study of *Sīrat Iskandar*, Faustina Doufikar-Aerts takes the middle ground: acknowledging that, though this particular tale has many markers of oral transmission, it cannot be proven. She thus decides to refer to *Sīrat Iskandar* as "semi-oral" (267). In her book, she is arguing that the *Sīrat Iskandar* does indeed belong within the *sīrah* tradition, despite almost certainly beginning with the written sources of other Alexander romances. But, if Hirschler's thesis is correct and we cannot prove the purely oral origins of several of the key texts in the genre, perhaps "semi-oral" is a good term for the genre as a whole.

Another argument for the oral origins of these texts, which also enters into the issue of canonicity, is the language in which they are written. The Arabic language has

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[7] For an excellent application of this theory to a modern Arabic poetic tradition, see Steven C. Caton's 1990 study, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe*.

often been described as diglossic, with a formal register (*fuṣḥā*) used for writing and in elite interactions, and a large group of informal dialects varying by geography and social strata. However, in reality, this dichotomy is more of a spectrum, with varying levels of education leading to varying registers of the language, approaching but never reaching the level of Qurʾānic language. The codification of the Arabic language as used in the Qurʾān began during the ʿAbbāsid period. There are several explanations for this situation, though most include the need to integrate the many foreign cultures conquered by the Islamic empire in some way. The argument is usually either that the language was codified as a defense against the "corrupting" influence of foreign tongues, as suggested by the great medieval historian, Ibn Khaldūn, or that it was an attempt to unify an elite class of bureaucrats, largely converts, in a single linguistic tradition (Versteegh 102; Bohas et al. 2). Grammatical texts began to emerge, and the sponsorship of poetic expression and translation from Greek by ʿAbbāsid caliphs led to linguistic innovations that were incorporated into the burgeoning codification structures (Versteegh 62). Following this codification, which continued to develop over time, an elite literary culture emerged whose practitioners used this form of Arabic as a badge of honor. Especially in prose form, this literature was called *adab*, a word also referring to the courtly etiquette of the learned elite who wrote this literature meant to both educate and entertain.

The language of *sīrah* literature is neither *fuṣḥā* nor any recognizable dialect, but rather what some scholars have called "Middle Arabic." Though there has been disagreement over time as to whether that term is referring to the Arabic spoken at a

given time period (between "Classical" and "Modern" Arabic, for example), or to a form

of the language that exists between formal and dialect, for the purposes of the *sīrah* the

latter interpretation is most useful.[8] Kees Versteegh argues forcefully for this definition

as follows:

> The collective name for all texts with deviations from Classical grammar is
> Middle Arabic…[there are] misunderstandings that arise when Middle Arabic is
> treated as a historically intermediate stage. In contemporary Arabic texts,
> mistakes may occur just as easily as in the Classical period, and it would therefore
> be a mistake to assign any chronological connotation to the term 'Middle Arabic.'
> (114)

Versteegh then goes on to argue against the assumption that Middle Arabic texts are

merely dialect or a separate language altogether:

> Anyone wishing to write in Arabic does so with the Classical norm in mind. The
> amount of deviation of the distance from the colloquial varies with the degree of
> education of the author of the text…even in the most extreme cases of colloquial
> interference the texts still cannot be regarded as truly dialectal, because they
> continue to be approximations of Classical Arabic. (114-115)

The general point here, with which I agree, is that, for most of Arabic written history, the

recording of literary works in writing was a rather formal affair. As Hirschler describes in

his book, *sīrah*s were written down as part of the increasing popularization of reading

practices over oral performance starting in the twelfth century. Up to that point, most of

those who used the written language were scholars or the aforementioned elite litterateurs

who sought increases in status by using the formal register of Arabic in their

compositions (Hirschler 164-165). Given that fact, those who were tasked with recording

the *sīrah*s in written form had to make use of a system developed for writing the most

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[8] For a chronological interpretation, see Joshua Blau. *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic*, or Clive Holes, *Modern Arabic: Structures, Functions, and Varieties.*

formal Arabic, not transliterating dialect. As Peter Heath puts it, "as the scribe or editor

transcribes the narrative, he recasts it into standard Arabic usage and grammar according

to his education. The text undergoes a process of translation from Middle Arabic to

standard written Arabic" ("Styles" 416). As he points out, this process can happen at any

time: the first transcription, over various transcriptions and editorial revisions, or upon

publication. Variations from such "standard written Arabic" could be due to several

factors: dialectical interference, attempts to represent authentic dialogue or create comic

effect, and representations of in-group languages, like those of minority religious groups.

In the case of the *sīrah*s, dialectical interference seems to be the most prevalent. Often

classed simply as "mistakes," instances of dialectical interference either show up as

simplified forms from the more familiar colloquial language or as pseudo-corrections: a

self-conscious attempt at using a Classical form, but in a way that is incorrect. For

example, though the correct form when trying to say "they did not write" may be *lam*

yaktubū, a writer may be aware that Classical Arabic often uses *yaktubūna* (which does

not exist in the colloquial) and, without realizing that the *lam* negates the need for the

extra ending, hypercorrect to *lam yaktubūna* (Versteegh 115). Texts exhibiting dialectical

interference are characterized by, as Verteegh describes it, "variation and inconsistency.

An incorrect form in one sentence may be repeated correctly in the next, the word order

may vary between the colloquial and the standard order," and so on (126). This is

certainly the case with many of the *sīrah*s, as scholars such as Muhsin Mahdi and David

Pinault have shown (Pinault 15; Mahdi I: 37-51). Still, as Peter Heath points out, some

*sīrah*s, like *Sīrat ʿAntar*, are closer in their language use to Classical Arabic than others;

as such they tend to get more respect as legitimate historical and/or artistic productions ("Styles" 432). As with most things in the *sirah*s then, there are as many exceptions as there are examples that fit the rules. Nonetheless, one thing we can trace for certain is the critical reception of these tales, from their earliest appearances until today.

Critical Reception

Konrad Hirschler argues that the initial, quite negative, critical reception of *sīrah* literature must be seen in the context of 12th-15th century literary culture, which was strongly linked to scholarship and heavily focused on public readings and literary salons (164). Such salons, examined by Samer Ali in his study *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages*, began as early as the ninth century and continued into the sixteenth century (Ali 18). While Ali argues that these salons were surprisingly open to various classes of society and different forms and registers of literary expression, they were still "by invitation only," took place largely in private, and were attended mainly by people seeking patronage and increased social status.

The *sīrah shaʿbīyah*, on the other hand, was performed in the streets or even in cemeteries where citizens gathered to revere saints, a practice particularly scandalous to scholars and religious elites at the time.[9] As Hirschler demonstrates, medieval scholars who referred with great affection to the exclusive salons described above were the same people who went to great lengths to discredit the *sīrah* genre. But the setting of the performances, portrayed as offensive for both its accessibility to lower social classes and

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[9] See Ibn al-Ḥājj's *Madkhal* I: 254-268, for a 14th century discussion of the "proper" way to visit tombs and how contemporary visitors, in his view, perverted the practice with their festival-like attitude.

for its distance from scholarly influence, was not the only issue they raised. In addition to

these issues, Hirschler describes scholarly opposition to the actual subject matter of the

texts (164). Though the tales claimed to be historical, for example, their content was

clearly meant to entertain, and their lack of author or chain of transmission as usually

exhibited in scholarly historical works made them untrustworthy. Combined with the

large audiences they drew, these interpretations of history could have gained more

traction than those of scholars. Hirschler claims, however, that it was not until these tales

began to be written down and circulated amongst the literate public that scholars really

started denouncing them. As he describes, though twelfth-century scholars mention the

tales in passing, by the mid-thirteenth century, "the reading of these epics and their

written circulation had become of sufficient importance that it challenged—or was

perceived to challenge—scholarly authority over the textual transmission of the past"

(167). The great historian and religious scholar, Ismāʿīl Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), for example,

once referred to *sīrah* tales as "nothing but lies, falsehood, stupid writings, complete

ignorance, and shameless prattle which is only in demand by fools and lowly

ignoramuses" (Reynolds, "Popular Prose" 260). Also in the fourteenth century, religious

authorities such as Ibn Taymīyyah in Damascus and Ibn Qaddāḥ in Southern Spain issued

legal opinions (*fatwā*s) condemning those who read or distributed these narratives

(Hirschler 169). However, it is important to note that *adab* forms like the *maqāmāt*

("assemblies"), which relied on a common trickster protagonist, show overlap with

popular storytelling forms in certain tropes, characters, and even shared anecdotes.

Hirschler shows how the well-regarded biographical dictionaries use several fanciful

stories reminiscent of the material in the *sīrah*s when describing historical figures that appear in both genres (169). Andras Hamori has explored anecdotes that appeared in multiple formats as well.[10] While I would not claim that the *sīrah shaʿbīyah* genre is some adulterated form of a more polished elite genre yet to be discovered, as some Orientalist scholars have done (Heath 1996: 38-39), it is apparent that, regardless of whether street storytellers were invited to literary salons (unlikely, though not impossible), "canonical" *adab* and "popular" street narratives were not separated absolutely.

This brings us to the problem of canonicity. The validity of the idea of a literary canon has been vigorously debated worldwide since the 1960s, but it has only more recently come to the study of Arabic literature.[11] In the premodern Arabic context, the ultimate canonical work, that which was considered the absolute (and never again attainable) paragon of accomplishment, was the Qurʾān. The study of this work, along with the supporting evidence and elaborations of the Prophet's words known as the *ḥadīth* and the formation of a multicultural chancery and extensive bureaucracy drawn from across the expanding territory of the Islamic Caliphate, gave rise to a courtly literary class (*adīb/udabāʾ*). The etiquette they followed, as well as their prose literary production which was meant to be "both morally uplifting and entertaining," became known as *adab*,

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[10] See "Tinkering with the text: Two variously related stories in the Faraj Ba'd al-Shidda," and "Folklore in Tanukhi: The Collector of Ramlah."

[11] The debate has been lively, and not yet decided one way or the other: though feminist and critical race theorist scholars have questioned the canon and continue to do so, several highly-respected scholars like Bernard Knox, Allan Bloom, and Harold Bloom have maintained that a shared cultural canon is important and relevant.

mentioned above as an example of literature written in the formal *fuṣḥā* form of the

Arabic language (Allen, "Transforming the Arabic Literary Canon" 3). As this genre

developed, alongside the complex poetic compositions collected in *dīwān* compilations,

wealthy patrons encouraged their favorite styles with valuable stipends for their court

littérateurs. These writings were the first to be listed as "canonical" Arabic literature

when such a project was first attempted. As Roger Allen has recently pointed out,

however, ideas of a canon formed in the nineteenth century are not only holding back the

study of modern Arabic literature, but also of premodern styles. These first attempts at

forming an Arabic literary canon took place during the cultural period known in Arabic

as "*al-nahḍah*," often translated as "revival," or "renaissance." This period took place in

the nineteenth century and was seen by its participants as being a revival of the Arabic

literary heritage, after centuries of rupture (the entire period of the 16th-18th centuries

were referred to as the "period of decadence") (Allen, "The End of the Nahḍah?" 4-5). As

Allen puts it, such attitudes about literary production:

> are highly problematic, in that they negate any possibility of continuity in the
> development of literary genres, preferring instead to talk in terms of cultural
> rupture. In such terms the neo-classical tradition of the 19th century is to be based
> on a 'classical era' in an idealized past to be found some seven or eight centuries
> earlier ("The End of the Nahḍah?" 5-6).

One of the main reasons, Allen claims, that these modern critics denigrated the literature

of the 16th-18th centuries was that the trends and preferences of the period "included a

much enhanced interest in more popular forms of literary expression and their language-

levels" which had actually begun earlier in what he calls the pre-modern period (the 13th-

18th centuries) ("The End of the Nahḍah?" 4). *Sīrah* literature was an obvious part of this

trend, and as such has not been included in attempts at forming modern Arabic literary

canons. It is important, however, to remember that the disregard for this genre was not begun in the nineteenth century, but seems to have been consistent at least from the time the tales were first written down.

In the modern era, the *sīrah* in general has historically been sadly neglected by both Arab and Western scholars, with the interesting female characters suffering even more disinterest. There are several reasons for the general lack of research, including the vast length of the narratives and the lack of critical (or often even printed) editions of the texts, in addition to the *nahḍah* worldview that disregarded all forms of Arabic folklore and popular entertainment. A more critical engagement with Arabic folklore began in Egypt with Aḥmad Rushdī Sāliḥ in the 1950s, continued with ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Yūnis in the 1970s, then finally led to some scattered studies in the late 1980s and 1990swhich mainly aimed to record and preserve the work of storytellers that was swiftly losing ground to radio and television (Connelly, *Arabic Folk Epic* 22). [12] Still, the goal was the preservation of an "authentic" heritage that ran counter to imperialist forms of literature and entertainment, focusing on more "pure" folktales told in family circles. Scholarly engagement with the *sīrah*s was mostly restricted to a few excellent studies of modern versions of the only *sīrah* still recited regularly in the twentieth century: the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Bridget Connolly's *Arabic Folk Epic and Identity* (1986) and Dwight Reynolds' *Heroic Poets, Poetic Heroes* (1995) show clearly how the values and preoccupations of

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[12] The most influential of these was by Hasan el-Shamy, who created an original motif index for Arabic literature, believing that the "universal" Stith Thompson Motif –Index of Folk Literature did not apply well enough to be used without significant changes. Though his exhaustive work was a boon to folklore studies, I have found that his motifs apply less well to the *sīrah* literature.

modern audiences and storytellers shape that narrative. Reynolds has continued his work with a multimedia website containing recordings of recitations, transcriptions and translations of performances, and other tools that are a fantastic resource to any student of public performance or anthropology in general.[13]

Despite this still relatively sparse interest in folklore toward the end of the 20th century, the *sīrah* corpus as a whole only attracted the attention of a handful of scholars. Most of the *sīrah*s were no longer being performed,[14] and though truncated chapbook editions and television serials based on the storylines still proliferated, the older versions of the texts were often deemed irrelevant in a literary sense. Still, a few scholars did take an interest in the *sīrah*. One of the earliest was Udo Steinbach, who published a monograph on *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* in 1972. After that, several decades passed before interest picked up again. In 1995, Dwight Reynolds published the aforementioned book on the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. In that same year, Malcolm Lyons came out with his three-volume magnum opus, *The Arabian Epic*, which has become an invaluable resource for researchers on the *sīrah* genre. Including a critical introduction, a narrative and comparative index, and straightforward prose summaries of ten *sīrahs*, it makes these narratives (many of which have never been published or edited) much more accessible and comparable to one another. The following year, Peter Heath published the first

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[13] See the *Sirat Bani Hilal Digital Archive* from the University of California, Santa Barbara: http://www.siratbanihilal.ucsb.edu/.

[14] In addition to *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, *Sīrat ʿAntar* was still performed occasionally late into the twentieth century. Performances in Morocco have been described by Claudia Ott and Remke Kruk in their 1999 article, "In the Popular Manner." A performance in Damascus was recorded for a BBC special, *Power of the Word*, in 1986.

English-language monograph on an individual epic, entitled *The Thirsty Sword: Sīrat ʿAntar and the Arabic Popular Epic*. This study deals with many important issues related to the genre in general as well as providing a close and analytical reading of *Sīrat ʿAntar* itself. Since then, there has been a growing interest in studying the *sīrahs*, as evidenced by publications such as Faustina Doufikar-Aerts's study of the Alexander romance tradition, by Driss Cherkaoui's dissertation on *Sīrat ʿAntar*, and by Thomas Herzog's extensive study of *Sīrat Baybars*, to name only a few. In 2003, there was a special issue of *Oriente Moderno* edited by Giovanni Canova on "Arabic Epics" containing some excellent articles, as well as an introduction by Canova containing a useful summary of studies up to that point in time. As this dissertation is being completed, some *sīrah*s are again entering the public sphere. In 2016, Helen Blatherwick published an exciting monograph on *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, and popular American author Nnedi Okorofor is completing a forthcoming comics series about the life of ʿAntarah, based partially on his *sīrah*.[15]

Though most of the scholarly studies on the *sīrah*s discuss characterization in one sense or another, the general attitude of scholars can be demonstrated by a comparison of Heath's and Lyons's categorizations. Heath creates character categories in his chapter on *sīrahs* for the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* ("Other Sīras" 325-328) and Lyons does so in his introductory volume to *The Arabian Epic*. Neither of these analyses is rigidly systematic, but, by combining them and noting the characters that overlap, we can identify five types that seem to be most common and important: The Hero, The Father,

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[15]For more information on the forthcoming comic, see https://antartheblackknight.com.

The Helper, The "Man of Wiles" (also called the *ʿayyār*), and The Villain. Heath, to his credit, is careful to mention that the Hero and the Helper can be female. Lyons, despite citing female examples for many of the categories, nevertheless concludes that women as a whole are unimportant to the action of the *sīrah*, saying that "within the cycles individual women can influence their contexts but collectively they start from a position of inferiority" (1:35). He proceeds to split them into two overarching categories: the formidable warrior women and "their humbler sisters," who, "with their 'trivial, light dispositions….lack intelligence and faith'…and it is this lack of intelligence that leads them to gossip and to give away secrets" (1:35). Somewhat paradoxically, only a few pages later he claims that the vast variety of women's roles in the narratives can be attributed to "differences in the strata of which the cycles are composed," and suggests that "an extended study would have to weigh up the narrative importance of their role, together with individual characters and their background, the apparent aspects of their inferiority and the ways in which these can be overcome" (1:41-42). In a sense, that is precisely what I mean to do in this dissertation.

It is most important at this juncture to draw attention to the research that has been undertaken on warrior women in the *sīrahs*, by Nabīlah Ibrahīm (1981) and, most importantly, Remke Kruk (1993-2013). Though I will refer to their excellent books and articles extensively in this study and I owe them a great debt of gratitude for their pioneering work on female characters in the *sīrah*s, their exclusive focus on warrior woman characters conforms to the idea that these women, who take on stereotypically male activities, are important, while the other female characters, who may conform to

more traditional gender roles, are unimportant. Though it is true that the warrior women are more remarkable, the wives, lovers, and mothers who do not spend their lives fighting exhibit access to power that strikes the modern reader as surprising. It is my belief that these access points reflect the realities of medieval Islamic society, in which gender roles were most likely more fluid than the ideals presented by more elite forms of literature being produced during the same period.

A gender-focused study of the entire spectrum of characters in the *sīrah* corpus has not yet been attempted, but an encouraging trend in historiographical research led by scholars like Nikki Keddie and Gavin Hambly has for the past few decades attempted to uncover the lives of real women who lived in premodern Islamic society. A smaller contingent of medieval Arabic literature scholars, including Julie Scott Meisami and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, has researched literary depictions of women. However, scholars in both fields draw medieval Muslims' values and practices regarding women from elite literature, which, in relegating women to the realm of "private" and thus not suitable to be depicted in written form, leads many to conclude that females were despised and cloistered.

The field of gender studies has produced a study similar to mine in all of the epic traditions that I have investigated besides the Arabic tradition. William Hanaway, Marina Gaillard, and Djalal Khaleghi Motlagh have all studied women in Persian Epic. Though these studies were useful in allowing me to access parallel traditions, the Persian epics had known authors, to whom attitudes about women could be attributed. Barbara McManus' *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics* influenced my work in her

distinction between "transgendered moments," described as "those that have come to be considered appropriate for both men and women but that are still affected by gender expectations and gender power differentials, and "sex-role crossovers," "when a member of one sex is perceived as inappropriately taking over a role considered to belong to the opposite sex." She also mentions, as distinct from the previous two portrayals, "gender-neutral moments," a situation she sees as currently impossible, in which gender is not considered in a character's role at all (95). In my framework, "transgendered moments" could be classified as "power-to," whereas "sex-role crossovers" are power-over. Where my conclusions differ is in my application of the "power-with" category: both of McManus' categories can fit into "power-with" so long as the performed roles progress the interests of the community in some way. In my work, I have found that "gender-neutral moments" would also appear to be impossible in the *sīrah* literature.

An example of another scholar who informed my research methods was Joseph Mbele, who has done very thought-provoking work on females in African epic. Mbele proposes definitions of heroism that speak to the female experience rather than requiring them to be warriors: he argues that the harlot in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* who tames the monster through sex, for example, or a mother carrying her hero son for years so that he can be born at the most auspicious time, should be classed as heroes (62). Mbele's work in particular was useful for reexamining the meaning of the word "power," which eventually became the guiding organizational principle of this study.

In terms of interpretive lenses, the genres of romance and saga provide useful background. In Amy N. Vines' *Women's Power in Late Medieval Romance* (2011), she

identifies the sharing of religious and cultural knowledge (through advice and prophecy), strategic public passivity and private activity, and different forms of patronage as forms of power deemed acceptable for women in English romance. Her work especially informed my analysis of virgins and marriage candidates, who exhibit similar entry points to acceptably influence their own lives. Maureen Fries has broken down Arthurian females into the categories of heroines, who operate within society's expectations in support of the good, female heroes, who step outside gender barriers to uphold society, and counter-heroes, whose intentions run counter to those of the hero. I follow her terminology when discussing the female heroes, like Dhāt al-Himmah and other warrior women, in the *sīrah*s. Forest Scott has described how women in Icelandic saga are the arbiters of religious, moral, and magical knowledge and openly use this knowledge to obtain power, an interpretive lens that was useful in analyzing the power of older women in the *sīrah*s.

There have also been many cross-cultural and comparative studies on women in popular and epic literature. For example, Adele Barker has used psychoanalytic theories to compare Russian and Homeric examples of mother figures influencing male heroes, while Mary Ann Jezewski has attempted to apply Raglan's male heroic traits to female heroes across several traditions and created her own female hero pattern to supersede it. Valerie Estelle Frankel takes Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero's journey and changes it into a form that can accommodate female heroes, again across several traditions. However, none of these fascinating comparative studies mention Arab or Islamic heroines, apart from scattered references to Scheherazade. It is thus my hope that, in

addition to bringing to the field of Arabic and Islamic scholarship a study of women in popular epic, my work will introduce these characters to the global and comparative paradigm in which the Arab-Islamic tradition has thus far been ignored, despite many similarities to other world epic and romantic traditions.

Power-over: Sexually available women

In theories of power, the most common and most traditional definition of the term can be described as "power-over." One classic example of this argument can be found in Max Weber's *Economy and Society*, in which he argues that power can be defined as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (53). Another is Robert Dahl in his 1957 article "The Concept of Power," where he describes power as the coercive ability to get someone to do something he would not do on his own (202-03). Even Michel Foucault largely subscribes to this idea when he says that "we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others," though he goes on to examine the structures by which such power is constructed, which brings his argument closer to a "power-to" scenario (217). In the literature of the Islamic Middle Periods, portrayals of women who were sexually available to men (whether as young women, wives, or older widows and divorcees) focus strongly on the potential of this sexual availability, both as temptation and as the intellectual influence that intimacy can bring, to control the actions of men.

This was true from legal to romantic literature. Medieval jurists almost unanimously described marriage as a positive societal structure, a way to satisfy sexual desire and create beneficial family ties in the community. The consensus was that female sexual desire was stronger than that of males, and therefore it was imperative that it be satisfied and controlled by marriage (Lutfi, "Manners and Customs" 107). Beautiful virgins were considered dangerous, both for how their presence distracted and tempted

men and how their own repressed sexual desire could drive them to recklessness and violence, both of which could cause *fitnah*, or social chaos. Though this is a general term, it was often specifically applied to the chaos caused by sexual temptation or manipulation caused by women. As for wives, historical sources comment on the trend that, because of their exclusive private access to their husbands, wives of powerful men could manipulate them in order to take political power for themselves. This conniving nature also had its own term that was often specifically applied to women: *kayd*, as in *kayd al-nisaʾ*, or "the wiles of women." This phrase has been ubiquitous since the Qurʾān quoted the prophet Joseph saying about Potiphar's wife, who contrived to seduce him: *inna kaydakunna ʿaẓīm!*, or "truly you women's wiles are great!" (Q 12:28). As Fedwa Malti-Douglas explains in *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, when describing how the phrase is used in the most popular example of medieval popular literature, *The Thousand and One Nights*, "the formula served in the medieval period as a sort of literary catchall for evoking the tricks of women; and it continues to this day in modern Arabic literature," including in the work of such renowned modern writers as Najīb Maḥfūẓ and Naʿīm ʿAttiyah (19). The fear that women could control men through their sexuality or physical closeness to men manifests itself in different ways: virgins tend to represent the physical side of "power-over," while wives represent the intellectual and emotional side. In the *sīrah*s this type of influence is seen as universally negative and dangerous, but so long as the women are eventually willing to convert their power-seeking activities to benefit their families or societies, they can be redeemed. It is when the characters in the tales are unwilling to give

up their quests for dominance over men that they are punished, usually by suffering a gruesome and dishonorable death.

Unmarried Women

<u>Virgins and Elders in historical, legal, and *adab* literature</u>

Virginity was treated ambivalently in medieval Islamic society, at least in comparison to the Christian glorification of abstinence. Sexual activity outside of marriage (*zināʾ*) was strongly condemned, and is one of the few crimes that are explicitly mentioned in the Qurʾān.[16] However, the purpose of marriage was explicitly constructed as a means to control sexual desire, which in itself was considered natural and unobjectionable, as well as to provide children for the community. As Judith Tucker has described in her examination of medieval Islamic marriage law, "the common thread…is that having licit sexual intercourse is both the primary motivation, and the most important effect, of the marriage contract" (41). As such, abstinence for abstinence's sake was widely discouraged in mainstream religious writings, though there is also evidence that ascetic trends within the widespread spiritual Sūfī communities of the era did hold considerable power.[17]

The conservative Mālikī scholar Ibn al-Ḥājj al-ʿAbdarī (d. 737/1337), whose writings condemning the degradation of his contemporary society can give us some of our best insights into how the real world may have functioned, puts the issue bluntly. In

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[16] Judith Tucker discusses more of the specifics of the crime of *zināʾ*, including medieval punishments, quite thoroughly in her 2012 book *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law*, 183-196.
[17] This is shown quite convincingly throughout Megan H. Reid's 2013 publication *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam*.

his work *Kitāb al-Madkhal ilā tanmiyāt al-aʿmāl bi taḥsīn al-niyyāt* (An Introduction to the Development of Deeds through the Improvement of Intentions) he states that female sexual desire is indeed stronger than that of men, though innate modesty can make it difficult to ascertain. He argues that, if this sexuality is left unsatisfied within the bounds of marriage, sexual chaos will result in the wider society, since men are unable to resist women who actively try to seduce them. Thus, men have a responsibility not only to marry women but also to keep them sexually satisfied within their marriages (Lutfi, "Marriage and Customs" 107).

There are indications in the literature that virginity was a good quality in a wife, though the idea is also contested. Again in contrast to the Christian context, in which "virginity was a signifier of both spiritual and physical wholeness," the reasons for this may seem counterintuitive (Sauer 51). Let us take two examples from two very different contexts: a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad and the famous elite literary work, the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī. The only *ḥadīth* that can be quoted to support marrying a virgin can be found in a few different forms, but here is one from *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*:

> Narrated Jābir b. 'Abdullāh: While we were returning from a *Ghaswa* with the Prophet, I started driving my camel fast, as it was a lazy camel. A rider came behind me and pricked my camel with a spear he had with him, and then my camel started running as fast as the best camel you may see. Behold! The rider was the Prophet himself. He said, "What makes you in such a hurry?" I replied, "I am newly married." He said, "Did you marry a virgin or a matron?" I replied, "A matron." He said, "Why didn't you marry a young girl so that you may play with her and she with you?" (Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb al-Nikāḥ 5245).

The Prophet here does not say the man should marry a virgin because she is pure or because she will be more obedient. Rather, he claims that they will have more fun together, suggesting that a virgin and a young man will have more in common with one

another in the strength of their desire and energy for sexual activity. Recall that the Prophet Muḥammad himself, out of all of his many wives, only married one virgin: ʿĀʾishah bint Abī Bakr. Obviously, then, he did not consider marrying women who had been married before to be a negative act. Rather, he is suggesting that virgins have greater energy and sexual desire than previously-married women.

In the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī, the narrator tells a lengthy anecdote about a man who runs into a "wise youth" and asks him whether he should choose a virgin or a previously-married woman as a wife. In witty and elaborate prose, the boy gives arguments for and against both choices. His argument for the virgin is that "none has soiled her with his touch…she has a face suffused with shame, and a bashful eye, her tongue is faltering, and her heart is pure; withal she is a playful puppet, and a sportive doll, a frolicsome gazelle" (127). Here the boy does make the argument for purity, but his main point is the same as that of the Prophet in the aforementioned hadīth: virgins are eager sexual partners. However, his argument that she is shy and full of shame would seem to contradict this argument. When the confused supplicant counters with what he has heard, that "the virgin is stronger in her love, and less given to wiles," the youth agrees, but adds that "she is a filly refusing the bridle, and the mount tardy to be tamed…the provision she requires is plentiful, and the help she affords is scanty" (127). Thus, marrying a virgin will perhaps bring you more enjoyment in bed, but not always, and on top of that she is a less accomplished helpmeet than a previously married woman.

Both of these anecdotes point to a belief that virgins were not asexual or pre-sexual, but rather that their sexuality was nascent, or even repressed, waiting to be set

free. Unmarried young women, then, have the potential to become good wives, so long as their sexuality is awakened within the confines of marriage. Their sexuality is not a negative trait in and of itself, but without the bounds of marriage it can sow chaos in a way that the women themselves are portrayed as unable to control. In this way it is possible to see them as both innocent and dangerous, shy and lustful, full of contradictions that must be controlled by men, a task perceived as both difficult and full of pleasures.

There are actually very few references in the historical or legal literature to virgins sowing chaos or dissention: usually the morality tales tend to mention widows, old women, or wives in their warnings about women achieving too much power. However, one important example is that of Bilqīs, Queen of Sheba, whose importance in the Islamic tradition is explored by Jacob Lassner in his *Demonizing the Queen of Sheba* (1993). It is important to mention here that, though tales of Bilqīs do occur in historical literature, because she was supposedly a contemporary of the Prophet Solomon, her story is really more myth than history by the time the likes of Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) and Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Thaʿlabī (d. 1035/36 CE) were writing about her. Nonetheless, as it was a story referenced in the Qurʾān, many medieval historians and exegetes spilled a great deal of ink trying to piece together the historical details. In the Qurʾānic version of the story, one of Solomon's animal subjects, a hoopoe, goes missing one day. When he returns, he tells a fantastic tale of a country led by a woman, who "has had something of everything bestowed upon her," just as Solomon himself has (*The Qurʾān* 27:23). As if this were not strange enough, the bird has seen them

worshipping the sun instead of God. Solomon decides that this cannot stand, and sends the hoopoe back with a letter, telling the queen to submit to both him and to Islam. The queen consults with her nobles, who recommend combat, but she decides to attempt diplomacy instead, with the additional goal of testing the king's intentions. Solomon responds angrily, claiming that, if they will not submit, he will invade. At this, the queen comes to him to discuss terms, and while she is on her way, Solomon has her throne stolen and disguised as a test of her intelligence. He asks if she recognizes her throne; she says, evasively, that it looks just like it. In one final test, the king makes the queen enter a room that has been made to look as if the ground is covered by water. She uncovers her ankles, only later realizing the floor is only glass, at which point she concedes defeat and submits to Solomon and to God.

Later Muslim accounts have a somewhat different emphasis. Whereas the Qurʾānic story is very clearly intended to show the triumph of Solomon's God, along with the allies He bestows on His servant, later accounts focus more on other aspects of the Queen of Sheba's life. A good example of this is the account in al-Thaʿlabī's 11th-century book of biblical tales, *ʿArāʾis al-majālis*. The basis of the tale is mostly the same, but al-Thaʿlabī gives many more details about the Queen's back-story, and about what happens after her encounter with Solomon. As Thaʿlabī describes it, the Queen was the child of the King of Yemen. Considering himself too good for common humans, the king had married a woman of the *jinn*, and they had one child, to whom Thaʿlabī gives the name Bilqīs. When Bilqīs' father died, she desired his throne, but only half of her people would accept a female ruler, and the other half managed to crown a man. But this king

was a tyrant, violating the women of the kingdom and leading it to ruin while the people watched helplessly. Bilqīs, enraged by the king's actions, saved the day by proposing marriage to this man, who was shocked and thrilled by her interest, and then cutting off his head on their wedding night. Her people, now grateful for her leadership, supported every decision she made. When she received the letter from Solomon, as Thaʿlabī put it, "She had already trained (*sāsat*) the leading men to conform [to her wishes] and was experienced at…manipulating authority" (qtd. In Lassner 79). They happily went along with her decision to send gifts, which would craftily determine whether Solomon was a true Prophet: if he was, they would know that they could not stand against him, but, if he was merely a worldly King, they would stand a chance. One of the tests is telling: Bilqīs told men to dress and speak as women, and women to dress and speak as men. The King would be asked to point out the women and the men. Here Bilqīs was presuming that he would choose wrongly, perhaps in this way proving judgments based on gender to be shallow and unimportant. However, Solomon was able to determine the men from the women by having them wash their faces, observing that all women do this differently than all men. In this way she was defeated.

The tests provided by Solomon in Thaʿlabī's account are mostly the same as in the Qurʾānic version, but he adds more to the end, in which Solomon decides to marry Bilqīs (after she removes the unattractive hair from her legs) and lets her rule Yemen on her own, visiting her for three days every month. In this way, Bilqīs's dangerous activities are curtailed, but she is still able to maintain her independent rule. Other historians, however, end the story differently. A story transmitted by several scholars,

including al-Ṭabarī, is attributed to Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. between 725 and 737 CE).
He claimed that Solomon did not marry Bilqīs, but rather demanded that she choose a
husband from her own people. When she protested, the prophet firmly retorted that she
would not prohibit what God had declared lawful, and so she reluctantly chose the King
of Ḥamdān. Solomon named him ruler of Yemen in her place, along with a *jinn*
commander, and she quietly faded from history after that (al-Ṭabarī III: 163-165). As we
can see, then, there are some major differences in these accounts: though both end with
the queen submitting politically to Solomon, the Qurʾānic account emphasizes how this
submission is tied to a religious submission to God and his chosen prophet. Thaʿlabī's
account, on the other hand, emphasizes her sexual submission as the most important
aspect of her defeat by Solomon. Al-Ṭabarī, meanwhile, demands both sexual, political,
and religious submission for the Queen to be deemed unthreatening.

Though no version of this story explicitly claims that the Queen of Sheba is a
virgin, nor does any variant portray her in a particularly sexualized manner, there are
several similarities here, especially in Thaʿlabī's account, to the stories of powerful
virgins in the *sirah*s. The arc of a woman possessing power over men, consisting of
manipulative sexuality hand-in-hand with physical violence and vitality, who is
eventually "tamed" by a more powerful man, is very common. The Queen, in Thaʿlabī's
account, exhibits both physical and intellectual control over men: she seduces and
murders the evil usurper of her throne, but thereafter turns to intellectual power,
"training" the men of her court to accept her rulings. It is only when she encounters a
man who is superior in both intellect and physical power that she is controlled, and even

then the historians cannot agree on whether the prophet would marry such a woman.

Some seem to think that she deserves punishment, causing her to disappear from the story

altogether, while others seem comfortable with her ruling her own country so long as her

physicality is controlled by regular conjugal visits from Solomon.

Old women are at the other end of the spectrum from these difficult but intriguing

virgins. Assumed to have no sexual or reproductive role for men, their power comes from

their independence from these obligations. The Qurʾān itself speaks directly to this lack

of sexual responsibility by claiming that it is not sinful for older women to discard some

of the trappings of female modesty: "The women who are past child-bearing who have no

expectation of marriage, it is no sin for them to discard their clothes [as long as] they do

not flaunt their ornaments" (24:60). It was not only religion, however, but also the system

of patriarchy that allows access for older women to the masculine public sphere. As

Deniz Kandiyoti puts it when describing older women who were powerful within more

modern harems,

> A woman's life cycle in the patrilocally extended family is such that the
> deprivation and hardship she may experience as a young bride are eventually
> superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own daughters-in-
> law. The powerful postmenopausal matriarch thus is the other side of the coin of
> this form of patriarchy (33).

However, as Leyla Rouhi points out in her study of romantic go-betweens in Arabic

literature, "Independence…always carries a connotation of danger, for it indicates the

ability to operate outside the control of a presumed authority" (133). A common attitude

that seems to be shared by the *sīrah*s is that these powerful older women are intensely

threatening. This can be summed up by a quote taken by Fatima Mernissi from the 16th-

century Maghribī poet Mejdhūb: "A man who reaches eighty becomes a saint/A woman

who reaches sixty is on the threshold of hell" (qtd. in Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil* 124). A further example of this attitude can be found in Nadia Lachiri's examination of Andalusian proverbs from two medieval collections,[18] in which she claims, "The image of old women…is totally negative whether in relation to their physical aspect…or to their personal qualities" (45). Her clearest example of this invokes yet again Mejdhūb's connection of old women to hell: "What the devil does in a year, the old woman does in an hour" (45). A final example of this attitude is found from an offhanded comment in a more scholarly source: the judge Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), who wrote that the duties of a eunuch house-slave (*zimām*) in the Mamlūk period were to be "concerned with women. It is his duty and his right to cast his eyes upon their affairs…and he must prevent agents of debauchery such as old women and others from gaining access to the women" (Marmon 5). There is no explanation of what he means by old women being "agents of debauchery"; the connection between old women enabling illicit affairs is obviously assumed. Note in this case that the danger is framed as sexual, and that eunuchs, as men assumed to be separated from their sexuality, are actually considered less sexually threatening than elderly women to the ladies of the harem.[19]

In historical sources, we can find some examples of older women exercising power over men, though not as many as we might expect, given the obvious strong feelings expressed about them in the offhanded mentions above. This power can be

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[18] Though she cites *Rayy al-awāmm wa-marʿā l'sawāmm fī nakt al-khawaṣṣ wa-l-ʿawāmm* by Abū Yaḥyā al-Zajjālī (d. 694/1294), and *Ḥadāʾiq al-azāhir fī l-ajwiba wa-l-muḍḥikāt wa-l-ḥikam wa-l-nawādir* by Ibn ʿĀṣim Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Qaysī (d. 829/1426), she analyzes them as a set.
[19] For more on the intermediary position of eunuchs in medieval Islamic society, see Shaun Marmon's *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (1995).

portrayed either positively or negatively, depending, as usual, on whether the activities help or harm the historian's own community. Take, for example, the character of the Prophet Muḥammad's granddaughter Zaynab. Either recently divorced (according to Sunni sources) or given permission by her husband (according to Shīʿī sources), she accompanied her brother to the disastrous Battle of Karbala, after which she and her younger sister were left without any brothers to defend them. Zaynab's *khuṭbah* (sermon) given before the caliph Yazīd became legendary. He offended her dignity by forcing her to go unveiled before the court, marching her past his courtiers, but was sorry for it when she launched into the sermon condemning his arrogance, calling on him to think of his place in the next world. When one of the soldiers, a "Syrian with a red face," asked for possession of Zaynab's younger sister as the spoils of war, Zaynab sprang to her defense, saying "You are too lowly born! Such a thing is not for you, nor for him!" When Yazīd responded with anger, saying "By God! You are a liar! That is for me. If I wish to do it, I can do it," she replied, "No, by God! God would only let you do that if you left our faith and professed belief in another religion…You, a commander who has authority, are vilifying unjustly and oppress with your authority." After this, he became silent, and angrily denied the Syrian's repeated request (al-Ṭabarī XIX:171-172). Especially in Shīʿī sources, these actions are portrayed as heroic: while grieving and enduring humiliation, she still had the eloquence and bravery to defend her family from a corrupt ruler. Notably, at this point her husband is nowhere to be found, and her independence is taken for granted.

Another positive example of older women expressing power and authority can be found in the Persian historian Abū al-Faḍl Bayhaqī's (d. 470/1077) *Tārīkh-i Masʿūdī*. He relates a story about the Ghaznavid ruler Masʿūd I in which, as a young man not yet in power, he consults the pious grandmother of a retainer, ʿAbd al-Ghaffār, about a dream:

> He told her, 'I dreamed that I was in the land of Ghūr, and there was a fortress there, just like here, with many peacocks and roosters. I would take them and put them under my cloak, and they would fly and flap about underneath. You know everything; what does this mean?' The old woman said, 'God willing, the amīr will conquer the Ghūrid princes and subjugate the Ghūrids'…and afterwards it was as he had dreamed, and Ghūr was subjugated by him… he told ʿAbd al-Ghaffār 'Your grandmother prophesied well!' (Bayhaqī 135-144; Meisami, "Eleventh century women" 93).

This story is striking for a few reasons: first, the young prince explicitly says to this older woman that he believes she "knows everything." Though older women interpreting dreams is not uncommon, this acknowledgement of that skill as a signal of vast knowledge is more unusual. Secondly, though the prophetic dream itself was the prince's, he acknowledges that the grandmother was the one who actually had the knowledge to interpret it: thus, she is credited with the prophecy itself. This woman is described in effusive scholarly terms by the historian, called "pious, respectable, and a reader of the Qurʾān; she knew writing, Qurʾānic *tafsīr* [exegesis], and the interpretation of dreams and had memorized many accounts of the life of the prophet," as well as being a marvelous cook (Bayhaqī 133; Meisami, "Eleventh century women" 92). Because she seems to have had no personal goals besides loyally serving the young heir to the throne, her authority in this case is honored and her character praised, despite the obvious influence she exhibits over the prince.

A more negative example of an older, independent woman comes from an interesting place: the classroom. The chronicler Muḥammad Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 902/1497) devoted an entire volume (*Kitāb al-Nisāʾ*) in his twelve-volume biographical dictionary *al-Ḍawʾ al-Lāmiʿ ahl al-qarn al-tāsiʿ* to women of his own generation. As such, it is a notable source for the study of prominent women of the fifteenth century. Al-Sakhāwī is almost universally complimentary toward the women whose lives he chronicles, but there is room for criticism as well. One criticism comes in the case of the *ḥadīth* transmitter Hājar (b. 1388). Hājar, educated by her learned father, was described by al-Sakhāwī as one of the most prominent *ḥadīth* transmitters of his time. However, Al-Sakhāwī comments that he himself refused to attend her popular lectures, to which students streamed, because she refused to wear the veil. He editorializes that her advanced age was not an excuse for such immodesty, despite it being a common practice "among many old women" (131-132). This is somewhat surprising, given the Qurʾānic allowance of this practice mentioned above, but al-Sakhāwī obviously felt that the woman still had the potential to be sexually attractive, or at least was trying to appear so. Al-Sakhāwī's attitude is not the only reaction to the modesty of older female scholars. The famous mystic Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240), for example, describes the ascetic Fāṭimah bint ibn al-Muthanna as follows: "When I met her, she was in her nineties and only ate the scraps left by people at their doors. Although she was so old and ate so little, I was almost ashamed to look at her face when I sat with her, it was so rosy and soft" (143). Though he feels ashamed at beholding her beauty, Ibn ʿArabī does not blame Fāṭimah for not

veiling; she is, after all, elderly; she is simply imbued with the beauty of God's light and love.[20]

Somewhere between the virgin and the elderly woman, in elite medieval literature, is the figure of the slave concubine (*qaynah*). Often foreign women captured in battle, and the subject of innumerable witty anecdotes, these slave women make up a category of their own: neither virgins nor wives, their power comes explicitly from the manipulation of their bodies. As Marla Segol puts it in an article examining the poetry written by these concubines, their work expressed "a profound consciousness of the relationship between their words and their bodies…their desirability, and hence their security, depended equally upon wit and attractiveness" (155). As the great early Islamic polymath al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868 CE) describes them in his famous *Risālat al-Qiyān* (*Epistle on Singing Girls*), "The singing-girl is hardly ever sincere in her passion, or wholehearted in her affection. For both by training and by innate instinct her nature is to set up snares and traps for the victims, in order that they may fall into her toils" (31-32). However, he links this tendency directly to their upbringing:

> Their origins in pimping houses throw them into the arms of fornicators…how indeed could a singing-girl be saved from falling prey to temptation, and how is it possible for her to be chaste? It is in the very place where she is brought up that she acquires unbridled desires (34).

Thus, though al-Jāḥiẓ warns extensively about the dangerous sexuality of these women, and of their wiles, he links it to the sexual experiences forced upon them from a young

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[20] Though there is a strain of Sūfī thought in which holy women are described and treated as men, in reality they were never treated equally. As Megan Reid points out in her book *Law and Piety in Medieval Islam*, modesty is a good example of this: though scanty dress was one of the most obvious and widespread markers of ascetic men, women never had access to that particular expression of piety (52-53).

age, assuming that these experiences lead naturally to an overdeveloped sexual desire.
Therefore, their danger is not necessarily innate to their gender, but rather a product of
their environments. His statements also tie into the idea mentioned above about virgins:
that their sexuality must be shaped/awakened within the bounds of marriage in order to
control it. I mention *qaynah*s here because, though slave-girls rarely play leading roles in
the *sīrah* narratives, the clever manipulation of one's sexual appeal merely transfers
instead to the characters of foreign virgins. For the most part, these tales do not take royal
courts and their harems as the main settings; though their protagonists are often upper-
class individuals, they are shown either in a tribal setting or as itinerant military leaders.
However, the essential foreignness, and sexual availability, of the (mostly Christian)
princesses who feature in the *sīrah*s give them more in common, generally, with the slave
concubines of elite literature than the pious virgins who rarely make an appearance in
elite or historical literature.

Virgins and elders in the *sīrah*s

As we can see, then, despite the existence of entrenched attitudes about unmarried
women in historical sources, there do not seem to be many specific examples of these
women engaging in *fitnah*-causing activity. In the *sīrah* literature, however, unmarried
female sexuality, whether old or young, is absolutely equated with uncontrolled, and
therefore dangerous, physical power over men. It is of note that, though seduction makes
up the most common path for this power, physical strength and vitality is another.

Let us begin with the young women who are the marriage candidates for male
heroes. Love in the *sīrah*s is instant, debilitating, and based on very little. Though it may

be tempting, then, to compare it to the courtly love found in medieval European romance literature, this trope is actually based on the indigenous *ʿudhrī* tradition of poetry and prose. This genre formed in the eighth century and developed over time into a major genre of Arabic literature. As Stefan Leder describes it, "In these stories, passionate love is depicted as unconditional devotion to one's friend in spite of all hindrances. This experience entails severe suffering, which often causes the lover's, sometimes even both lovers' death" (163). The genre is named after the ʿUdrah tribe, from which two of the greatest exemplars of the form, Jamīl and ʿUrwah ibn Ḥizām, hailed. In the *sīrah*s, love stories are obviously influenced by this genre, though most tend to end happily eventually. Men and women frequently fall deeply in love with glimpses, portraits, dreams, or even skillful descriptions of someone; because of that love they are willing to go so far as to change their religion, betray their family, or destroy their reputation. The trope of a hero catching a glimpse of a woman bathing and falling deeply in love is ubiquitous. However, the opposite is also exceedingly common; every one of the *sīrah*s has at least one case of young women actively pursuing a man with whom she has fallen deeply in love on first sight. This usually happens in one of three ways: through sexual seduction, through wily manipulation, or through violence or threats of violence.

Purely sexual seduction is most common in *Sīrat al-Ẓāhir Baybars*, which purports to follow the life of the Mamlūk Sultan al-Ẓāhir Baybars al-Bunduqdārī (d. 1277). There is a lengthy cycle within the story which revolves around the secondary hero ʿArnūs's acquisition of a truly astounding number of wives, many of whom pursue him instead of the other way around, and several despite the disapproval of their fathers

(*Sīrat Baybars* 3: 1579, 1761-1762). The Armenian princess Runaqīṣ, for example, rejecting her father's advice to ignore this man who "eats princesses," as he puts it, pulls a classic seductress move when she tells ʿArnūs that she is too afraid to sleep in her own tent, thus gaining entrance to his and eventually marrying him (3: 1888-1891). Marīna, a sheltered island princess, falls in love with ʿArnūs on first sight and tries to kiss him immediately. ʿArnūs, however, holds her off until she converts and agrees to marriage (3: 1945-1946). A good example of seduction can also be seen in *Qiṣṣat al-Amīr Ḥamzat al-Pahlawān*, with the princesses Qamar Shāh and Yāqūt, cousins who invite the hero Rustam to their rooms and ask him to marry them both. He weakly objects that they are Christian, so they convert on the spot, at which point the story jumps to their discovery by the guards as Rustam is "drowning in pleasure" (*Qiṣṣat Ḥamzah* 3:17).

Despite this latter example, *Qiṣṣat Ḥamzah* actually contains more examples of the manipulation trope. The main hero of the tale gets caught up in the wiles of multiple women. Princess Miriam, daughter of Caesar, bribes Ḥamzah's right-hand man to fetch him to her rooms, where she demands marriage in exchange for helping the army take the city (1: 195-197). Princess Lauʿat al-Qulūb[21] falls in love with a detailed description of Ḥamzah and sends a painting of herself far and wide in the hopes that he will catch sight of one and fall in love instantly. Unsurprisingly for a romantic tale, this scheme works perfectly, and after many adventures the two are married (2: 166). As a final example, Hamzah's lifelong love Mihrdukār, daughter of a great Persian ruler, falls in love when she sees Ḥamzah from her bedroom window. Afterwards she expends a large amount of

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[21] The name Lauʿah, meaning "lovesickness," is a clear reference to the torturous love of ʿudhrī fame.

time and effort orchestrating meetings, finally convincing the reluctant hero to ask her

father for her hand after a night of wine and poetry in her chambers (1: 73, 96).

Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* have many examples of

young virgins who use violence as a form of power over men. This can come either in the

form of violence against others or violence against themselves in the form of suicide

threats. One example of violence against oneself is the story of one of Sayf's many

wives. The great sorcerer Akhmīm al-Ṭālib promises his daughter, Jīzah, that he will let

her marry Sayf, but Sayf is busy on several different quests and the marriage is delayed.

Eventually losing patience, Jīzah threatens to kill herself, which seems to immediately

defeat any reluctance displayed by her father or her beloved. The two are married

immediately (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 358). Sayf's first wife, Shāmah, uses violence in a different

way. When her father sends Sayf on an impossible marriage quest before he will agree to

their match, she suggests elopement instead. When Sayf refuses, she dresses in armor and

intercepts him as he is leaving, challenging him to a duel, hoping to force him to take her

along on his journey. When he defeats her and tells her to go back home, she is reduced

to praying that he will fall into some difficulty that will require her to save him, thus

leaving him in her debt. Her prayers are, of course, answered, and she saves him from an

oubliette into which he falls while chasing some raiders soon thereafter (1: 54-55). *Qiṣṣat

Fayrūz Shah* has another excellent example of female violence in service of love. When

the main hero's love interest, ʿAyn al-Ḥayāt, hears that Fayrūz Shāh is in her palace, she

climbs over her rooftops for three nights in a row to visit him, killing her own servants

whenever they get in her way (*Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shah* 1: 86-90).

The important thing to notice about all of these marriage-candidate characters, whether they use their physical attributes to sexually seduce, manipulate, or commit violence, is that their stories generally end "happily," with marriage to a hero. By the logic of the *sīrah* literature, which does not shy away from killing off problematic characters, this implies tolerance for their *fitnah*-causing activities. What links them all together is that, after accepting marriage to a usually stronger and more powerful man, their physical attributes are considered controlled and directed into more typical female pursuits: running a home and raising children. This can be shown most clearly by examining in more detail the character of Nūrah, in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*.

The link between violence/physical vitality and virginity is made explicit in *Sīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*, which is notable for its cast of female heroes. The heroine of this *sīrah*, Dhāt al-Himmah herself, is an asexual misogamist, but also an admired and capable leader and fighter. However, the tale also describes her younger years, when the men in her life attempt to force her into a more traditional female role. In trying to arrange her marriage to her cousin, her uncle says that he approves of the match not only because of her beauty, but because losing her virginity might "check her vigor and diminish her strength" (pt. 6: 36). In the end, he is wrong: though she is forcibly married and raped by her husband, it only makes her more determined in her independence. Even within the internal mechanics of this *sīrah*, however, Dhāt al-Himmah is an anomaly. An example of a more typical character, who combines both sexuality and violence, is Nūrah, a young Christian princess who causes chaos in the Muslim war camp between men fighting over her.

The character of the (usually Christian) princess living with a group of close female companions either in her own castle or in a convent,[22] which the medieval Islamic storytellers seem to find quite titillating, is exceedingly common. The most influential of these ubiquitous princesses is Nūrah, the daughter of a petty Christian king known only as ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ("Servant of Christ"). While trekking through a vast and dangerous jungle, Dhāt al-Himmah's right-hand man, Maḥmūd al-Baṭṭāl, comes across Princess Nūrah wrestling with her loyal maidens in her convent. The narrator of the tale explains that Nūrah "loved women and hated men," suggesting that her fellow maidens were something a bit more than mere companions (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 13: 45).

When al-Baṭṭāl is caught sneaking through a window, Nūrah challenges, and defeats, each of the Muslim men in a wrestling match before capturing al-Baṭṭāl himself and delivering him to her father. She later fights in her father's army, again with her loyal female attendants, and kills wide swaths of opponents, who are helpless before her beauty, leading her father to proclaim that she could match twenty thousand men (pt. 13: 47). Dhāt al-Himmah finally decides that she needs to deal with this troublesome girl personally, and eventually manages to capture her, even though her own soldiers trip her up in order to defend their beautiful enemy (pt. 13: 61). After this, Nūrah goes on to become the cause of great discord amongst the Muslim men, each of whom wants her as his wife, by refusing to marry anyone and responding violently to any advances. The two

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[22] The Arabic word for convent, *dayr*, can also be translated as "monastery," "stronghold," or even simply "residence." It may be interesting to note that, whereas some princesses, like Nūrah, live in an all-female environment, some actually live with monks, many of whom are portrayed as sexually indecent toward their young charges.

main male heroes and best friends, the aforementioned al-Baṭṭāl and Dhāt al-Himmah's

son, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, are nearly torn apart by their desire for Nūrah.[23] After lengthy

negotiations and some violence, Dhāt al-Himmah decrees that al-Baṭṭāl should marry

Nūrah, but this does not solve the issue entirely: Nūrah attacks and poisons al-Baṭṭāl on

their wedding night, and our female hero is required to step in yet again, drugging the

bride and tying her up so that the marriage can be consummated (pt. 20: 43). Again and

again in Nūrah's story, Dhāt al-Himmah, being immune to her charms, is the only one

who can defeat her. Our heroine performs this task with great annoyance, but great

determination: from her perspective, all that matters is that Nūrah is coming between her

soldiers and loved ones, and this *fitnah* must be controlled at all costs.

Once Nūrah is successfully raped by her new husband, "her disgust turned to

love," as the storyteller says, and she ceases her warlike activity (pt. 20: 43). The only

exception to this is a few instances in which she fights harmoniously alongside al-Baṭṭāl's

other warrior wives (he has a type) to defend the tribe and their children while the men

are away (pt. 31: 41). Thus, not only is Nūrah "converted" to heterosexuality, but she

finds herself with harmonious homosocial bonds within the "acceptable" structure of

polygamous marriage. Her complete conversion is shown later in the narrative. Nūrah's

husband assists in drugging a captive princess who is resisting a young warrior so that he

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[23] This represents a typical "love triangle," as described by Eve Sedgwick in her book on male homosocial relationships in 18th and 19th-century English literature, *Between Men*. Using Foucauldian analysis, Sedwick concludes in this work that "Large-scale social structures are congruent with… male-male-female erotic triangles…in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power," and that in literature this is expressed as a series of stories about fraught triangles between two male friends and one threatening female love interest (25).

may rape her, in an echo of Nūrah's own experiences. The narrators make this connection themselves when Nūrah and her daughter are enlisted after the rape in order to relate their own story, combined with "amusing anecdotes," so as to comfort the girl. In the end, the raped princess is convinced to convert and successfully enters her new society (pt. 70: 141-142). This scene is stunning for a few reasons: first, in doubling down on the suggestion that rape is an effective way to "convert" women to heterosexuality, but also, for its suggestion that this sexual conversion may not be enough: in order to be converted emotionally and religiously, positive homosocial relationships are necessary as well. Nūrah's "conversion" story, and that of the other princesses in the tale like her, is portrayed as a three-pronged process: loss of virginity, whether consensual or forced; conversion to Islam, if necessary; and finally the redirection of homosocial (or sometimes homosexual) impulses into structures, like polygamous marriage, that serve the interests of patriarchal society. In the process, their almost magical pull on the men around them seems to disappear, and the *fitnah* is controlled.

As these few examples show, sexual desire mixed with physical prowess, the combination of which is explicitly linked with virginity, is an obvious threat to men. If this physical threat can be contained and channeled into acceptable social structures, then these women are considered even more desirable than women with a meeker personality. The best example of this is the character of Ghamrā in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. Though she pines after her cousin, he is uninterested in women and marriage, preferring the battlefield. After defeating him in battle, humiliating him by cutting off his forelock and stealing his clothes, Ghamrā loses interest, while his passion is stoked high and he falls

into lovesickness (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 40: 56). Ghamrā then disguises herself as a young man and takes her father to join the battles of Dhāt al-Himmah's tribe, distinguishing herself in battle and winning the respect of the entire tribe. When she finally reveals herself, the men do not react with defensiveness or disgust, but rather with wonder and desire. Every single tribal warrior fights for her hand, and the leader of a rival tribe laughs, saying, "there exists no other girl like her on earth! I would very much like to be in the same situation as Prince ʿAbd al-Wahhāb [Dhāt al-Himmah's son], who has women who can protect him as well as themselves!" (pt. 41: 3). Physical power is considered acceptable so long as it is transmuted from power over men to power that supports men; whatever serves societal structures is deemed admirable, while anything that causes *fitnah* in those structures is threatening and must be destroyed.

But what about characters who are unable or unwilling to have their activities converted into those deemed acceptable by the logic of these tales? Women whose physicality remains untamed by marriage or by some special dispensation (like Dhāt al-Himmah's piety, something that I will discuss further in a later chapter) all meet the same fate—death—and usually in a particularly gruesome manner. There are some examples of young and beautiful women who fall into this category, such as Maymūnah in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. Like Nūrah, she starts off as a virginal warrior woman with "no desire for men" (pt. 37: 3). However, she falls deeply in love with a description of Dhāt al-Himmah's son, who rejects her suit. Angry, she challenges him to a duel and defeats him, at which point the tables are turned: he suddenly cannot live without her, but she has no further interest. In the end, yet again, the situation requires intervention from Dhāt al-

Himmah: when Maymūnah meets her suitor's mother, God "inspires her with love" for

Dhāt al-Himmah, which convinces the princess that the son could also be worth her time

(pt. 37: 36). She marries the young man and they conceive a son. Up to this point,

Maymūnah's narrative arc is fairly typical of warrior virgins. But instead of settling into

her new role as an invisible wife and mother, her story gets more interesting when her

son falls in love with a Christian girl and asks his mother to convert back to her old

religion with him. This apostasy sets her, seemingly inevitably, on a path of betrayal,

serial marriage, and violence that finally ends in her defeat in single combat with Dhāt al-

Himmah herself (pt. 55: 35). This story is unusual, and a departure from the normal path

for violent and beautiful women. The narrator seems to acknowledge this, inserting

frequent explanations for her behavior: first, her love for her new Christian husband (pt.

47: 6), and finally, when all explanations are exhausted, nothing remains but to declare

that "God removed mercy from her heart" (pt. 47: 52). There is an unusual regret in the

way the narrator describes this character, as if divine intervention can be the only

explanation for losing such a promising warrior virgin to villainy.

However most of the sexually/physically uncontrolled characters are not young

and beautiful; the combination of women who are sexually driven, old, and unattractive is

portrayed as particularly frightening. As Remke Kruk describes them in her 2013 study of

warrior women in the *sīrah*s,

> A special category is formed by the warrior women who are not young and
> beautiful but old and ugly. If such old women belong to the enemy camp, as they
> usually do, the narrator may describe them in very coarse terms…they are
> sexually repulsive as well as threatening, and their cunning and undiminished
> physical strength make them redoubtable enemies (29).

An example of this type of character is Bakhṭūs, Queen of Georgia, another character in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. This character is richly described in a way specifically calculated to elicit both philosophical and physical disgust. The very first thing the narrative points out is that she is unattractive: her face was "*aqbaḥ al-nās*," or "the ugliest among all people" (pt. 5: 12). She is a glutton, and what she gluts herself upon is pork: two pigs a day. She is consistently drunk, quick to rage and bloodshed, and of course, old. The final straw is her sexual appetite and physical prowess. She is a formidable opponent, large and strong, and, when she defeats a man, forces him to have sex with her until he dies of exhaustion or passes out, at which point she squeezes his head until his eyes burst (pt. 1: 13). As Remke Kruk points out, though some of the Queen's un-Islamic activities are used to denigrate Christians as a whole (eating pork and drinking alcohol, for example), some clearly go against Christian law as well, such as her taking of multiple sexual partners. In this sense, she is not only un-Islamic, but also un-Christian, despite being a prominent political leader in that community (*Warrior Women of Islam* 147). In the end, this formidable warrior is defeated by her lust: a handsome Muslim commander seduces her, killing her in her sleep after spending the night in copulation (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 5: 16-17).

One other example of the "threatening old woman" character comes in the form of the evil sorceress. The *sīrah*s vary widely in their acceptance and use of magic. Some, like *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* and *Sīrat 'Antar*, ignore it altogether. Others, like *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan* and *Sīrat Baybars*, embrace a magical perspective. This has been noted by critics and audiences throughout the history of the tales, and has partially been

responsible for a separation in which some tales are considered "history" and thus acceptable, and others are labeled merely "silly tales." As Remke Kruk and Claudia Ott observed at a 1997 *sīrah* recitation in Marrakesh, even modern audiences note this distinction. In a conversation with an audience member, they asked why he does not like *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. He replies: "Because there are too many devils and too much sorcery in it. Sayf is just lies and exaggeration (*kdūb wa-mubālagha*), while the *ʿAntariyya* and the *Wahhābiyya* [an alternate title for the *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*] are *taʾrīkh*, history" (Kruk and Ott 189). Though there are certainly elements of the fantastical in these more "realistic" *sīrah*s, I would separate the sorceress characters in the magical tales from the miracles of "saintly" women, which are mainly involuntary and only appear in situations requiring self-defense. In *Sīrat al-Ḥākim*, for example, the pious Sayyida Nafīsa miraculously disappears when a man tries to rape her (Lenora 97), and in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, a king holding an ʿAlid woman captive gets an epileptic fit each time he tries to rape her (pt. 22: 4-5). On the other hand, sorceresses (and sorcerers) generally have the ability to control and direct the *jinn*, are able to perform sand divination, and/or can perform spells of battle or protection. This ability in and of itself is not portrayed as negative: there are several helper characters who use their powers to assist the heroes and their communities, thus using their abilities to promote "power-with." However, like other forms of physical power, when it is used to attain power over men, it is extremely threatening and needs to be controlled.

The best example of this polarized narrative about women's magical power is the story of the sorceress ʿĀqilah in *Sirat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*. She is the hero's mother-in-

law, and is powerful in both sand divination and magical combat. When she sees in the sand that her daughter will marry Sayf, she devotes her life and her powers to him, quickly becoming indispensible. However, from the beginning there are hints that she may be dangerously inclined to use her power over men: in the past, at "only" 150 years old, she had married and killed a sorcerer, taking his followers and infiltrating the royal court of her homeland (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 75). This tendency comes out again when Sayf befriends a male sorcerer, Hadhād, and ʿĀqilah becomes jealous. She plots with another sorcerer and kills the interloper, but apparently never frees herself from her guilt (3: 272, 281-282). Though she fights in several more battles after the murder, in her final one she faces down a powerful enemy sorcerer, opining, "if he kills me, I will finally be free from the guilt of killing Hadhād" (4: 255). The enemy sorcerer obliges, killing her and all of her followers. Neither Sayf himself nor the rest of his army are described as mourning her, despite her years of loyal service (4: 255-256). ʿĀqilah is not shown to have any unsavory sexual tendencies, but her sheer power, combined with a history of using it to kill men, cannot go unpunished.

Wives

We have already touched on a few characters who remained active after their marriages, but for the most part their physical activities, whether violent or sexual, tend to become a non-issue. What is generally considered threatening about wives in the *sīrah*s is rather their intellectual and emotional influence over their husbands. This fear can also be seen in historical sources, though even this type of influence is often framed in explicitly sexual terms.

Wives in historical, legal, and *adab* literature

Of all personal relationships with women mentioned in medieval Islamic legal and historical literature, marriage is probably the most common, though largely in a lineage-based capacity. Medieval jurists almost unanimously described marriage as a positive societal structure, a way to satisfy sexual desire and create beneficial family ties in the community (Tucker 41).

The question of how much power marriage granted to women is a recurring theme from medieval historical sources, rising to the surface during periods when wives of rulers proved to be more influential than usual. Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 485/1092), the famous courtier and chronicler, wrote strongly against women being given any form of political power in his *Siyāsatnāma*, saying:

> They are wearers of the veil and have not complete intelligence…When the king's wives begin to assume the role of rulers, they base their orders on what interested parties tell them, because there are not able to see things with their own eyes…Naturally their commands are the opposite of what is right, and mischief ensues…In all ages nothing but disgrace, infamy, discord [*fitna*] and corruption have resulted when kings have been dominated by their wives (185).

As Anne Lambton explains in her seminal examination of this text, Niẓām al-Mulk had a vested interest in this argument: he was involved in a conflict with the Sultan Malikshāh's wife, Terken Khātūn, over her husband's succession (44). Niẓām al-Mulk earned the ire of Malikshāh when one of his sons seized property without permission. But earlier, he had also aroused the anger of Terken Khātūn, when he encouraged the Caliph to nominate the son of a different concubine as his heir. So when he gave her an excuse, she stoked her husband's rage, telling him that Niẓām al-Mulk was basically dividing the kingdom between his children. Soon thereafter, Niẓām al-Mulk was assassinated, and

Terken Khātūn's son proclaimed heir: apparently, his fears of whispering wives were well-founded (44).

Regardless of Niẓām al-Mulk's personal reservations about female rule, however, Julie Scott Meisami emphasizes that his assessment fits into "a prevalent medieval Islamic model of women as dangerous and destructive to political order" when he compares his nemesis to Eve, Zulaykhā, the Kayānid queen Sūdābah, and ʿĀʾishah (2006: 57). These choices of negative examples are telling: Eve, for example, is not portrayed in the Qurʾān as a temptress to sin as she is in the Bible. She and Adam make the choice to eat the forbidden fruit together. But, as scholars like Miriam Cooke and Leila Ahmed note, as the Islamic conquest conquered more and more "people of the book," some Judeo-Christian concepts about women, like the value of virginity and this idea of Eve as being created from Adam's rib and becoming the source of original female sin, penetrated the Islamic milieu, since it complemented the already patriarchal structures of the society (Ahmed 4; Cooke 79). The example of Zulaykhā, the name given in later Islamic interpretation to the wife of Potiphar, who attempts to seduce the young Joseph in Surah 12 of the Qurʾān (she is not named as such in the Qur'an itself), is interesting in that, so far as we can tell, her attempt at seduction was not politically motivated. For this example, Niẓām al-Mulk is explicitly conflating women's sexuality with their political ambitions, whether they are actually connected or not. As for Sūdābah, a Persian queen with a story nearly identical to that of Zulaykhā as described in the Persian epic *Shahnāmeh* and in Persian historical sources, it attests to the multicultural environment of the Seljuq era (Yarshater 299-307). Any learned *adīb* like

Niẓām al-Mulk would be able to draw from Biblical, Islamic, and pre-Islamic Persian models in his writing.

The figure of ʿĀʾishah is perhaps the least surprising inclusion on this list, being a typical symbol of female political initiative run amok in this period. Of all the Prophet's wives, because of her favored status as well as her later involvement in politics, commentators have focused on ʿĀʾishah in their writings. It is said that, being so young, she was sometimes disrespectful, but also very intelligent. She was childless, often jealous, and questioned everything. Later commentators note these personality traits with ambivalence, mostly seeing them negatively while noting that the Prophet trusted and confided in her above all others. Kathryn Kueny explains how her childlessness was portrayed by later scholars as "a bodily imperfection that in her case—contrary to the Qurʾān's depiction of the prophet's wives' barren righteousness—is equated with impiety, jealousy, and her own claims to authority, power, and wisdom within the tradition" (83). However, these scholars could not denigrate her too harshly, since "she was intelligent and knowledgeable in matters of religion, Qurʾānic verses were revealed on her behalf, and she carried forth Muḥammad's message after his death" (84). In fact, according to Ibn Hajar, ʿĀʾishah contributed two hundred and forty-two of the strongest Bukhārī *hadīth*s. For the sake of comparison, ʿĀlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the first Shīʿah imām and major contender for the role of the Prophet's successor, only contributed twenty-nine (Mernissi, "Women in Muslim History" 38).

Much of the negative lens through which Muslim scholars have tended to view ʿĀʾishah's legacy comes from her involvement in politics after the Prophet's death. Most

of his surviving wives took sides in the fight for succession, but none went to the lengths

of ʿĀʾishah, who actually led troops into battle in 656 CE to avenge the death of the third

caliph ʿUthmān and block the rise of ʿAlī as his successor. Though she did not fight

herself, she led her howdah (atop a camel, which led to the famous battle's moniker of

"Battle of the Camel") into the thick of the fighting to encourage the troops to fight

harder. As Denise Spellberg points out, "men followed her, a woman, into battle together

with two male Companions of the Prophet, an event that suggests not just her prestige,

but her power" (48). Later commentators recognized but feared this power, and often

used the fact that her side lost the battle and that she afterward humbly retired to her

home, never again to interfere with politics, as a lesson on women's unfitness for political

participation. As Spellberg explains about early commentary, "Taken as a whole, ninth-

century references to ʿAʾisha's role in the first civil war may be divided thematically into

negative appraisals of rule by women, predictions of doom, censure, humor, and regret.

These varied categories reflect the Muslim community's range of response" (50). Mostly

these responses are negative in nature, but the character of ʿĀʾishah herself—jealous,

scheming above her station, but intelligent, wise, and loyal—persisted as a wifely

archetype in Islamic society alongside the patient, long-suffering Fāṭimah, who sided

with her husband against society even though their marriage was known to be difficult,

and the strong rock of support for the Prophet that was his first wife Khādijah.

What is most interesting about ʿĀʾishah's portrayal as a wife by Niẓām al-Mulk

and others is how it changes as time passes. For example, in the later Mamlūk period, her

example set the tone for female *ḥadīth* scholars to gain status based on their long lives

and personal relationships, since word of mouth transmission was considered the most trustworthy method (Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce* 40). As Yossef Rapoport explains, the Mamlūk period experiences a revival of interest in ʿĀʾishah as a transmitter of *ḥadīth* "as well as a symbol of Sunni—as against Shiʿi—communal memory and solidarity." Al-Zarkashī (d. 795/1392) expands upon earlier works on the Prophet's favorite wife by emphasizing her piety, generosity, and asceticism as well as her wifely and daughterly attributes (Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce* 41). The asceticism especially is a new addition: ʿĀʾishah is more commonly described as somewhat frivolous, if intelligent and pious.

Going back to Niẓām al-Mulk, then, he thus cites mytho-historical examples of women's initiative that are supposedly harmful to society, without differentiating between sexual and political initiative, in an attempt to degrade the ambitions of his rival. However, there are other historical examples more contemporary to Niẓām al-Mulk of wives seizing power through emotional and/or intellectual influence in medieval Islam. Just to name a few, Shajar al-Durr of Egypt and Arwá of Yemen are examples of wives who gained access to the ruling apparatus through their relationships with their husbands.

The story of Arwá (d. 532/1138), the last ruler of the Ṣulayḥid Ismāʿīlī dynasty in Yemen, was told by Najm al-Dīn ʿUmāra (d. 569/1174) in his *Tārīkh al-Yaman*. She was a concubine who grew up in the palace of ʿAlī al-Ṣulayḥī ʿAlī's wife ʿAṣmāʾ was powerful in her own right, advising her husband and eventually serving as regent for her son. Notably, Arwá did not claim power publicly until after Asmaʾ died in 467/1074-5, after which she also took the same title as her predecessor, *al-sayyidah al-ḥurrah*, or "the

free/independent Lady" (Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens* 115). ʿAlī recognized value in the young Arwá when she was only a child, ʿUmāra claims, and saw to her extensive education. Later, she married ʿAlī's son, al-Mukarram, who became paraplegic shortly after his mother's death. ʿUmāra claims that al-Mukarram himself demanded that Arwá take on the reins of government for him, at which he claims that she was quite reluctant, saying, "A woman who is [still] desirable in bed, is not suitable for running a 'state.'" (Cortese and Calderini 130). This narrative device was likely added by the historian as an apology for her later assumption of power, and in her reluctance the reader is supposed to find legitimacy: she did not seek such power but rather had it thrust upon her. Note, also, the conflation of sexuality with political matters, as we also saw in Niẓām al-Mulk's examples.

In 1084, al-Mukarram died, and soon thereafter he and Arwá's son died as well, making Arwá the sole ruler of Yemen. Though the Ismāʿīlī establishment ordered her to marry a Fāṭimid relative soon thereafter, ʿUmāra claims that she accepted the obligation on paper but refused to consummate the marriage or even stage a wedding (Cortese and Calderini 131). She ruled until her death in 532/1138, and the Ṣulayḥid Dynasty died with her. But to this day she is remembered in Yemen as a generous, wise, and beloved Queen, known in contemporary literature and popular lore as *Bilqīs al-ṣughrá*, or "Little Queen of Sheba" (Cortese and Calderini 134).

A later, and more controversial, example of a royal wife accessing political power is Shajar al-Durr (d. 655/1257), whose period of authority straddled the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk dynasties in Cairo; she might in fact be called the founder of the Mamlūk

dynasty. She was not the only female ruler in this time period: for example, Princess Raḍīyah in Delhi reigned from 1236-1240 and Queen Ḍayfa Khātūn of Aleppo from 1236-1243, but Shajar al-Durr's story has two particularly interesting elements for our purposes: she actively claimed power for herself in very visible ways, and she is represented in the *sīrah* literature (Habib 68).[24] She gained access to power not only through her husband but through his followers, and also gained legitimacy through her son. Shajar al-Durr was a Turkish slave-consort in the court of al-Ṣāliḥ Ayyūb, who married her after she gave birth to their son. When al-Ṣāliḥ became ill and died during the Seventh Crusade, she paired up with the commander of her husband's military to issue orders in his name and conceal the fact of his death from the besieged city in order to keep them focused on defeating the French army at their doors (Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens* 91). Once the Crusaders were repulsed, the Sultan's heir Turānshāh began acting aggressively toward the Mamlūks (slave soldiers) and everyone associated with his father's reign, including Shajar al-Durr, demanding, for example, that she surrender all of the jewelry that the former ruler had given her. When she complained to the Mamlūks about his treatment of her, it was the last straw: they assassinated him and installed her as the new monarch (Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens* 91). Note that, in this case, Shajar al-Durr did not have emotional or intellectual influence on her husband necessarily, but rather on her husband's former soldiers. In a time of ethnic and political strife, she was savvy

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[24] In fact, interest in this figure has continued into the modern period. The great writer Jurji Zaydan wrote a historical novel about her, *Shajar al-Durr* (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal 1914), which has been translated into English by Samah Selim as *Tree of Pearls, Queen of Egypt* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 2012).

enough to convince an elite group of soldiers to fight for her by drawing on both their

loyalty to their fallen king and, through that, their loyalty to the dignity of his widow.

At this point, Shajar al-Durr visibly grasped power for herself by having her name

mentioned during the *khuṭbah*, or sermon associated with Friday prayers in which the

leader was traditionally proclaimed. She also had her name inscribed on coinage, in an

unusually bold move. Even Arwá had kept the name of her long-deceased husband on her

Ṣulayḥid coins (Cortese and Calderini 107). The language Shajar al-Durr uses to describe

herself in these prayers and coins is significant: in both, she legitimizes herself by her

familial relationships. In one recorded variation of the *khuṭbah*, for example, she is

referred to as "[the one submissive to] al-Mustaʿṣim and al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, queen of the

Muslims, mother of Khalīl, commander of the faithful" (Wolf 201). The coins use the

same titles, calling attention to Shajar al-Durr's deceased husband as well as to her son

through whom she claims legitimate rule. Unfortunately, the ʿAbbāsid Caliph in Baghdad

refused to acknowledge her leadership, and, three months later, she "abdicated" in favor

of her new husband and former commander in chief ʿIzz al-Dīn Aybak. Historians report

that there was little trust in this partnership: Shajar al-Durr concealed matters of state

from her husband, and, despite her opposition, he persisted in marrying other women

(Mernissi, *Forgotten Queens* 98). When Aybak was finally murdered in the baths, his

servants admitted under torture that Shajar al-Durr had planned the assassination; she was

beaten to death and thrown from a tower, supposedly by the women of the palace.

In the examples of both Arwá and of Shajar al-Durr, wives seized power as a

consequence of their close relationships with their husbands, but, once the husbands died,

the patriarchal powers of the world stepped in to oppose them. While both women were forced to remarry in order to maintain legitimacy, it seems that Arwá was lucky, in that her kingdom was not considered important enough to require her overthrow; in addition to which, her loyalty to her male relatives--namely in not having them killed, and not co-opting visible trappings of power like coins in her own name--was less threatening to the structures of power. Shajar al-Durr, on the other hand, is remembered by historians as early as Al-Maqrīzī (d. 845/1422) and as late as Fatima Mernissi in her book *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, first published in French in 1990, as being violent, overly ambitious, jealous, and scheming. As Mernissi describes it, "amorous passion turned her into a jealous murderess" (97). Al-Maqrīzī does not openly express such opinions, his feelings can be guessed at by the fact that he describes her death with relish, spending several pages on the description, including her scantily-clad body being flung out the window, after only a short passage on her actual ascent and rule (Permo 138). The sexualization of Shajar al-Durr in both Mernissi's and Maqrīzī's descriptions yet again conflates sexuality with violence in these accounts. There were alternate portrayals of this short-lived ruler, however. Her contemporary Ibn Wāṣil (d. 697/1298) refused to comment on whether or not she had Aybak murdered, saying that rumors were rife but no one really knew (Permo 137). Ibn Taghrībirdī (d. 874/1470), who usually followed the example of his teacher al-Maqrīzī, nonetheless distinctly strayed from his example here, giving more space to Shajar al-Durr's rule. He portrayed her power as starting before her first husband's death, emphasizing that she practically ruled Egypt even while he was alive. Thus, he emphasized her influence over her husband, a more traditional (if still

dangerous) means of female "power-over." In addition to this credited her appointment as her husband's successor to "her good conduct, her abundant intelligence, and her good governance" (Permo 137-138). In describing her and Aybak's deaths, he keeps his description short, emphasizing that the Mamlūks continued to protect Shajar al-Durr after she was accused, and that she was a pious Muslim who deserves God's mercy (Permo 138). The similarities to the revision of ʿĀʾishah's reputation in the Mamlūk period, where despite her faults her piety becomes her defining feature, are notable here. As we shall see later, Shajar al-Durr's portrayal in *Sīrat Baybars* falls somewhere in between these two versions, though skews more toward the sympathetic. Many later historical descriptions of the events show significant influence from the *sīrah*'s version (Schregle 84-122).

We do not have any explicit *endorsements* of wives being permitted to occupy positions of power in politics or public life in historical sources. But, as we can see from the depictions of the above characters, historians were not always loath to describe a female ruler's achievements. If a wife ruled quietly, allowing her male family members to take the majority of the public credit, they were often portrayed as wise and generous. Shajar al-Durr knew this, making sure to foreground her connections to her husband, even after he died, and to her son on her public proclamations of power. However, when a woman is caught actively defying or performing violence against powerful men, as Shajar al-Durr did to Aybak, or is caught attempting to manipulate her husband against other men, as was Terken Khātūn, they are described by historians in coarse and often highly-sexualized negative terms.

<u>Wives in the *sīrah*s</u>

In the *sīrah* literature, it should be noted that the vast majority of wives are silent characters, a situation that is theoretically portrayed as the best relationship. An ideal wife is described in the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* as being "a noble [woman], very pretty…[her husband] calls for something: 'Yes, right away'…he will live and die in happiness, yes, contented" (Reynolds, *Heroic Poets* 170). As mentioned above, marriage is in fact portrayed as a "cure" for active and sexually driven virgins, one that automatically lessens both their desire and the desire of other men toward them. Once these women are married, the vast majority of them either disappear from the narrative altogether or show up in more "acceptable" circumstances: as helpless "damsels in distress" who are kidnapped and rescued by their husbands and tribes, as defenders of the tribe in their own right when their husbands are away, or as mothers to heroic sons. However, there are also several examples of wives who influence events through their exclusive access to their husbands, and are thus closer to the fears of Niẓām al-Mulk and others.

The idea that wives have emotional influence over their husbands is taken for granted in the *sīrah*s. Regardless of how much or how little time the couple actually spends together, the idea that it is a man's responsibility to protect the women of his household is ubiquitous. Just as marriage quests spur a hero onwards and outwards into the wider world, so too do rescue quests drive a large portion of *sīrah* plots. In *Sīrat ʿAntar*, for example, the hero's wife ʿAblah gets captured countless times (just a few examples can be seen in Hamilton 1:3, 53-54, 2:165-66, 296-97, 319-320 and *Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 7: 253, 298). In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, the caliph al-Maʾmūn kidnaps the

tribe's wives and children, the final straw that leads to them breaking their bonds of loyalty (pt. 35: 46). Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan and his companions meet several of their wives while saving them from various dangers (*Sīrat Sayf* 2: 160-162, 252-253, 4: 174-175). Even warrior women may fall victim to this trope: Dhāt al-Himmah herself is kidnapped on several occasions, causing chaos among her family and tribe (pt. 61: 9).

This drive to protect the female members of one's community is especially apparent in the tribal *sīrah*s, which contain frequent scenes describing an ancient phenomenon: women spurring men on in battle. This is an ancient trope that also turns up in the tales purporting to describe the battles of pre-Islamic tribes entitled the *Ayyām al-ʿArab*. Despite some fantastical elements these stories were widely regarded as historical narratives of pre-Islamic life in the Arab tribes. They were almost certainly the predecessors of the tribal *sīrah*s like *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Ilse Lichtenstadter's classic study of women in the *Ayyām*, dated though it may be, has some interesting observations about women's activities in battle. She claims that:

> The impulse to defend their womenfolk and the thought that the women might be watching the battle from a distance, inspired the Arabs with courage and bravery…When in the greatest distress and danger, the Arabs had recourse to a device which was meant to excite their courage and their desire of fighting to the highest degree: they hamstrung the camels carrying the women's litters or severed the girths of the saddles and thongs of the litters, so that the women fell to the earth (39, 42).

It is important to note that these efforts can be organized by women themselves. Jāziyah, wise sister to the hero Ḥasan in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl,* organizes the tribe's women into a cheering/jeering section for the men during several different battles (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl al-Kubrá* 538, 543), as well as directing their *howdah*s into battle to spur them on (584, 587). This activity is not limited to wives, and indeed Lichtenstadter observes that, just

like the men in these narratives, "the woman, too, appears in this branch of ancient Arabic literature less as a member of the family circle than as a member of the society of the tribe" (64). This communal aspect of the tales does survive in the *sīrah*s, but the extraordinary length of the later narratives allows the storytellers to emphasize more modern nuclear family ties as well as ancient tribal affiliations and roles. Thus, though in the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl* we do see the aforementioned women standing on a hill above a battle to inspire courage in their men, in other tales we also see women pleading with the community to save their sons or husbands when they are captured, or even betraying their community for their sons (*Sīrat Sayf* 3: 114, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 44: 5-6).

Regardless of how actively women themselves perpetuate their menfolk's protective impulses, that type of influence is not portrayed as negative or threatening in the *sīrah*s. More pertinent to our study of how wives can represent a dangerous "power-over" scenario are the examples of the long-term, beloved wives that occur in these tales. One of the best examples of this character type is ʿAntar's wife ʿAblah. Beginning when they are both quite young, their courtship is rife with problems of race (as ʿAntar is black), class (though ʿAntar is of noble birth, his blackness leads to him working as a slave as a young man), and eventually marital rights and privileges. Quests to win ʿAblah's hand in marriage make up a large portion of ʿAntar's youth, and a concern for what she might think of his actions is a thread that runs through his entire life. For example, ʿAblah successfully urges ʿAntar to have mercy on his enemies (*Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 9: 46) and even employs the age-old method of refusing to sleep with him until he does what she wants, from hanging his famous poem on the Kaʿbah to getting revenge

on men who insult her (7: 312, 11: 438). They quarrel on several occasions, mostly

because ʿAblah does not feel she is receiving the respect she deserves; at one point she

tells him "you have imposed so many wives upon me…when the women of the tribe

meet me, they laugh at me," and that, if she wanted, she could "send him back to herding

camels" as he did when his father refused to acknowledge him as his son (7: 445). When

ʿAntar loses control and rapes a prisoner that he has captured, his only true concern is

that ʿAblah will be angry: the story reveals that he wishes to marry the girl to make up for

his actions, but didn't, *min khawfihi bint ʿammihi ʿAblah* (for fear of his cousin ʿAblah)

(5: 424). And yet, she is also shown to protect him fiercely, even at one point distracting

and stabbing a would-be executioner of her husband (7: 282).

Interestingly, ʿAblah is also childless. So far as I can determine, she is the only

heroine in the tales who is married but childless. The story mentions her barrenness only

obliquely and on a few occasions, but it is clear that she and ʿAntar have no children

together (7: 34). The reasons for applying this unusual trait to her are unclear: it could

make ʿAntar's frequent marriages and extramarital affairs more palatable to the audience,

since a hero absolutely needs sons to carry on his bloodline. Or perhaps it makes ʿAblah's

actions make more sense when ʿAntar becomes mortally wounded in battle, where she

dons his armor, mounts his horse, and leads his army (12: 25, 30). After all, she has never

been "softened" by the trials and joys of motherhood, as happens to most female

characters. But I would posit that the character of ʿAblah is based upon that of the

Prophet's wife ʿĀʾishah. She too was childless, and, like ʿAblah, was not the most

demure or tractable wife. Both women talk back to their husbands, question their

decisions, and often give voice to feelings of jealousy regarding other women. Finally,

ʿĀʾishah, too, took up arms after her husband's death, when she fought and was defeated

at the Battle of the Camel. These similarities between ʿAblah and ʿĀʾishah are difficult to

overlook, and the use of this archetype to create a complex, dramatic, but fiercely loyal

wife is an interesting part of this supposedly pre-Islamic tale. The main difference

between these two characters comes with the ending. Whereas it is generally reported that

ʿĀʾishah died in her sleep after a long life, never remarrying, ʿAblah's end is more

cynical. After ʿAntar dies, she remarries, but cannot stop her tongue. After continuously

comparing her new husband unfavorably to ʿAntar, the new husband, after consultation

with his tribe, has her strangled by his slave girls (12: 38). This is typical of the *sīrah*

narratives: wives, and women more generally, are sometimes quite powerful, but only

within the context of specific relationships. Their power often comes at the forbearance

of their male relatives, without whose protection they often come to grisly ends. Wives

pay for this forbearance with fierce loyalty and often very active defense of their

husbands' affairs. This is one rare instance where it seems that the real world was kinder

to the archetype than to the *sīrah* character, and it is telling that the grisly ending occurs

to a character based on a figure upon whom the Islamic community has never found

consensus. Trusted and beloved, but feared and sometimes hated, the archetype of

ʿĀʾishah never got her comeuppance for her political actions: but in the *sīrah*s, perhaps

the storytellers have found a way to do so abstractly.

In other tales, such beloved wives can also serve as trusted advisors to their

husbands, emphasizing the intellectual rather than emotional influence that wives can

have over their husbands. Again, this is not portrayed as universally negative. In *Sirat al-Ḥākim*, for example, al-Ḥākim's wife Maryam is not only unflinchingly loyal to her husband but also gives him good advice: he is obsessed with treasure hunting in dangerous caves, and she repeatedly objects. His greed causes him to ignore this advice, to his great detriment (Lenora 44, 56). On the negative side, however, some villainesses control their pliant husbands. In *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr*, Jalīlah is the wife of Kulayb, the main hero's brother. She hates al-Zīr and at one point refuses to sleep with her husband unless he kills his brother (*Qiṣṣat al-Zīr* 25). She also uses this stratagem when her husband sends away her own brother, the main villain Jassās: she refuses to sleep with him until he kisses her brother's foot (35). Their relationship becomes so fraught that at one point he says that he would kill her if she were not at that moment carrying his child, proceeding to throw her out of the house in her nightgown instead (43).

There are two wife characters in the tales who have direct historical referents: Zubaydah, wife of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, and Shajar al-Durr herself. Both of these characters experience significant revisions in their stories to more closely match the ethos of romance and adventure required for a *sīrah*.

Because her story is somewhat simpler, let us start with Zubaydah, who appears as a character in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. In the *sīrah* Zubaydah is influential through the combination of her gullibility and her ability to make policy decisions in her husband's court. Her main contributions to the tale are her support for her son Amīn in the battle for succession with his brother Maʾmūn, and her trust in and love for the main villain, ʿUqbah. The battle between Amīn and Maʾmūn is portrayed rather similarly to the

historical accounts in this *sīrah*, in which Amīn is portrayed as unfit to be caliph, but obtains the throne anyway. In the *sīrah*, the tale tells a fable-like version that heavily features Amīn's mother, Zubaydah. In the historical literature, there are many explanations given for this, but Zubaydah does not feature prominently in them. This is shown very clearly in Michael Cooperson's excellent study *Classical Arabic Biography: The Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Maʾmūn*. This extensive comparison of several historical accounts of the succession only mentions Zubaydah's name six times in the entire book, which shows her limited involvement.

In the *sīrah*'s version of the tale, when the princes are still young men, Hārūn and Zubaydah go secretly to watch the princes' behavior at night. They find Muʾtamin praying, Maʾmūn speaking with scholars, Muʿtaṣim drilling with weapons, and Amīn fondling skimpily dressed girls (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 68: 54). When Hārūn sends Amīn a note telling him to behave more seriously, they watch him tear it up, and Hārūn thinks of sending him away. But then, with no reason given besides that Zubaydah has requested it, instead he calls a meeting of the tribes and names Amīn as his heir (pt. 29: 55). After this, Zubaydah is involved in a constant struggle to keep her son on the throne, gathering intelligence on Maʾmūn and even enlisting a kidnapper at one point (pt. 30: 44).

ʿUqbah's *modus operandi* is to fake holiness in whatever religion amongst whose adherents he finds himself and to convince leaders to make chaos-spreading decisions. Despite his proven dissoluteness, time and again his most successful target is Zubaydah. No less than seven times throughout the narrative he convinces her to support his plans,

despite evidence that they never produce good results. For example, she believes his tales of persecution by Dhāt al-Himmah's tribe, weeping as she tells her husband to pursue revenge (pt. 21: 12). At one point she agrees to bear witness against ʿUqbah, saying that she realizes that he is a bad man, but she recants and weeps when he acts piously at his execution, ordering him brought back to his tent under guard (pt. 40: 35). Later, she intercedes with her husband when he is angry with him (pt. 63: 37).

As we can see, Zubaydah embodies Niẓām al-Mulk's warning that king's wives "base their orders on what interested parties tell them," thus causing "disgrace, infamy, discord and corruption" (Hillenbrand 105). But it is important to note that the ʿAbbāsid caliphs are not portrayed in a particularly complimentary light in the *sīrah*, and that Hārūn al-Rashīd himself, along with his successor sons, is shown to make several questionable decisions that lead our pious heroine Dhāt al-Himmah threaten to leave their service on several occasions (pt. 1: 534, pt. 69: 11). Hārūn's son Muʿtaṣim is even rebuked by a holy woman, Saʿīdah, who refuses to kiss the ground before him and reminds him of his mortality before walking out of his presence, calling to mind the historical figure of the Prophet's granddaughter, Zaynab, and her shaming of the Caliph Yazīd (pt. 56: 46). On several occasions when Zubaydah decides against all logic to trust ʿUqbah, the narrators make sure to mention that the Caliph would have made the same decision even without her input (pt. 21: 14, pt. 40: 47). However, even though she is not necessarily portrayed as more gullible or negligent than the men of the court, the men's naïve trust in both Zaynab and their villain of an advisor is portrayed as yet another sign of their own questionable judgment.

The character of Shajar al-Durr in *Sīrat Baybars* also shows significant differences from her treatment by historians. Whereas historians portray her as a power-grabbing temptress, *Sīrat Baybars* has a much more sympathetic view. In one way, the difference is achieved by changing her role from that of sister or wife into mother: she acts as foster-mother to Baybars and helps him out of many scrapes, using her power to benefit the hero. Her role may thus be classified as "power-with." The other way in which she is cast in a kinder light is by both turning Aybak into a major villain of the tale and making her association with him obligatory because of her bond with her first husband, al-Ṣāliḥ. On his deathbed he tells her that she must marry again, and she sees him saying so again in a dream as she is about to refuse Aybak's proposal (*Sīrat Baybars* 2: 966, 1003). The narrative does indeed have a scene in which she tries to rule on her own, based on her own royal blood, but fails. The description is very matter-of-fact: the only judgment passed is that of the king in Mecca who refuses her petition for legitimacy, judging that "women can never have power over men in the lands of Islam—this is a custom of the unbelievers!" (2: 1000). In the end, she agrees to Aybak's marriage proposal, but has her new husband beaten by her most frighteningly large female servant when he defies her wish to see her foster son whenever she chooses (2: 1006-1007). Here again we see the focus on her motherhood: whereas the historians say that she objected to her new husband making policy decisions and marrying other women, here her ire has a more acceptable "lioness protecting her cub" angle. Later, when Aybak insults her again, she has a vision of her first husband telling her to avenge her honor, thus giving her a male authority, and supernatural intervention, to justify her actions. She kills Aybak with

a sword, at which point his son attacks her and she falls to her death from a window (2: 1073). The differences in this particular part of the narrative are very interesting: Shajar al-Durr marries Aybak for personal reasons, not political, and she murders him herself, as a righteous and perhaps divinely-inspired act, rather than having him killed indirectly. These changes turn Shajar al-Durr into a devoted, passionate wife and mother, and a noble ruler, instead of a driven and savvy political player. In the world of the *sīrah*s, murder and marital disloyalty are more acceptable than a woman's actual desire to rule and hold power for herself.

Conclusions

As we can see from these various explorations into the historical, religious, and narrative portrayals of sexually available women in the Islamic Middle Period, their potential to exercise their will over men, either physically or intellectually, causes male writers to consider them a threat by default. However, the situation is not really so simple. Historians frequently accept women wielding political power without comment, for example, so long as they rule in a way that they consider just, and, most importantly, leave a place for their male relatives as the face of their rule. In elite literature, concubines are portrayed as often more intelligent than the men around them; since their dangerous sexual aggressiveness is instilled in them from childhood, they are thus not at fault. In the *sīrah*s themselves, virgins, wives, and widows all have both negative and positive exemplars, the deciding factor being whether they use their potential power *over* men in order to benefit the community, in which case it is transformed into power-*with*, that being considered the ideal place for women. However, if these women persist in their

activities, they are punished with a grisly death. In theory, then, there does seem to be a preoccupation with Weber's idea that sexually available women "will be in a position to carry out his [in this case, her] own will despite resistance" (53). Even so, there is still a charted path to social good for these powerful women, one that does not necessarily entail giving up their influence and talents in favor of letting men carry out their will over them instead, in other words a reversal of the power dynamic. Rather, their talents in and of themselves (intelligence, physical strength, or even magical/occult abilities) are all seen as potentially beneficial, whether they are bestowed by God upon men or women (and in the *sīrah*s, men are not portrayed as receiving these traits any more frequently than women). But in the rough and tumble world of the *sīrah*s, social structures are considered essential: so long as these strong women use their talents within those structures, they are celebrated. But breaking those structures causes *fitnah*, which, while usually reversible, requires punishment in the moral universe of these popular tales.

Power-to: Daughters and Sisters

An alternate theory of power, related to, but often framed in opposition to, the "power-over" camp, can be described as "power-to." Proponents of this theory include Hanna Pitkin, who claims that, "power is a something—anything—which makes or renders somebody able to do, capable of doing something. Power is capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal" (276). Thus, this theory is less oppositional, and less interpersonal, than that of those scholars who specify that power is the ability to cause *other people* to do what one wishes *against their will*. Those who claim that power-over is the only form of power may acknowledge this theory, but believe that the only real way to achieve the "capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal" of which Pitkin speaks is to force others to do it against their will. For example, Steven Lukes argues that the definition of power as mere capacity obscures "the conflictual aspect of power—the fact that it is exercised over people" (31) In the *sīrah*s, however, there are situations where female power is portrayed as harmless, or even helpful to society. For the most part, this occurs when female characters wish to live an unconventional lifestyle, most often as warriors, but sometimes as rulers or other traditionally male roles. As a rule, these ambitions are condoned only if these women meet two requirements: they have innate "god-given" talents that are considered unusual, and they also maintain certain key family ties and functions that order the societies portrayed in these narratives.

The characters who most exemplify this definition of power are those whose main relationships to powerful male characters are as sisters and daughters, the first

relationships, besides one's mother, explicitly defined as nonsexual in the Qurʾān. As described in the introduction, the *Sūrat al-Nisāʾ* begins, "Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters…" (*The Qurʾān* 4: 23). The rest of the relationships listed in the *sūrah* are extensions of these relationships: mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, aunts, nieces, nephews, and milk siblings, so the basic categories remain the same. Sisters and daughters in the *sīrah*s leverage their close relationships with male relatives to gain greater independence and the ability to live non-traditional lifestyles. In a way, "power-to" is an intermediary stage between "power-over" and "power-with"; a waiting period before the characters' actions are judged. Sometimes, especially when sisters and daughters act as reasonable advisors to their hot-headed male relatives, the narrators eventually deem their influence positive, as "power-with," because it serves the interests of the community. At other times, if their unconventional lifestyles begin to cause *fitnah* in their communities, or if they use violence or sexuality to gain influence rather than their family ties, they are judged negatively, as exercising "power over." The defining characteristic of "power-to" is that it is temporary, a period in which female characters are allowed to be unconventionally influential in expectation of eventual benefit to the community. They receive this benefit of the doubt because of their close, expressly non-sexual ties to powerful male family members. Finally, what is perhaps most interesting about sister and daughter characters is the ways in which they differ from their portrayals in Arab mythology and literature.

Daughters and sisters in historical, legal, and *adab* literature

<u>Daughters</u>

The fact that there is a controversy in Islamic thought over how many daughters the Prophet had suggests that this relationship was not considered to be as important as his other, more closely scrutinized, relationships. Sunnī Muslims claim he had four daughters, while Shīʿī Muslims believe Fāṭimah to be his only child by blood, thus making her descendants the Prophet's only legitimate heirs. Regardless of all this, however, the Prophet's closeness to and obvious high valuation of his daughter Fāṭimah, as well as his statements on the benefits and joys of daughters, are portrayed in Muslim sources as a break with the pre-Islamic treatment of women, in which they were seen as a burden, sometimes exposed to the elements at birth. This specific practice is explicitly mentioned in the Qurʾān and is labeled murder, marking the beginning of the Prophet's ongoing campaign to protect female children in his community. For example he is said to have promised anyone who raised three daughters well a place in paradise beside him (al-Tirmidhī 4.1.1912). The Qurʾān also stresses the need to care for orphans and treat them fairly, specifically mentioning orphan girls (4:3).

In terms of what the Prophet's family can tell us about how daughters are supposed to behave, the example of Fāṭimah is the most representative. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Fāṭimah was sometimes portrayed as more of a mother to Muḥammad than a daughter, adopting the *kunya*, or motherly honorific, "*Umm Abīhā*," meaning "mother of her father" (Kueny 104). This was part of a larger trend: as Delia Cortese and Simonetta Calderini explain in their book, *Women and the Fatimids in the*

World of Islam, Shī'ī thought lays special stress on Fāṭimah's role as ideal daughter, wife,

and mother, making her the perfect overall woman:

> Besides epitomizing the role of the devout and obedient daughter of the Prophet, the one who nurtured him during his illness and eventual death, and who died, distraught, only a few months after her father, Fatima also embodies the role of the suffering wife of 'Ali b. Abi Talib, who strives to make ends meet, and of the mother who has premonitions about the tragic fate of her two sons. (6)

Interestingly enough, Cortese and Calderini also mention that the ideology of the

Fāṭimids (909-1171 CE), the first successful Shī'ī dynasty, also emphasized a story about

Fāṭimah fighting for her inheritance rights as a daughter of the Prophet. She claimed that,

before his death, her father left her an oasis (named Fadak) as her inheritance. Abū Bakr,

who by then was competing with Fāṭimah's husband 'Ālī for leadership of the Prophet's

community, "firmly dismissed Fatima's claims, arguing that a prophet cannot leave

inheritance" (Cortese and Calderini 8). Fāṭimah did not stop there, however, but delivered

a sermon (*khuṭbah*) quoting her father and the Qurʾān about other prophets who left

inheritances, and calling on the community's respect for her father and herself to reverse

the decision. While her plea was unsuccessful, this story still provides the basis for both

the enhanced inheritance laws of the Fāṭimids that I will discuss below and, as Cortese

and Calderini claim, for the failure of Shī'ī sources to uncompromisingly condemn the

political activities of women, despite their disdain for 'Āʾishah's "interference" in public

life after her husband's death (29, 106).

In terms of later examples, we have strikingly little information about the raising

and education of girls in the Middle Periods. What knowledge we have is generally from

legal literature and relates to disputes based upon family law: custody, inheritance, and

marriage. We can also piece together some information on emotional attachment and

education from the admonitions of Islamic authorities. We can infer, for example, from

the sustained efforts of Islamic leaders and legal scholars from the Qurʾān onward to

thwart the practice, that the wider society continued to celebrate the birth of boys more

than that of girls. As described by Avner Giladi, who has studied the concept of

childhood in medieval Islam, religious authorities continually fought against this:

> The tribal-patriarchal sentiment Islam had to balance, as it were, by a morality
> based on a total submission to God and his decrees, the sanctification of human
> life, on showing mercy and taking care of the weak and on having contempt for
> the tribal admiration of strength gained through wealth and a large number of
> male warriors. ("Gender Differences" 295)

Islamic scholars from the Prophet onward stressed the advantages of daughters, such as

their supposed "sincerity, love, care, and helpfulness," with all the expected references to

the Prophet's daughter Fāṭimah (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 296).

However, this scholarly care for female children did not always extend to their

education. Frequent conservative commentaries, such as Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī's *al-

Mughnī* (still regarded as the main work of *fiqh* for the Ḥanbalī school of Islamic law),

and Ibn al-Jawzī's *Kitāb aḥkām al-nisāʾ*, claimed that girls should remain at home and

learn domestic and religious skills from their parents, and warned about the dangers of

coeducation (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 301). Ibn al-Jawzī emphasized the need to

educate girls in the requirements of religion, but instructed teachers only to take on

female students "if they do not have a father, or a brother, or a husband, or a guardian"

(*fa-in lam yakun lahā ʾab, ʾaw ʾakh, ʾaw zawj, ʾaw maḥram*) to teach them instead (137).

Of course, what we immediately learn from these condemnations is that girls must have

sometimes attended institutions of elementary education, or else the condemnations

would not have been necessary. Several illustrations from the fifteenth century offer

further proof of this: Giladi mentions a miniature painting that shows a teacher with his disciples, some of whom are female, and a folio from the Mughal *Khamsa of Nizāmī* held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York shows the famous lovers, Majnūn and Laylah, meeting for the first time at their mosque school (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 301n52; Baisunghuri 2018).

Dire warnings about upsets in the social order that occur when girls are taught to read and write suggest that this, too, was something that at least occasionally took place (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 302). In the eleventh century, for example, the Persian prince Kay Kāʾūs ibn Qābūs, advised his son to hand over his daughter to chaste nurses, and then later to assign a female teacher to instruct her how to pray and fast. Nonetheless, he made sure to emphasize, "Do not teach her to write!" (Walther 78). In addition, some handbooks for market inspectors, known as *ḥisbah* manuals, mention guidelines for elementary religious schools intended for girls and presided over by female teachers (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 301). Although it may not be applicable to society at large, there is extensive evidence that courtly women could read and write. Al-Jāḥiẓ's *Epistle on Singing Girls*, discussed in the last chapter, casually mentions on several occasions the love letters that these women would write to men (al-Jāḥiẓ 21, 32). Tāj al-Dīn ʿAlī ibn Anjab ibn al-Sāʿī (d. 674/1276), in his famous work on courtly women entitled *Nisāʾ al-Khulafāʾ*, includes an illuminating anecdote about a slave concubine of the ʿAbbāsid Caliph al-Mutawakkil. This slave woman, named Faḍl, was known as one of the greatest poets and wits of her time, but was also known for her written works:

> Few in God's creation could match Faḍl the Poetess in elegance of handwriting, clarity of style, eloquence of expression, and in her ability to turn a phrase.
>
> One day I said to Saʿīd ibn Ḥumayd, 'I think you've been writing Faḍl's letters for her. Not to mention tutoring her and giving her tips on composition. That's why she sounds like you!'
>
> 'A nice thought!' he replied with a laugh. 'If only she were getting it from me. No, in fact, I'm the one who's been imitating her style, and cribbing from her letters." (Ibn al-Sāʿī 71)

As we can see, the narrator is not surprised that Faḍl was writing letters: rather, he has a difficult time believing that her refined style came from her own talent rather than that of a famous male poet like Ibn Ḥumayd. As a final example of women writing, there are many accounts of female calligraphers (*khaṭṭāṭāt*) who copied beautiful Qurʾāns and were sometimes entrusted with scribal work (Guthrie 176-177).

The education of girls seems to have been largely linked to their fathers: the vast majority of the educated women listed in biographical dictionaries of the Middle Ages (al-Sakhāwī's biographical dictionary contains 411 explicitly educated women) were the daughters of scholarly men, and studied with their fathers as well as with scholars of his acquaintance (Berkey, "Women in Islamic Education" 146-47). This is significant for several reasons, one being that several scholars have attributed the efflorescence of female scholarship in the Mamlūk period to the revision of the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾishah's reputation, discussed in the last chapter, in which she becomes a symbol of Sunnī communal memory and an exemplar of pious women. However, it is fathers who are most often mentioned as the benefactors involved in their daughters' education rather than the women's husbands, despite the fact that the revision of ʿĀʾishah's reputation involved her activities as a wife, not as a daughter. It appears that, despite any newfound

acceptance of female education, it was easier to justify if the relationship of educator to

educated was decidedly non-sexual in nature, an attitude that was perhaps due to a fear of

the "power-to" of scholarly women becoming "power over" their husbands.

In one extraordinary example from al-Sakhāwī's *Kitāb al-Nisāʾ*, we have the

famous female scholar, Umm Hānī, who was brought up by her maternal grandfather. He

took her to hear *hadīth* recited by important experts in Mecca and, al-Sakhāwī says,

"presumably taught her the rest of the Six Books, and also Nāshawīrī's version of the

Saḥīḥ of Bukhārī," since she had become so knowledgeable as an adult. In fact, he says,

"As for me, everything I learned from her teachers came through her. Yet still I believe

that she knew more than I was able to learn" (Al-Sakhāwī 157). It is notable that, in the

absence of any direct knowledge of her education, al-Sakhāwī automatically assumes her

father figure to have been the source, showing the prevalence of women becoming

educated through the efforts of their fathers. Al-Sakhāwī does mention Umm Hānī's

husbands (she was married several times), and her four sons, one for each of the schools

of Islamic jurisprudence. The only editorial note that our biographer inserts is about her

second husband, to whom she was married when her beloved grandfather died. As al-

Sakhāwī puts it,

> Her husband seized her inheritance and spent it freely (*taṣarrafa fīhā mā shāʾ*),
> but then he died and she inherited everything. With the money she bought the
> great workshop, famous for its large size and many spinning wheels, known as
> Inshāʾa al-Akram near Birkat al-Fīl. (Al-Sakhāwī 156)

The note of disapproval here is difficult to miss: while Umm Hānī's profligate husband

"spent freely" when he got his hands on her inheritance, our scholar herself invests in a

large factory, certainly a more prudent use of the money. We can also guess from this

statement that it was most likely Umm Hānī herself, rather than her husbands, who took responsibility for educating their scholarly sons.

As an earlier example of daughters learning from their fathers, we can cite an anecdote from al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's (d. 463/1071) *Tāʾrīkh Baghdād*, one of the earliest examples of the biographical dictionary genre. One of the women upon whom he focuses is named Amat al-Wāḥid (aka Sutaytah) (d. 377/988), who was the daughter of the judge, Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥusayn al-Maḥāmilī. Al-Baghdādī tells us that she used to give legal decisions, or *fatwā*s, in cooperation with Abū ʿAlī b. Abū Hurayrah, a singular distinction for a woman (al-Baghdādī XIV:442). He adds that she studied with her father, as well as other luminaries in the field of Shāfiʿī jurisprudence, and also transmitted *ḥadīth* (al-Baghdādi XIV: 443). For a woman to be considered a *muftī* was no small accomplishment, but it seems that Sutaytah's native intelligence, along with the connections and care of her father, allowed her to live the unconventional life of a female scholar in the early days of Islam.

Regarding emotional attachments shared by fathers and daughters, Avner Giladi has examined a genre of literature called *taʿāzī* (consolation), treatises written for the many parents who suffered from the loss of their children during the late medieval period. The intense grief and emptiness revealed by these works suggests that, at least in the Islamic world, Phillipe Aries' idea that high rates of child mortality bred indifference toward children certainly does not hold true (Giladi, "Gender Differences" 305). Though these treatises are mostly aimed at fathers who have lost their sons, many refer to daughters as well, especially in a book of consolation written by al-Sakhāwī himself (the

same scholar who wrote the *Kitāb al-Nisāʾ*), entitled *Irtiyāḥ al-akbād*, in which he makes

sure to indicate that all of his consolations should be interpreted for the loss of a child of

either sex.[25]

Regardless of affections, however, treatment was far from equal, even in the letter

of the law. One more obvious case was that of marriage. In most schools of Islamic law,

ḥiḍānah, the mother's right to custody of a child, ended at around age seven for boys and

at pre-puberty, usually about the age of nine, for girls (Giladi, "Concepts of Childhood"

150-151). Despite nearly unanimous legal opinions that marriage during the period of

ḥiḍānah was reprehensible, it seems that such marriages were fairly common (Giladi,

"Gender Differences" 303). However, even if a girl made it to physical maturity before

marriage, it was recommended that a marriage be contracted as soon as possible after that

date. At that point, she legally became a member of her husband's household and, though

she often maintained ties with her own family, they were often unable to help her in any

disputes that arose in her new situation.

Concerning inheritance, practice varied throughout the period, but, in this case as

well, daughters and sons were far from equal. The Qurʾānic injunction states that

daughters should get half of what their brothers receive as inheritance upon their father's

death. However, other practices seem aimed at increasing this amount, such as

bequeathing daughters property instead of currency during the Ayyūbid period, or the

disposition of trousseaux and dowries during the Mamlūk Period, which were given to a

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[25] For more on this, see Giladi's 1993 article "'The child was small…not so the grief for him': Sources, Structure, and Content of al-Sakhawi's Consolation Treatise for Bereaved Parents."

woman upon her marriage and considered as her exclusive property even through

widowhood or divorce (Rapoport, "Women and Gender" 17-18). In Fāṭimid Cairo, laws

supplementing the inheritance prescribed by the Qurʾan were passed, justified by stories

of Fāṭimah and her insistence upon her rightful inheritance of the Fadak oasis from her

father (Cortese and Calderini 29). Though these practices varied by time and place, there

does seem to have been a recurring effort in the later medieval period to leave daughters

more than the letter of the law required.

<u>Sisters</u>

Several scholars of Arabic myth and literature have argued that the brother-sister

relationship is the most important connection in the "Arab psyche." Geert Van Gelder, in

his work on incest and inbreeding in classical Arabic literature, claims that poetic laments

by sisters are so emotional that they sound like laments composed by lovers, though he

also admits that mentions of actual incest are scarce in any form of Arabic literature

(128). As we shall see later in this chapter, this lack of reference to incest does not

necessarily hold true in the *sīrah* literature, but all mentions of incest are negative or at

least require some explanation of "that is how it was done in those days." One prominent

example of the laments to which Van Gelder refers is the famous female poet, al-Khansāʾ

(d. after 630), whose elegies for her brothers are legendary in their grief. Take, for

example, this lament for her brother Sakhr:

> The rising and setting of the sun keep turning on my memory of Sakhr's death.
>
> And if it were not for everyone around me crying for their brothers, I might have killed myself. (al-Khansāʾ 61)

In reference to folklore, Van Gelder, as well as the prominent feminist scholar, Fedwa

Malti-Douglas, also ascribe an incestuous motivation to this relationship by comparing it

to Freud's Oedipus Complex (Malti-Douglas 74; Van Gelder 128). However, both have

adapted this idea from the noted Arab folklorist, Hasan El-Shamy, who explicitly denies

a connection to incest. He has described his "Brother-Sister Syndrome" theory as

follows:

> Within the nuclear family the Brother-Sister syndrome is manifested through
> brother-sister love, brother-brother hostility, sister-sister hostility, parents-
> children hostility, and husband-wife unaffectionate relations… for an adult, it is
> affection (kindness, sympathy), and togetherness in life, *not* incestuous impulses,
> that are the dominant facets of the Brother-Sister Syndrome." (El-Shamy, *Tales
> Arab Women Tell* 3, 18)

As he explains it, this intense bond is created because, "according to the codes of

honor—religious and otherwise, strict rules of separation between the sexes are observed

among traditionary groups. Yet, maximum exposure is allowed among siblings" (El-

Shamy, "The Brother-Sister Syndrome" 319). This is indeed something that can be seen

in the *sīrah*s. Assumed to be non-sexual, but intensely emotionally close, brother-sister

relationships can shape many of the narratives.

On the topic of access to power through the bonds of sisterhood in Islamic

history, the most powerful historical example is Sitt al-Mulk, the Fāṭimid queen who

ruled briefly upon the death of her half-brother, al-Ḥākim, after acting as his most trusted

advisor for years. In truth, Sitt al-Mulk's great success as a political figure is due to her

familial relationships on several different fronts: she was doted upon by her father, given

her own palace across from the main royal residence and her own loyal staff and military

squadron, and acted as regent for her nephew, al-Ẓāhir, for over 20 years, until her death

(Cortese and Calderini 117-118). However, she could not have risen so far without the trust and affection of her brother. Their relationship at first was said to be rocky: in a court torn by ethnic tension, she and her brother were on opposite sides. Al-Ḥākim's guardian Barjawān blamed Sitt al-Mulk for a failed coup against his master soon after he assumed power. But when Barjawān was killed, "within two years she became a trusted advisor to al-Ḥākim, who 'was consulting her in the affairs [of the 'state] (*kāna yushāwiru-hā fī 'l-umūr*), acted according to her opinion, and did not oppose her advice" (Cortese and Calderini 121). However, over the next decade, as her brother's behavior became more and more erratic, their relationship degraded, and Sitt al-Mulk decided to give refuge to his abused wife and child in her palace. Soon thereafter, al-Ḥākim "disappeared," and several historians blame his sister for a conspiracy leading to his murder.[26] She acted as regent for al-Ḥākim's son until her death, making many reforms that were welcomed by her subjects. Nonetheless, as noted by Cortese and Calderini in their description of women in the Fāṭimid Dynasty, even though she was a widely respected and successful political player, "it is to her reputation as a possible fratricidal murderer that she ultimately owes her fame" (123). In the real world, as opposed to the world of the *sīrah*, service to the Muslim community does not always assure a friendly portrayal.[27]

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[26] Others among al-Ḥākim's friends and followers never believed that he died. Muḥammad al-Darazī, one of his advisors, went on to found the Druze sect, which teaches al-Ḥākim's occultation rather than death. For more on this sect, still in existence today, see Phillip K. Hitti's classic study, *The Origins of the Druze People and Religion: With Extracts from Their Sacred Writings.*

[27] The enduring appeal of this story can be seen in Bensalem Himmich's 1989 novel *Majnūn al-Ḥukm*, which emphasizes Sitt al-Mulk's role in al-Ḥākim's assassination after he threatens her personally. It makes

Medieval Muslim historians' accounts of early Islam include portraits of sisterly influence and power that come closer to those of the *sīrah*s' vigorous warrior women. For example, the historian Ibn al-Athīr (d. 630/1233) reports several martial women who were sisters of prominent men. He says that Umm ʿĪsā and Lubāba, the two sisters of the ʿAbbāsid revolutionary general Sālih b. ʿAlī, promised to wage holy war if the Umayyad dynasty came to end. As such, they joined him in the campaign into Byzantine territory in the year 756 CE. Another case is that of Laylá bint Ṭarīf, sister of the Khārijite leader, al-Walīd ibn Ṭarīf. In a tale that could come straight out of one of our *sīrah*s, Ibn al-Athīr describes how, when the Caliph Yazīd sent an army against her brother, she accompanied him into battle, armored and armed. When she was recognized, the leader of the Caliph's army warned her that she was bringing shame on her family. She was told in no uncertain terms that she should go home and leave the fighting to her brother. Laylá is described as feeling ashamed and immediately following this advice (Kruk, *Warrior Women* 19). A final example of this dynamic is the Imām ʿAlī's daughter, Zaynab, granddaughter of the Prophet and sister of the Shīʿī martyrs, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Zaynab's famous sermon was mentioned in an earlier chapter to illustrate the authority expressed by older women in early Islam. One particular aspect of Zaynab's story is pertinent to this chapter: by all accounts, both Sunnī and Shīʿī, she left her husband in order to follow her brother into his doomed battle at Karbalāʾ. Accounts diverge as to whether she asked her husband's permission for this trip. Sunnī sources do not raise the issue, thus privileging the strength

a very political issue into a personal one; still, in the twentieth century, male authors betray their discomfort with female political ambitions.

of her sisterly bond in making the decision.[28] Shīʿī sources, on the other hand, often go to

great lengths in describing Zaynab's tearful pleas to her husband, and claim that, after the

captivity imposed upon her by the Caliph Yāzīd after the battle of Karbalā', she returned

to her husband, only for him to die shortly thereafter.[29] Nonetheless, they do not deny that

she left her husband behind to follow her brother, suggesting that the the brother-sister

bond is stronger than the bond between husband and wife. It should be noted that Shīʿī

sources regularly emphasize the extraordinary familial bonds of Muḥammad's

descendants, since it supports their argument for a coherent and exemplary line of

succession from the Prophet. These descriptions of Zaynab's preference for her natal over

her conjugal family thus serve a political as well as anecdotal purpose, and should not be

taken as representative of sister-brother relationships on the whole. However, as we shall

see below, brother-sister loyalty in the *sīrah*s is sometimes used in much the same way,

and to much the same effect, namely to emphasize the importance of bloodlines in the

loyalties and personalities of its characters.

I would like to touch upon one final category of women who achieved "power-to"

by leveraging their connections to their brothers in medieval Islamic history. These

women go by many names: they could be called saints or Sūfī mystics, but I prefer the

term ascetics. They mostly subscribed to Sūfism's mystical spiritual philosophy, and

some were buried in elaborate tombs that were regularly visited by those who venerated

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[28] See, for example, Henri Lammens. *Fāṭima et les filles de Mahomet; notes critiques pour l'etude de la Sira*, 124.

[29] An example of the lasting appeal of this interpretation can be seen in the popular modern Shīʿī biographies written about her in Iran, like Muna Heari Bilgrami's *The Victory of Truth: The Life of Zaynab bint Ali*, abd Badr Shahin's *Lady Zaynab*.

their actions. But what defined their unconventional lifestyles was their asceticism. In the

previous chapter we discussed older ascetics in connection with modesty rules, quoting

some scholars disapproving of older ascetic women remaining unveiled. But there are

other examples of women who shunned the accepted roles for women in their society by

pursuing scholarship instead of relying upon their husbands, and sometimes refusing to

marry at all. The descriptions of these women rarely mention their families, since, like

their male counterparts, the women tend to renounce them. However, when their family

ties are mentioned, it is almost always their relationships with their brothers. For

example, the aforementioned al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's *Tāʾrīkh Baghdād* includes several

female ascetics among its scholars. A few anecdotes can serve to illustrate this. First, he

describes Maymūnah:

> Maymūnah was the half-sister of Ibrāhīm b. Aḥmad al-Khawwāṣ, a mystic of
> extreme piety, who died in Rayy either in 284 or 291 A.H… she patterned her life
> as closely as possible after that of her brother, and several important Ṣūfīs wrote
> about her in their work. (Rahmatallah 38).

Another anecdote concerns the two sisters of a Persian mystic, emphasizing both the

closeness of their relationship and the sisters' unconventional, but here uncondemned,

actions:

> Maḍghah, Muḥḥad and Zubdah were the sisters of Bishr al-Ḥārith…when
> Maḍghah, the eldest, died, her brother was so affected that he cried bitterly. When
> asked to explain this excess of emotion, he answered, 'I read in many books that,
> if a servant of the Lord does not live up to God's expectations, God takes from
> him his dearest delight, and, of the world, my sister was my one delight.'… [the
> sisters] often confounded Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal with their questions… [in one such
> situation] Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal said 'She must be one of [Bishr's] sisters, for no one
> else would ask such questions.' (Rahmatallah 40-41)

In this example, as in the others above, intelligent and assertive sisters are able to emulate

their brothers without reproach, leveraging the close emotional, but necessarily non-

sexual, relationships that they share with them to gain access to the world dominated by the brothers' friends and colleagues. It is notable that Ibn Ḥanbal specifically refers to the women's brother in attempting to explain their unconventional conduct, thus justifying their actions through this connection. This is an explicit representation of the "power-to" granted by the sister-brother relationship: Ibn Ḥanbal is flustered by the women's behavior, but withholds negative judgment by conflating them with their brother's scholarly identity.

Thus, we can see that, in historiographical and biographical literature, women are sometimes allowed to exercise intellectual or esoteric authority over men without condemnation, so long as it never hints at physical authority or manipulation. The writers demonstrate this lack of threat by emphasizing these women's close connections to either their fathers or brothers: the assumed purity of these relationships allow for women to live the unconventional lifestyles of scholars or even sometimes of warriors.

Daughters and sisters in the *sīrah*s

In the *sīrah*s, the characters of daughters and sisters are constructed in roughly the same way as in the historical literature, representing the purest example of "power-to" in the narratives. Their closeness to powerful male relatives, uncorrupted by any threats of sexual or real physical domination, allow them to pursue unconventional lifestyles in the expectation of future benefit to the community, or "power-with." Of course, should this expectation remain unfulfilled, condemnation for exercising "power-over" awaits.

<u>Daughters</u>

In the *sīrah*s, a female's status as a daughter generally comes into play in three circumstances: when she is a candidate for marriage, when she betrays her family, and when she is the daughter of a hero or villain. In extraordinary circumstances, when the female character is a hero in her own right, her familial relationships are treated more similarly to those of other male heroes than to those of her fellow female characters. In general, father-daughter relationships in the *sīrah*s seem to attract far less conflict than father-son relationships. Whereas the abandonment of sons by their fathers seems to turn the sons into heroes, there is not the same effect for most female characters, unless they themselves are destined to become heroes. Male characters are often placed in the position of challenging their fathers; suspicion and competition seems to be the assumed state of the relationship. By contrast the relationship between fathers and daughters is portrayed as simpler and more pure, since in all but the most unusual cases a daughter will never challenge her father's position or power (though we shall examine one of these rare examples below).

At the same time, the father-daughter relationship is often shown to be close. In a world of constant warfare and raids, daughters are often kidnapped, and fathers will do anything to get them back, from starting wars to striking out on their own to find them (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 23: 64). These storylines also play into the romances: most often in these cases the hero saves the damsel and wins her hand in marriage as his reward. Even when their daughters plot against them, fathers are almost always willing to forgive. As we will see however, the same cannot always be said of daughters toward

their fathers. The *sīrah*s seem ambivalent about what makes a "good daughter." Obedience, devotion, and deference are obviously lauded, but, if a father betrays Islamic virtues or denies a daughter's wish to marry the man whom the story intends, then her ability to betray her father is praised even more strongly. A daughter's choices in these circumstances can change the course of a battle, or even of an entire *sīrah*. In such circumstances loyalty to the common cause of the Muslim community, as a power-with scenario, is the ultimate arbiter of a good or bad outcome.

The most common portrayal of daughters, and also the most common portrayal of women more generally in the *sīrah*s, is when she is described as a marriage candidate for one of the major or minor heroes. The circumstances in which they become marriage candidates may be purely mercenary: examples of fathers using the opportunity afforded by their daughters' marriages as a bargaining chip in negotiations, treaties, or to win the loyalty of a strong hero, occur on nearly every page of the tales. This is particularly interesting because of the widespread belief discussed in the introduction that throughout time endogamous marriages have been the most common in the Middle East: though these tales do contain stories of star-crossed cousins, the vast majority of the contracted marriages are exogamous.

For most of these transactions, the opinion of the woman seems to be neither sought nor heeded. These women tend to disappear from the narrative soon after they are bartered, seamlessly integrated into the tribe with little consequence while the men continue their wars and quests. But sometimes, the women insert themselves into the narrative by refusing the match or by arranging marriages on their own initiative. Though

it is agreed by nearly all Islamic legal schools that a woman has the right to refuse a

marriage, in the *sīrah*s these women sometimes must resort to extreme measures in order

to assert this right, often braving death, either by defying threats or by threatening

suicide. In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, for example, Salmā, the daughter of the chieftain of

Ṭayy, is twice threatened with death by her father if she refuses to marry a man in

exchange for a spectacular horse (pt. 1, 65-67, 77). In *Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh*, both the

heroine ʿAyn al-Ḥayāt and the Damascene princess Kalīlah promise to kill themselves

rather than marry the dimwitted and repulsive men whom their fathers have chosen for

them (2: 10-11, 3: 63). Instead both end up married to the heroes whom they themselves

choose. By leveraging their fathers' emotional care for them with threats of physical

violence against themselves, these two women manage to gain the power to choose their

own husbands.

However, not all marital transactions are so expedient, or so unromantic. As much

as marriage is often portrayed as a political institution, the *sīrah*s are often called

"popular romances" for a reason. As mentioned in the last chapter, love in the *sīrah*s is a

chaste, idealized state into which heroes and heroines fall in love at first "sight" (whether

through a picture, a description, a dream, or through a chance encounter), pine for one

another, and overcome many obstacles set in their way before they are married in a lavish

ceremony. The first set of such obstacles are usually caused by the girl's father. The

"princess locked in a tower" motif, in which a father locks his daughter away in order to

protect her, is common. Shams al-Ḍuḥā, a foreign princess in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, has to

meet her heroic lover secretly because her father is too fond of her to accept the proposals

of her many suitors (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl al-Kubrá* 651). In the same narrative, the brave

princess Suʿdā falls in love with a description of a hero and complains to her maid that,

out of love, her father has built her a castle but will not let her leave or marry anyone

(*Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* 27-28). This trope is also common in the *sīrah* of the oft-married

Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan. For example, Rawḍah, daughter of al-Rawḍ, the king of a

civilization of giants, sends his daughter to a deserted island and starts wars by refusing

so many suitors (*Sīrat Sayf* 4: 7). In a rather more touching scene, the father of Nafīsat al-

Durr refuses Sayf's suit because he cannot bear to be parted from his daughter. He only

agrees when he hears of the splendid palace and sumptuous lifestyle that the suitor

intends to provide for his bride (3: 225).

At times there is an incestuous leaning to a father's affections. For example, in

Sīrat ʿAntar, the Persian ruler Sharwīn is described as falling in love with his own

daughter (*Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 11: 63). In *Sīrat Baybars*, the king of China kills his daughter

because she refuses to marry him (5: 2823). In *Sīrat Iskandar*, the great ancient Persian

king Bahman marries his daughter Humānī, since, as the *sīrah* states simply, "this was

permissible at the time" (Doufikar-Aerts 283). Most of these instances refer to Persian

kings, most likely hearkening back to the popular medieval Arab perception that Persians

engaged in father-daughter incest. Though attested to in early Zoroastrian sources, it

seems that this was only ever practiced in the upper echelons of society during the

Sasanian period, directly before the coming of Islam, and that it completely disappeared

after the Muslim conquest (Van Gelder 38). Nonetheless, as Geert Van Gelder puts it in

his book, *Close Relationships*, "since in the Islamic period the term *majūs* was used

indiscriminately for all adherents of Zoroastrianism, the custom was seen by the Arabs as an abomination of the Persians in general" (37). However it is notable that in the *sīrahs* the daughters of these incestuous kings are never interested in the union themselves, and in fact often violently protest their fathers' desires. As just mentioned, in at least one case this leads to the girl's death. More often, it is intended to prove the purity and innate knowledge of the "truth" of Islamic strictures that is required in order to eventually become the wife of a Muslim or proto-Muslim hero. In this expression of power-to, unlike women gaining respect by associating with their relatives' good names, women defy their filial loyalties because of their fathers' evil qualities and/or desires. So long as they eventually use the defiance in the service of the Muslim community, their actions are judged to be "power-with" in the end.

Finally, even when a girl's father has agreed to a marriage, he often sends the potential bridegroom on marriage quests. These are usually near-impossible tasks that are intended to kill the hero, but of course it never turns out that way. Marriage quests drive a large portion of the plots of these tales, and the need for a bridegroom to prove himself worthy to his future father-in-law privileges the father-daughter relationship in importance.

This brings us to daughters who betray their fathers. Because women who marry heroes must be pure and pious, although their actual religion is less important, the majority of women who betray their fathers do so because their fathers are evil, will not convert to Islam, or will not allow their daughters to marry the patently worthy heroes whom they have chosen. Even in non-incestuous cases, a girl prevented from marrying

by her father often comes up with creative, bold, and sometimes violent ways of circumventing her restrictions and falling into the arms of her beloved. For example, the villain Rūmān in *Sīrat Sayf* can only be killed by an enchanted sword. Rūmān's daughter helps Sayf obtain this sword, because she is in love with her first cousin, a match that Christianity, unlike Sayf's proto-Islam, will not permit (4: 266). In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, the princess Zanānīr kills eleven of her father's men when they try to keep her from leaving her father's city with her beloved hero (pt. 56: 61). This enterprising princess goes even further in securing her own interests: she tells Dhāt al-Himmah that the Muslims can have her father's wealth, but that her own possessions must remain with her in exchange for her assistance in taking the city (pt. 56: 12).

Other examples of the trope of women disobeying their fathers in order to pursue men can be found in *Sīrat Baybars*, within which a lengthy cycle revolves around the hero ʿArnūs' acquisition of a truly astounding number of wives, many of whom pursue him instead of the other way around, and, in the cases of several of them, despite the disapproval of their fathers (3: 1800, 1620). In a typical example of this story arc, the daughter of king Falaq of Bashqāṭ falls in love with a picture of ʿArnūs and marries him in secret, which causes a war between her father and her former suitors (3: 1970). Another Christian princess also marries ʿArnūs secretly, but the two are discovered by her father and he imprisons them, necessitating a rescue by ʿArnūs' men (3: 1620-1622). The theme whereby princesses free heroes from their fathers' dungeons, often killing the

guards, is also a very common trope.[30] In one humorous episode in *Sīrat Hamzah*, three Turkish kings each leave a daughter to guard a certain Muslim prisoner and keep watch over the city. Each of the daughters has plans to free the prisoner and take him for herself, but, when he saves the city for them, they reach a compromise whereby all marry him at the same time (2: 240-242). In the most extreme cases of disobedience, both *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* and *Sīrat Baybars* show multiple women killing their own fathers in order to be with a hero (*Sīrat Baybars* 3: 2010, 2044-2045; *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 35: 46, pt. 43: 13).

Although these ruses, betrayals, and even murders are often accepted without comment, or more frequently offered as evidence that the woman has cut ties with her non-Muslim past, every now and then the narrative reveals reservations about such filial impiety. In *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, for example, the princess Suʿdā betrays her city and her father out of love for the Muslim hero Marʿā. Later, when she is captured by the villain Diyāb, she sends a letter asking the hero Ḥasan to save her in return for this favor. Ḥasan duly goes to her rescue, showing Diyāb the letter. Diyāb, however, replies: "a daughter who betrays her father is of no good to anyone" (*Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* 627). In this context it should be noted that that Diyāb is the villain of this tale; it is interesting that stories emerging from a patriarchal society that emphasizes filial piety would only express such an opinion from the mouth of a villain. In the world of the *sīrah*s, filial piety emerges as being much less important than religious piety; only a villain would express a

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[30] See, for example, *Sīrat Baybars* 4: 2217; *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 9:32; *Sīrat Ḥamzah* 1: 196-197; *Sīrat Sayf* 3: 120-122; Doufikar-Aerts 361.

different opinion. In these cases of betrayal, the fathers' affection for and trust of their

daughters has allowed the latter the "power-to" whereby they can perform

unconventional actions such as violence, even against their own people, and establish

illicit liaisons with men whom they wish to marry. The moral universe of the tales

portrays this as patently acceptable because it provides proof that the woman has thrown

off loyalty to her previous family and society, and is willing to use her talents for the

good of the Islamic community, as "power-with" the right side.

The idea that children take after their parents, even if they have never met them, is

a common one in popular literature around the world. The drama of the eventual

recognition scene is irresistible.[31] For the most part, heroes and villains only seem to have

sons, who grow up to be just like their fathers. However, every now and then in the *sīrah*s

a hero or villain's daughter will come into the spotlight. In general, these heroic women

have similar dramatic arcs to their more common heroic brothers: growing up without

knowing their fathers, but inheriting their strength and talent, they are trained in the arts

of war from a young age. Eventually, they either decide to go in search of their fathers or

meet them by chance in combat, at which point filial or fatherly affection kicks in, often

as a physical force; neither can kill the other. The heroine Dhāt al-Himmah, whose father,

Maẓlūm, gave her away to his servant when he found out she was a girl, meets him in

combat later in life. She attacks his tribe and captures him, but cannot seem to make

herself kill him when she tries to do so. At this point, the servant who knows their secret

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[31] For examples, see the lengthy index entry on sons in: Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, v. 6.2 (Index), 727-730.

intervenes. When Maẓlūm finds out that this fierce warrior is in fact his daughter, "he threw himself down on his knees to thank God Most High, saying: 'Praised be God, who brought forth this lioness from my loins! Praise to Him for bestowing this blessing!'" (pt. 6: 29). Interestingly, villainous daughters, unlike their fathers, are rarely given origin stories or *enfances*. Their inheritance of the family villainy seems to be taken more for granted.

For the most part, both heroic and anti-heroic daughters end up married to their fathers' warriors, have heroic children, and disappear quietly from the narrative. Sometimes they continue fighting alongside their husbands and/or sons once they are married. But at other times, albeit rarely, heroic and anti-heroic daughters take over their fathers' careers. The most potent examples of this are in *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. In *Sīrat ʿAntar,* the story continues for three and a half books totaling 274 pages after the eponymous hero dies (Heath 1996: 168, 227). For the rest of the narrative, the story turns to the hero's posthumously-born daughter. The reaction to the girl's birth is described as follows:

> And all the people compared her to her father ʿAntar Ibn Shaddād. When her mother saw her, she also compared her to her father…and said to herself, 'praise be to the creator of human beings!'" (*Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 56:53)

Soon thereafter, the girl's warrior mother names her ʿUnaytirah (her name translates as "little girl ʿAntar") after her father. Like her father, ʿUnaytirah grows unusually quickly, is aggressive toward animals and slaves, and is quick to learn riding and the use of a sword when her mother and uncle teach her. Also like ʿAntar, she kills a lion at a young age, thus winning a fearsome reputation for herself. In spite of her dark skin, she is unsurprised when she learns of her noble lineage. Throughout her story, the narrator

periodically reminds the listeners of ʿUnaytirah's close resemblance to her father and the admiration that all the Arabs have for her prowess and courage. As Remke Kruk points out, the question, is: "what made the narrator decide to end the story of ʿAntar, the epitome of machismo, with the history of a daughter, a female hero, even if she is a daughter as fierce and relentless as ʿUnaytira?" (Kruk, *Warrior Women* 146). In answer to this query, she suggests that, "the answer might be that in this way the audience is allowed to keep the image of their great hero ʿAntar intact... A daughter does not challenge her father's image, but enhances it" (146). It is true that, unlike sons who take over their fathers' legacies, ʿUnaytirah is explicitly conflated with her father. Even her name references him, whereas her brothers have their own individual identities. And yet, why have an entire lengthy epilogue where she takes over? Why not make ʿAntar live longer (heroes already live impossibly long lives) and complete his exploits himself?[32] It is impossible to know for sure, but what is most significant is that this is not the only *sīrah* to allow daughters or sisters to take over from their male relatives. The heroine Jāziyah in *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, a rare example of a female hero with no children of her own, is charged by her brother with training his children in combat so that they may avenge him when they grow up. When this confrontation finally arrives, she herself leads them into battle disguised as a man, killing two challengers before she is finally defeated by the villain Diyāb (*Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* 742). These female heirs demonstrate a familiar

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[32] Kruk points out that in the *Encyclopedia of Islam I* article on *Sīrat ʿAntar*, ʿUnaytirah is not even mentioned, and it credits her half brothers with avenging their father. Though it is technically possible that they were looking at a version I have not seen, during my research I have found such erasure of female characters to be quite common in Western scholarship on *sīrah* literature (Kruk, *Warrior Women* 146).

combination of two types of power: power-to and power-with. They want to live non-traditional lifestyles, and their societies accept it based on the expectation that the talents they share with their prominent male relatives will benefit the community. Military prowess especially is so important to the societies described in the *sīrah*s that it makes more sense for the community to accept these women leading unconventional lifestyles than to force them into roles where their martial talents will not benefit the wider society.

Other major examples of female heirs to their fathers' heroics or anti-heroics occur in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. In addition to having the only main female protagonist of any of the existing *sīrah*s, this tale also features the theme of daughters taking after their fathers in two major instances: ʿUqbīyah, daughter of the villain ʿUqbah, and ʿUdhaybah, daughter of the "man of wiles," Al-Baṭṭāl. Unlike ʿUnaytirah, we can presume that both ʿUqbīyah and ʿUdhaybah grow up knowing their fathers, since they first appear in the narratives as adults traveling with their parents. The villain ʿUqbah actually has two daughters, both of whom are first encountered when the hero Al-Baṭṭāl overhears a conversation they are having over a bottle of wine concerning their father's plan to kill some Muslim heroes. One of them, ʿUqbīyah, is described as betrothed (to an Arab Christian) and beautiful, and the other, ʿAqībah, enjoys killing Muslims by driving nails through their heads (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 66: 8-9). This description is interesting for several reasons. First, their names, so similar to their father's, both conflate their identities with his and perhaps attest to his arrogance in making sure their names were variants of his own. Next, though both sisters are drinking wine, hinting at impiety, only one is described as promoting sadistic violence against Muslims. Shortly after this

incident in the tale, this sister (ʿAqībah) is killed in battle along with her evil aunt ʿĀqibah, thus giving her a quick punishment for her crimes.[33] The other daughter, ʿUqbīyah, takes over from her aunt as her father's sidekick (pt. 67: 35). It should be noted that this role passes straight from one non-sexual relationship to another, passing over ʿUqbah's wife completely. ʿUqbīyah quickly manages to win her way into the Muslims' good graces by claiming to be secretly Muslim and by pulling her father's beard and spitting in his face (pt. 67: 35). Her beauty, typically a symbol of inherent goodness in the *sīrah*s, most likely helps in this task. However, this behavior is all merely a ruse: later she opens the gates of a city held by the Muslims to an invader, and she works with her father on his schemes from that point on (pt. 68: 47).

Al-Baṭṭāl's daughter ʿUdhaybah is first mentioned when the Muslim army is having difficulties gathering intelligence on their Byzantine opponents. ʿUdhaybah, who claims to have been taught the arts of disguise and all the various Byzantine languages by her mother (Nūrah, the *fitnah*-causing beauty of a warrior woman discussed in the last chapter), offers to infiltrate the camp. When she succeeds, she kills ʿUqbīyah and frees her prisoners. She then goes on to capture ʿUqbah himself, and participates in future capers alongside her father (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 68: 48, pt. 69: 42, pt. 69: 96). This duplication of ʿUqbah and al-Baṭṭāl's rivalry between their daughters adds some variation to the circular nature of the seemingly endless battles and matches of wits between the two men, but also points to a belief that daughters can inherit their fathers'

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[33] Lyons' version of this tale seems to name these women differently than does mine, calling ʿUqbah's sister "ʿAqība" and his surviving daughter "ʿĀqila." He does not say the name of the second daughter, which in my version is "ʿAqībah."

characteristics, and, as necessarily nonsexual partners, can be worthy sidekicks for them. This can allow them to live the lifestyles of their fathers without upsetting the natural order of the *sīrah*'s universe.

Occasionally the narrators decide to turn this theme of daughters taking after their fathers somewhat on its head: decidedly unheroic fathers nonetheless manage to raise heroic daughters. One of the most interesting father-daughter relationships in the *sīrah*s is that of Ghamrā and her father ʿUṭārid in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. Ghamrā's story, in which she develops her martial skills as revenge upon her uninterested cousin, was mentioned briefly in the last chapter, as an example of warrior women being described as attractive. Perhaps one of the most interesting parts of her story, however, is her relationship with her father. After defeating her cousin in hand-to-hand combat and, as a result, losing any romantic interest in him, Ghamrā finds that she enjoys the warrior lifestyle. She continues to dress as a man, takes the name ʿAmr, and joins her meek father, ʿUṭārid (he is described as "learned," but not "a man of strength" like his more powerful brother) in an extended visit to Dhāt al-Himmah's tribe, the Kilābīs (pt. 40: 49). In the end, she has to rescue her father when he is captured, reversing the normal script of a father-daughter relationship in these narratives (pt. 41: 25-26). Ghamrā is one of the more interesting female characters in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* because she embodies so many different relationships and forms of power. She is a loyal daughter whose courage and martial prowess makes up for her father's lack thereof, thus giving them both honored positions amongst the Kilābīs. Her substitution for her father's lack of skill, along with his support of her passing as a man, for a time allows her the "power-to" live as a respected male

warrior. However, her sexuality is also emphasized: she only learns to fight in the first place because her cousin spurns her as a wife. When her gender is revealed to the Kilābīs, the men immediately change the way they treat her and begin fighting each other for her hand, as described as the last chapter. When you combine this with the fact that she uses her physical power both to defeat her cousin and to convince her father to bring her with him when he travels, it seems that the tale should eventually judge her activities negatively, as "power-over." Instead, the narrators appear to struggle with how her story should end. Ghamrā goes on to spurn all her suitors and continue to fight, like the heroine Dhāt al-Himmah herself. Also like Dhāt al-Himmah, however, the Caliph decides that such a catch cannot be wasted and forces marriage upon her. After this point, however, she actually fares better than the heroine of the tale. Instead of being subjected to marital rape, Ghamrā successfully ties up her bridegroom on their wedding night and rides off, eventually conquering all of Yemen and Ḥaḍramaut (pt. 41: 31-32). Thus, in this rare case, Ghamrā successfully exercises "power-over" without being punished: instead, she lives the life of a wandering warrior, unencumbered by marital ties or children, and is never subjected to the brutal death suffered by most women in the *sīrah*s who dominate men. I suspect that this is because her unexpected bravery and martial prowess make up for the lack of these attributes in her rather unimpressive father. As such, her "power-to" is not temporary but continues on, as she is allowed to stand in his place in the universe of the *sīrah*.

Another good example of admirable daughters of unadmirable men is the character of Ṭurbān in *Sīrat Ḥamzah*. She is the daughter of Aflanṭūsh, a leading general

in the army of Chosroes, Zoroastrian king of Persia. Ṭurbān is a warrior woman whose

king promises her hand in marriage to an ugly and lazy man, Zūbīn, as a reward for his

attack on Ḥamzah's army. The princess is described as being repulsed by this man (2:

97). Zūbīn attempts to rape her twice, thinking she will then be more amenable to the

match, but the first time she threatens suicide and the second time she challenges him to a

duel which ends in a draw (2: 107). Her father values Zūbīn as a soldier and is therefore

unwilling to stop any of this. When Ṭurbān is eventually captured by the Muslims,

Ḥamzah offers to marry her to one of his heroes, without forcing her, since "our law

prohibits marriage except with the consent of the two spouses" (2: 129). She agrees to his

offer but requests that she be able to write a letter of explanation to her father, since she

still desires his good opinion and fears that he will see her decision as a betrayal (2: 129).

Up to this point, the narrative is a rather typical story of a foreign warrior woman

just waiting to be tamed by a Muslim hero. But instead of fading into the background as

these women normally do, both Ṭurbān and her relationship to her father continue to

occupy pride of place in the narrative. In the first place Zūbīn convinces Aflanṭūsh to use

his relationship with his daughter in order for both of them to infiltrate the Muslim camp.

He instructs the king to say that he is ready to abandon Zoroastrianism and wants to come

to his daughter, since he cannot bear to be separated from her (2: 136). Unsurprisingly,

the ruse only holds for a few months before both Aflanṭūsh and Zūbīn betray the Muslims

in spectacular fashion. The other interesting part of Ṭurbān's story is that she does not

give up her warlike ways after marriage and childbirth. She herself teaches her son the art

of war, and, when his first opponent tries to turn him away because of his youth, she tells

him that it is better to die than to retreat like a coward (2: 248). When her father betrays the Muslims, Ḥamzah allows her to fight against Aflanṭūsh's army. She personally captures him in the battle, later killing her old tormentor Zūbīn as well.

At this point, however, we can observe the true attitude of this narrative toward warrior women. After Ṭurbān finally kills Zūbīn, Ḥamzah summons her for a conversation. He tells her her that, now that she has completed her vengeance, she should really stop fighting alongside the men, since "we do not want it said of us that we ask for help from our women" (3: 258). Unlike most cases of women in the *sīrah* literature, this story privileges the personal over the collective here. Ṭurbān's fighting is tolerated so long as she has a personal score to settle. However, once she has achieved her revenge, Ḥamzah is uncomfortable with her integration in his army as a regular fighter, fearing that such a move will be interpreted as weakness by his enemies. On Ḥamzah's scale, at least, this threat is more significant than the benefits of having another skilled warrior in his army. This situation is in decided contrast to one of the characters in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, who, as we described in the last chapter, expresses his desire to marry Ghamrā because of his wish be like the hero of the *sīrah*, who has "women who can protect him as well as themselves!" (pt. 41: 3). Despite her love for her father and desire to trust him, Ṭurbān is willing to fight against him because of his many failures to protect her from Zūbīn, but also because he betrays her adopted tribe. Ḥamzah seems to respect the first reason, but the second sounds far too much like a career warrior for his comfort. This explicitly links Ṭurbān's "power-to" live an unconventional lifestyle to her relationship with her father. Once that relationship is broken, though she is not punished for

dominating men as most "power-over" characters are, it is made clear that the only
acceptable way for her to benefit the community in the future is to step back from the
battlefield. As we shall see in the next chapter, she successfully finds a way to do this,
putting her talents to use in training her son to fight. In this particular tale, "power-to"
live the life of a woman warrior only holds so far as her reasons for fighting are personal,
not communal.

The mother-daughter relationship is one of the few instances in the *sīrah*s where
women can gain power through their connections to female rather than male relatives.
Daughters can use the support of their mothers to avoid or choose certain suitors or to act
as unconventional sidekicks for their unconventional mothers. For the most part, mother-
daughter relationships are only described before marriage. After women are married, it is
unusual for them to be shown thinking or speaking about their mothers, even though they
sometimes do speak about or visit their fathers. But while a daughter is still living with
her parents, the mother-daughter relationship seems to depend on the daughter's function
in the tales. If the daughter is mainly important to the tale because a hero wants to marry
her, we usually see the mother-daughter relationship through the lens of marriage
negotiations and/or the mother's opposition to or complicity in the lovers' illicit
rendezvous. For example, in *Sīrat ʿAntar*, the hero pursues his beloved cousin ʿAblah for
a large part of the narrative. Initially, her parents are against the marriage of their noble
daughter to this man, who has been raised as a slave. However, ʿAntar wins the support
of his beloved's mother, Samīʿah, when he rescues ʿAblah from a group of kidnappers
(Hamilton 1: 53-54). She conceals her daughter's affair with ʿAntar from her husband

until she suspects him of theft and worries for her daughter's future (Hamilton 1: 59). It

should be noted that, though ʿAblah gains the power to choose her own suitor through her

relationship with her mother, when her mother gets nervous, she readily betrays the

young lovers by leveraging her close relationship with her husband. In this way, male

"power-over" overrides the female "power-to" that is at play. *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*'s

warrior woman Ghamrā, whose relationships with her suitors and her father have already

been discussed, also has a few touching moments with her mother that are highlighted in

the tale. After her affections are rebuffed by her cousin, she goes weeping to her mother,

who gives her good advice: "do not seek one who does not seek you!" Later, when

Ghamrā defeats this same cousin in a duel, the narrator returns to her mother's

perspective, describing her as being proud of her daughter's success (pt. 40: 57). It can be

argued that, without her mother's support, Ghamrā would never have gained the courage

to attempt her cross-dressing, wandering warrior lifestyle. Her meek father surely would

not have encouraged it. In *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, the hero's sidekick and jinn foster-

sister, ʿĀqiṣah, gets help in her marriage negotiations from her mother, who whispers in

her ear ideas for impossible dowry demands (3: 253-254). This allows ʿĀqiṣah, who does

not actually wish to marry, a way to continue her unconventional lifestyle as her foster-

brother's sidekick without necessarily offending a powerful fellow *jinnī*. In the end, her

mother's impossible demands prove unsuccessful: her suitor completes them, and

ʿĀqiṣah has to resort to a threat of suicide as a deterrent to marriage (3: 263).

Nonetheless, her mother's resourcefulness and sympathy for her daughter's attitude

toward marriage buys her an extension to her "power-to" state. As a final example, we

have Zahrbān, one of Ḥamzah's wives in *Sīrat Ḥamzah*. Zahrbān falls in love with

Ḥamzah and asks her mother for help on winning him over. After noting that Greek girls

can choose their own husbands (an unusual claim that could point to a Christian

composer of this particular tale), Zahrbān's mother worries that the Muslim hero would

never marry a Greek girl, but encourages her daughter to don her best dress and try to

meet him in person. Her plan works, and the two are swiftly married (1: 184). In all these

cases, a close relationship between a girl and her mother, in which they can be candid

about their desires, allows for the mothers to leverage their knowledge and connections

so that the daughters can make their own choices about marriage.

Other daughters use their mothers' reputations to shield them from censure. One

interesting example of this is exhibited by ʿUnaytirah, the aforementioned daughter of

ʿAntar and the child who takes on his legacy. Like most heroes, she grows up without

knowing her parents. However, when she learns of her lineage, her first act is to avenge

ʿAblah's murder by her second husband, who has suffocated her in annoyance at being

constantly compared unfavorably to ʿAntar (*Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 12: 38). The most

interesting part of this story is that ʿAblah is not even ʿUnaytirah's mother: she is actually

childless throughout the whole tale. But her status as matriarch of the family allows her

the dignity of revenge through her husband's descendants, no matter who actually gave

birth to them. Despite her resemblance to her father, ʿUnaytirah can still face resistance to

taking on the life of a warrior. However, avenging the death of a mother figure is a first

mission that all the tribe can accept as honorable. On the less honorable side, we have the

daughter of the Abyssinian princess Maymūnah in *Sīrat Baybars*, who acts as a sidekick

to her mother, assisting her military operation by seducing her Muslim opponent and then destroying his weapons and magic cloak while he sleeps (4: 2414).

Finally, there are those daughters who betray their villainous mothers. To begin with, a childhood that involves being raised by a villainess starts a daughter off in an unusual lifestyle, but, as is the case when they betray villainous fathers, they can also leverage a betrayal to gain them a place with the heroes. For example, in *Sīrat Sayf,* Armīdah, daughter of the evil sorceress Iṣnā, betrays and kills her mother after being converted to Islam by a dream (3: 229-230). A similar episode occurs in *Sīrat Baybars,* where the hero Shīḥah falls in love with the daughter of a pederast whom he has killed. She tells him that she has been converted in a dream, but he asks her to kill her mother to prove it; when she carries out the command, he marries her (2: 1107). The most complex version of this story is the relationship of Zaynab to her mother Dalīlah in *Sīrat ʿAlī al-Zaybaq.* "Crafty Dalīlah" is the main villain of this urban *sīrah,* the leader of the gang of thieves with whom the trickster hero is in a continuing match of wits. Throughout most of the tale Zaynab is her mother's sidekick and helper, despite falling in love with ʿAlī on first sight. Eventually, however, she takes a stand when her mother plans to declare her raped by ʿAlī, proclaiming, "are you going to put me to shame because of your games?" (*Sīrat ʿAlī al-Zaybaq* 84). In the end her mother ends up convincing her, but Zaynab gets the last laugh when the police confirm her virginity. She eventually marries the hero, who overcomes even more obstructions in abiding by her mother's impossible dowry demands (118-119). In this case however, her "bad blood" shows when she murders the hero in a fit of jealous rage and is killed by his son in revenge (191). Perhaps her career helping her

mother exercise "power-over" the men of the city, including the hero, was too long to be reconciled by the "power-with" exemplified by marrying the hero and bearing his child.

If we look at the ways in which daughters in general are portrayed in the *sīrah* literature, we see that the parent-daughter tie carries a power of which both parties are aware; the daughters frequently leverage this "power-to" to their advantage. Whether it is through appeals to their parents' love and care, through allowances gained by their parents' reputations, or through an unexpected, almost unthinkable betrayal, these characters often gain the ability to make unconventional choices about their own lives without censure or punishment, at least for a time. However, regardless of any claims to the value of filial piety, in the end these characters are always judged by how closely and loyally they support and promote the spread of Islam and the influence of the hero's tribe, in other words converting their temporary "power to" into "power with."

Sisters

In the *sīrah*s, sisters are mostly disconnected from the lives of their heroic brothers, or given to their brothers' friends in marriage, at which point they largely cease communication with their natal families. However, there are a few prominent exceptions. In *Sīrat Sayf*, for example, not only does our hero have a coterie of helpful wives to make up for the lack of a mother figure in his heroic upbringing (as will be discussed further in the next chapter), he also has a *jinn* milk-sister, ʿĀqiṣah, as his most devoted companion, helper, and "woman of wiles." Though ʿĀqiṣah is not Sayf's blood sibling, the tale explicitly mentions that ʿĀqiṣah's mother suckled Sayf when she discovered him starving

in the desert as a baby (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 36). Under Islamic law and custom, as discussed in

the introduction, this makes them legal siblings.

Sayf is a typical hero from the *sīrah*s: brave, strong, and good, but not particularly

clever, and morally rigid to the point of impracticality. In order for the story to move

forward, such characters usually acquire a companion early in their lives who has the

moral flexibility, intelligence, and education to get the heroes out of the many scrapes in

which they find themselves. Malcolm Lyons calls these companions "men of wiles," and

they tend to be some of the more interesting and dynamic characters in the tales,

occurring in almost every known *sīrah*. Given the existence of several female versions of

this character type, I would prefer the term "person of wiles." They are masters of

languages, disguise, thievery, and the use of drugs. They and their followers are the ones

who rescue prisoners and kidnap enemies, matters of vast strategic importance. As Lyons

describes it, the importance of the character of the man of wiles is that, "as guide and

resolver of difficulties he embodies the hero's good fortune and his character lies at the

heart of the favourite paradox of the cycles, the relationship between superhuman or

miraculous virtue and lies, theft and deception" (Lyons 1: 118). Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan's

"man of wiles," or "woman of wiles" in this case, isʿĀqiṣah, She is the closest thing to

the intensely devoted sisters found in ancient Arab myth and poetry who were explored

earlier in this chapter, wailing when she thinks that Sayf has died and, when he tries to

arrange her marriage, joking with him (or, possibly, not really joking with him) that she

will only marry him or someone exactly like him (2: 167, 3: 254). However, she is also

the sensible rock in Sayf's life, saving him from certain death again and again, giving

him good advice (which he seldom takes), and even finally killing his evil mother when he cannot bring himself to do it (1: 368).

It is worth mentioning here that, whereas most "men of wiles" get their power from education and intelligence, having knowledge of many languages, poisons, and arts of disguise, ʿĀqiṣah's power comes mostly from her status as a *jinnīyah*: her ability to fly and perform magic are the talents that allow her to act as her brother's right-hand-woman. As a *jinnīyah,* ʿĀqiṣah is not expected to be a typical woman: in the *sīrah*s, the *jinn* are portrayed as wilder, more mercurial, and more independent than humans. And yet, they are also shown to have their own rigid social structures, including the importance of marriage. It is only ʿĀqiṣah's sisterly bond to Sayf, essentially non-sexual in nature but emotionally closer to him than anyone else in the world, including his wives, that allows her to deny marriage many times in order to continue adventuring. Her parents seem to think it is in the best interests of their community for her to help her brother, and Sayf's community can hardly object to having a powerful *jinnīyah* on their side. The other important way in which this relationship represents "power-to" is that ʿĀqiṣah is able to choose when and how to help her brother. On several occasions she opts not to do so: for example, when he breaks his promise to give her the magical robes he stole from Bilqīs, ʿĀqiṣah steals his sword and threatens to throw it into the sea. They quarrel, and she eventually carries out her threat, after which Sayf threatens to kill her. However, he does not, and by this point in the narrative the audience understands that he never would; the two are too close, and he relies on her too much (2: 315). Of course, ʿĀqiṣah always repents after these arguments and lends her talents to her brother again,

thus resolving the tension of this occasional resistance that could lead to her being classified as a "power-over" character in need of punishment. Eventually, however, even ʿĀqiṣah's freedom must come to an end. After hundreds of attempts to impress his beloved, her long-time suitor finally wins her respect. She agrees to marry him and gives birth to a son, ʿUfāshah, who from then on acts as Sayf's sidekick while ʿĀqiṣah disappears almost entirely from the narrative (*Sīrat Sayf* 3: 270-271).

The other major example of a strong sisterly character in the *sīrah*s sticks even more closely to the "man of wiles" character type. This character is Jāziyah, sister of the hero Ḥasan in the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*. Jāziyah, like several of the "men of wiles," can also be considered a hero: she not only takes part in battle, but, once all the brave men of the tribe have been killed, she also trains and commands the army of their orphans (*Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* 711). In addition to this, her wisdom is so respected that she has a seat on the four-person council of her tribe, giving her a substantial voice in all their decisions (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl al- Kubrá* 600). However, she is better described as a woman of wiles than a hero because her talents are better employed behind the scenes than on the battlefield. Though she knows many languages and is a strategic mastermind, she does not need all the disguises and poisons of most "men of wiles" because of a more natural attribute: her beauty. Jāziyah is considered the most beautiful woman of her time. On the tribe's migration westward across Africa, her hand is demanded in marriage by several kings and rulers in exchange for safe passage (Reynolds, "Sīrat Banī Hilāl" 310-311). By consenting to these demands, Jāziyah often saves the entire tribe, and, though she is then left to her own devices, she always manages to "find some means of escape or an

honorable deception" that allows her to rejoin her people (Reynolds, *Heroic Poets* 14).

Because of her ability to handle such delicate situations, she is given the nickname

dabbīra, or "disentangler" (Galley 134). In one incident, Jāziyah also plays the role of

"sacker of cities": she seduces a gatekeeper with her witty poetry and perfume. When he

loses his head and comes out to her (with his pants down no less), he is killed by the

warriors accompanying her, who proceed to enter the city and rescue the captive

tribesmen within (Reynolds, *Heroic Poets* 194-197). Thus we see a uniquely feminine

version of the indispensable cunning companion to the hero, one who cuts a fascinating

enough figure to be the main focus of the oral performances of the Banī Hilāl cycles in

Algeria and Morocco (Galley 136). Yet again, the fact that Jāziyah is sister to one of the

most powerful men in the tribe gives her a dispensation to control events to an impressive

extent. She uses her sexuality to dominate men, but usually in furtherance of the goals of

her brother and thus, by extension, of the tribe as a whole. This allows her to use her

intelligence to further the interests of the tribe, and avoids the fate of having to leave the

tribe once she is married. Her importance allows her to leave several marriages, a fact

which is mentioned without comment by the narrators of the tale, signaling that they do

not see her inconstancy as a problem. Like the Prophet's granddaughter Zaynab discussed

at the beginning of this chapter, Jāziyah's relationship to her brother is so strong, and her

bloodline so noble and superior, that it seems to naturally take precedence over her

obligations to her husbands. In the end, however, it seems that she overreaches: in her

final battle, she leads the army of orphans against the main villain Diyāb. She fights

several male warriors in single combat and defeats them, but is finally killed by a single

kick from Diyāb himself (*Taghrībat Banī Hilāl* 742). Though he mourns her, the message is clear: even a woman as wise, brave, and strong as Jāziyah can be killed easily by a strong villain. Perhaps it is her final act, of leading an army herself without the guidance of her brother or his generals, that seals her fate. As with the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾishah, this act is a step too far into the realm of "power-over" for a woman. With her brother dead and no children of her own, she can no longer claim the family ties that continued her "power-to" state of suspended judgment, and her inglorious death speaks to a discomfort with her continued leadership activities.

In addition to these two prominent examples, several interesting, if minor, sisters do occur in the other narratives. In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* the brother-sister relationship is highlighted on the side of the villains: ʿUqbah's sister ʿĀqibah acts as his right hand, helping him kidnap his enemies (pt. 59: 54-55, pt. 63: 15, pt. 66:6) and saving him when he is kidnapped in turn (pt. 66: 47). As mentioned above, this is a similar role to that played by ʿUqbah's aforementioned daughter after ʿĀqibah's death, and the point seems to be that a propensity for villainy runs in the bloodline, and also that these non-sexual cross-gender relationships make for the best partnerships. This "helper" role also shows up in smaller ways. In *Sīrat Baybars* the Abyssinian king's sister, Maymūnah, offers to help her brother "destroy the whites" when the Muslims invade, employing warriors, sorcery, and later the trickery of her daughter, in the pursuit of victory (4: 2404). In *Sīrat Ḥamzat al-Pahlawan*, Ḥamzah's beloved wife Mihrdukār, daughter of one Chosroes and sister of his successor, intercedes for her brother with her husband on several occasions (2: 92-93, 4: 288). In *Qiṣṣat al-Zīr Sālim*, Ḍayyāʿ changes the entire story arc by deciding

to disobey her husband when he tells her to kill the hero al-Zīr, who is her own brother. When al-Zīr begs for his life, saying that he will find her another husband but she can never have another brother, she kills a ram instead and helps her brother escape. Later, she herself runs away (56, 65).

As we can see from these examples, sisterhood seems to grant power in several ways. First, and less importantly, being the sister of a powerful man can lead to marriage prospects, at which point the sister becomes a wife, with potential power through her husband. More importantly, a sister can gain power directly through her brother. As we can see, Hasan El-Shamy's "Brother-Sister complex," in which this relationship is formative, intensely close, and emotionally intense, holds true in the *sīrah*s, so long as we also acknowledge that it is portrayed in this genre as intrinsically platonic in all circumstances. Because of this dynamic of a close, long-term, inherently non-sexual relationship, sisters are occasionally able to take on the role of the hero's best friend, helper, and person of wiles. On the negative side, at least where the brother is concerned, this relationship also means that, if the trusted sister occasionally falls for his captive or decides to offer her loyalties elsewhere, he can be easily betrayed. Either way, the use of influence as sister of a powerful man, whether it involves influence over the brother himself or over the society that respects the brother and the bloodline, can lend women the ability to choose whether to live a traditional or a non-traditional lifestyle for a time, in expectation that her actions will eventually benefit the broader community.

Conclusions

As we can see, both father-daughter and brother-sister relationships truly exemplify "power-to." The powerful male relative's reputation and trust of his female relative gives these women a temporary dispensation to live non-traditional (sometimes shockingly so!) lifestyles. Whether it is by adding a talented warrior to an embattled army, bending her magical abilities to the benefit of the community, or by aiding and abetting an important but flawed hero, so long as a sister's actions eventually further the interests of society at large, they are judged acceptable. If, however, she uses her relationship to betray her society, if she goes too far in using her influence to dominate men, or even if her relative dies and she continues her behavior independently, her actions can just as easily be judged "power over," which necessitates punishment in the universe of the *sīrah*. As was also the case with women exhibiting "power-over," then, in order for a woman to maintain control over her life, "power-to" must be transmuted into "power-with," which as we shall explore next is considered the only unequivocally admirable form of female power.

Power-with: Mothers

The final expression of power exhibited by female characters in the *sīrah*s is that of "power-with." This theory of power was first suggested in the 1930s, by Mary Parker Follett, whose philosophy on human resource management was that, "this is always our problem, not how to get control of people, but how all together we can get control of a situation" (Follett 130). Since no one truly enjoys being dominated, and therefore is likely to react against such an attitude in obstructionist ways, Follett argued that it was reciprocal relationships that had historically led to the greatest productivity and capacity for development. Hannah Arendt, whose theory of power-to was examined in the last chapter, further refined her own ideas in 1970, when she remarked that power is "the human ability not just to act but to act in concert" (*On Violence* 44). Neither of these thinkers framed their theories as particularly feminine or relating to women, and in fact Arendt presented herself as explicitly anti-feminist in other aspects.[34] However, in 1983, Nancy Hartsock pointed out that these and other women tend to theorize power as capacity and empowerment more than domination, and that we should be able to "understand why the masculine community constructed…power, as domination, repression, and death, and why women's accounts of power differ…such a standpoint might allow us to put forward an understanding of power that points in more liberatory

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[34] For example, her biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, asserted that she "was suspicious of women 'who gave orders,' skeptical about whether women should be political leaders, and steadfastly opposed to the social dimensions of Women's Liberation" (238).

directions" (226). This defining of power "as energy and competence rather than dominance" was what she called "the feminist theory of power" (224).

In terms of women in the *sīrah*s, "power-with" is arguably the most important theory of power, because it is consistently the bottom line at which female ambition is sanctioned. "Power-over" and "power-to" are both temporary states that end in death in the worst case or "conversion" to power-with, and thus permanent integration into society, in the best case. No matter what form female ambition takes, whether it is violence, seduction, business or economic pursuits, or even political or religious authority, the ultimate arbiter of whether the narrators allow the character to thrive or feel the need to punish them is the answer to one simple question: do these actions benefit the community? To an extent, this bottom line is quite egalitarian: men's actions are also judged on the benefit they bring to the community. What differs is the criteria by which women's actions and men's actions are deemed "beneficial." Men are expected to be brave protectors of their community, willing to sacrifice their bodies in service of their families and their societies. If they are not brave warriors, they must then be wise leaders or clever "men of wiles." For a man to be judged "good," it is not necessary to be both wise and a brave fighter: one will do. Family life is not generally an essential part of a man's character, either. Cruel fathers, husbands, and sons can be punished in the narratives and are usually villains. However, those that are inattentive or dismissive are common enough that it is not considered worthy of comment, and these actions do not affect their character overall. The only exception to this is men who do not wish to marry, and thus upset the very structures of society. We have discussed the warrior woman

Ghamrā from *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* a great deal, but one final aspect of her story is the portrayal of her cousin ʿĀmir, whose refusal of her in marriage sets her on her warrior path. ʿĀmir is portrayed as an extreme loner, who refuses his cousin's suit because, as he puts it, "I do not want to be distracted by women from what I want to do. My only purpose is to meet heroes and to encounter chieftains!" (pt. 40: 53). The narrators punish him by having Ghamrā humiliate him in combat and then go on to spurn him when this defeat stokes his passion (pt. 40: 56).

Women, on the other hand, are assumed to naturally bring benefit to the community by both bearing and raising children and by running their husbands' households. Performing only one of these two functions, or taking on any other functions, could eventually be judged unfavorably. Though female warriors, rulers, or "women of wiles" can occasionally be accepted by the community if they are exceptionally talented and meet the criteria laid out in the previous chapters, they *also* have to eventually perform the prescribed duties of women in order to be fully accepted as valuable contributors to their societies.

As we have explored in the two preceding chapters, this applies to both "power-over" and "power-to" situations. Wives, lovers, sisters, and daughters can all have their activities sanctioned by the "power-with" label so long as their activities eventually uplift their communities. However, there is one character who most embodies this philosophy of female power in the *sīrah*s, and that is the mother.

The stock character of "the mother" is common in folklore and popular literature worldwide.[35] This character embodies everything that is woman: woman at her most primal and, in the minds of many throughout time and place, woman at her most suitable. In a rare burst of sentimentality, Sigmund Freud once said that, of all relationships, that of the mother and son is least "liable to disaster," and furnishes "the purest examples of unchanging tenderness, undisturbed by any egoistic consideration" (Freud 174). As mothers, women are allowed liberties that other roles do not provide: they may be fierce and strong in the protection of their children, outspoken and wise in their advice. The sacrifices made by mothers in bearing and raising their children garner respect and allow greater leeway in behavior and movement. In both elite and popular Arabic literature from the Islamic Middle Period, mothers are respected and revered. However, in the power that motherhood grants, the medieval author also sees danger: menacing accounts of mothers who betray their children, or who use their maternal connections to manipulate the realm of men, also make appearances in medieval literature. The ideal mothers are portrayed as protective (but never to the point of dominance), supportive (but never to the point of ignoring their role as a wives), and good advisors (but never to the point of controlling matters themselves). They walk a tightrope between sainthood and demonhood, but what is clear is that motherhood is seen as crucial to society and yet dangerous, much like women themselves.

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[35] See Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, v..6.2 Index, p. 521-523, for worldwide examples.

Mothers in historical, legal, and *adab* literature

In medieval religious works, mothers inevitably emerge as the apogee of all feminine achievement, mostly by virtue of their suffering. Scholars rely for the most part on *ḥadīth*s for evidence on these matters, but the Qurʾān itself reveals sympathy toward the trials of motherhood. One oft-quoted passage comes from the *Sūrat Al-Aḥqāf*: "And We have enjoined man to be good to his parents; with troubles did his mother bear him and with troubles did she bring him forth; and the bearing and the weaning of him was thirty months" (*The Qurʾān* 46:15). This acknowledgment of a mother's sacrifices appears elsewhere as well. In Kathryn M. Kueny's 2013 book, *Conceiving Identities,* she uses medical and religious works to explore the image of an ideal mother in medieval scholarly circles. Starting with the Qurʾān, she explains how the holy book portrays an often intimate and sensitive relationship between God and the mothers of His prophets. In the story of Mary, mother of Jesus, for example, comes this touching moment:

> And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, 'Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten.' But He called her from below: 'Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you; it will drop ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be comforted.' *(The Qurʾān* 19:23-26)

God appears in this story as a sort of comforting midwife. He does not take away Mary's pain, but neither does He blame her for her potentially sacrilegious lament. Kueny goes on to describe how later exegetical scholars, uncomfortable with the close relationship between woman and the divine implied by these stories, often included elements in their expanded interpretations that widened the gap (32-33).

Despite these efforts, there are still many *ḥadīth*s that command respect for

mothers. The most famous is found in both *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*:

> A man came to the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) and said: "O Messenger of
> Allah! Who from amongst mankind warrants my devotion?" He replied: "Your
> mother." The man asked: "Then who?" He replied: "Your mother." The man then
> asked: "Then who?" The Prophet replied again: "Your mother." The man then
> asked: "Then who?" And he replied: "Then your father." (*Sahīh Bukhārī* 5971;
> *Sahīh Muslim* 7/2)

In another story, the Prophet advises a man hungry for the glory of fighting holy war that,

if his mother were still alive, he should "cling to her feet, because paradise is there"

(*Sunan al-Nasāʾī* 3104).

It is, of course, difficult to ascertain how much the general public actually

followed these exhortations to revere mothers. In Kueny's book, she turns to both

medical sources and bestiary literature to show how the entrenched patriarchy of

medieval Islamic society exerted control over the act of childbearing (traditionally an all-

female affair) by obsessively studying anatomy and genetics, in the end placing blame for

any imperfect offspring on the mother's body. Since the Qurʾān states that God created

children in wombs perfectly, medieval medical, exegetical, and folklore treatises argued

that the mother's body, which took on aspects of her thoughts and morals, had been an

imperfect host for God's perfect creation (10).

Kueny's study shines an important light on the medieval perception that women's

bodies were both necessary for and potentially inimical to successful childbearing, and

thus had to be under the control of men throughout parturition. One of her most

interesting findings is that women apparently participated willingly in rituals designed to

frame their husbands as the primary givers of life, for example, holding back from

nursing the child until the father could feed it with masticated dates. In gifting their

natural powers of nourishment to the father of their child, they reaffirmed the patriarchy

and in return gained status and protection as a "proper" mother. On the other hand,

however, women also seized control of their own reproductive lives by purchasing

charms, potions, and other forms of folk medicine to aid in conception, or by practicing

contraception. Overall, Kueny concludes that "'good mothers' must be steadfast in belief,

robust in womb, ready to sacrifice all for their children, husbands, or God, and prolific

producers of offspring who will grow to defend and protect the faith" (Kueny 11).

Beyond infancy, most of our sources for the life cycle of a woman and her

children are literary, since education was largely considered an informal, personal matter,

something that was only made public later in life in order to prove one's learning. In a

legal sense, however, it is clear that a mother's rights declined sharply once her body was

no longer necessary to sustain a child. As Judith Tucker explains in her 2012 book,

Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law,

> Any point of conflict between the mother's desire to nurture and hold her child
> close and the father's right to assert possession of the child for his family in the
> wake of a divorce is resolved in favor of the child's father. Thus the mother has
> temporary rights of custody (*ḥiḍāna*) of her child, but the natural guardianship of
> the child and custody once the child has reached a certain age (which varies from
> one school of law to another) is vested in the father. Here the mother's role in
> reproduction is, in fact, limited to childbirth, nursing, and the nurturing of young
> children; the intense and lifelong attachment of a mother to her child gets no legal
> recognition. (29)

Despite the commanded reverence for one's mother then, and the prestige that women

should have gained from mothering, there were still elements of insecurity and

uncertainty. Despite the mutual ties of love and devotion between mother and child that

medieval Islamic society considered both natural and necessary, a woman's children

never legally belonged to her. As with most legal prohibitions, perhaps this was the point: such a powerful bond and obligation to women had to be controlled, lest it shade into female domination of men.

The most common usage of the trope of the mother in elite medieval literature attests to the perceived closeness of the mother-son relationship: the metaphor of the bereaved mother is prevalent. A few quotes from the *Maqāmāt* of al-Ḥarīrī should demonstrate this quite clearly. One narrative begins, *Wa kāna yawman aṭwal min ẓill al-qanāt. Wa aḥarra min damʿ al-miqlāt.* "The day was longer than a spear's shadow, and hotter than a bereft mother's tears" (Al-Ḥarīrī 195). In another, a trickster riddler "sighs like a bereft mother" (*fa-tanaffasa kam tanaffas al-thakūl)* (284). Still later, a very religious man "wails the wails of a bereft mother" (*yurinnu irnān ar-raqūb*) (416).[36] In the *Maqāmāt al-Hamadhānī* , you also see this trope. "May you have no mother" (implying "may you lose your mother") (*lā umma laka*) (Al-Hamadhānī 42; 383; 467), and "May your mother/she who birthed you mourn your loss," (*thakilatka ummuka/thakilatka man salaḥtka*) are common curses uttered by heroes and villains alike (466-467). A mother's strong connection to her children, for reasons of both affection and securing her future, made her bereavement an especially poignant example of boundless grief.

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[36] The many different Arabic terms for "bereft mother" seen above (usually implying, more specifically, a mother with no surviving children) attest, sadly, to the ubiquity of this circumstance in the medieval Muslim world. From plagues to warfare, mothers losing their children was all too common. Avner Giladi has examined the vast corpus of consolation literature aimed at bereaved parents that was written in the Middle Periods in his "Concepts of Childhood and Attitudes towards Children in Medieval Islam."

One interesting example of a medieval literary work that deals with motherhood, if only through its discomfort with the topic, is the lengthy tale (sometimes called the first Arabic "novel"), *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān* (literally "Alive, son of Awake"), by the famous Andalusian polymath Abū Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185 CE). *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* is a philosophical thought-experiment exploring how a child might develop if separated from human society altogether at birth. As Fedwa Malti-Douglas has discussed in several publications, it begins by dealing with the subject of this extraordinary child's birth, for which it presents two possible scenarios (the only variant narrations in this particular text). In the first, a king's beautiful sister marries in secret because she knows of her brother's jealous love for her. When she has a child, she puts him in a basket and sends him away, fearing that the king will discover her secret. The basket washes up on a deserted island. In the second variant, Ḥayy is spontaneously generated on the island, from a mass of perfectly balanced and fermented clay. In both cases, he is nursed and raised by a gazelle. When this "foster mother" passes away, he dissects her body to determine the cause and thus sets out on his journey of scientific discovery. Malti-Douglas argues that the story's "narrative ambivalence" in these two variations "reflects psychological ambivalence. The mother is guilty or she is nonexistent. Sex is problematic or perhaps not necessary at all" *(Woman's Body* 77). She explains further:

> Sexuality and motherhood are presented in negative terms. The two birth accounts make this abundantly clear: the first, positively, through the problem couple; the second, through spontaneous generation, which is nothing more than the dream of life without sexuality and without motherhood. (84)

Interestingly, Kathryn Kueny also addresses this narrative in her book, but comes to a different conclusion. In addressing the spontaneous generation variant of Ḥayy's birth,

she sees a continuation of other "wondrous" medieval creation stories. In each of these,

she claims:

> …there is a principle of life (divine breath, soul, or *pneuma*) that is set into
> motion by heat (sun or animal bodies) that acts upon matter, which in turn affects
> life. Matter in these depictions is far from inanimate or passive as it must engage
> the principle of life as a willing and active partner… To capture the influential
> and even determinant qualities of matter, many medieval Muslim scholars
> personify it as a feminine recipient of masculine heat. (208-209)

Thus, Ḥayy's spontaneous generation is not spontaneous at all in Kueny's view, but still

requires matter, visualized as the female member of the creation pair. Either way,

however, Ḥayy ends up achieving ultimate enlightenment by following his own reason

and intuition. His lack of a mother figure, as well as his lack of contact with society at

large, is portrayed as a positive influence, a lack of distraction and preconceived errors in

thinking.

Perhaps in an ideal society then, children could raise themselves. In real medieval

society, however, scholars, including such renowned scholars as Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad

al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah (d. 1350 CE), wrote extensively in

their morally inclined works about how to correctly raise children (Giladi, "Concepts of

Childhood" 135). In al-Ghazālī's famous treatise *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, an authoritative

work on classical Islamic education, he includes a chapter titled "On the Training of

Infant Children, their Education, and the Improvement of their Character" (*Bayān al-*

Ṭarīq fī Riyāḍat al-Ṣibyān fī Awwal Nushūʾihim wa-Wajh Taʾdībihim wa-Taḥsīn

Akhlāqihim). In this chapter, he usually refers to "the parents" collectively as a child's

first and most influential teachers, suggesting that the mother may have a role in her

children's education. However, as the child ages, al-Ghazālī assumes that the father

becomes the primary source of knowledge and director of his children's education

(Giladi, "Concepts of Childhood" 127). This appears to be supported by biographical

dictionaries, where both women and men from educated families are said to have begun

their education under their *fathers'* tutelage, as discussed briefly in the last chapter

(Berkey, "Women and Islamic Education" 147). Most references to mothering in these

works seem to focus on infant care; at least in the case of male children, the need to leave

the realm of women for the halls of tutors as soon as possible (usually around the age of

seven) was seen as a priority by many scholars of the time (Salamah-Qudsi 217). The

only contradiction to this assessment that I have found is in Aḥmad ʿAbd Ar-Rāziq's

1973 study, *La Femme au Temps des Mamlouks en Égypte*. Here he brings together many

sources on the women of the ruling Mamlūk dynasty, mostly from historical chronicles

and biographical dictionaries. He claims that, "In family life, the principal role was

played by the woman, who had to look after the children, raise them and educate them"

(186). However, he admits later that "The Arab chronicles of the Mamlūk period contain

absolutely nothing on the subject. All they say is that the harem was still the center of

children's education" (188). It is unclear here exactly what he means by the term

"harem." Since the Arabic word *ḥarīm* can often be interpreted as an architectural term

designating the innermost sections of a household, it is quite possible that the lessons

themselves occurred in the private quarters but were not necessarily organized by the

child's mother.

As we shall see later, the insistence that fathers should educate their children is

interesting because the situation is almost completely the opposite in the *sīrahs*. Of

course, as with most sources to which we have access, these treatises refer exclusively to situations within elite families. For children that had to work rather than study, the situation may have been different.

Once children were grown, it appears that mothers could reap some benefits from their sacrifices in the form of superior status and security. As Leila Ahmed puts it in her book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, "as the mother of grown sons and daughters, especially sons, a woman acquired security, status, authority, and respect within the family" (122). These women no longer had to rely purely on their other male relatives for support, but could appeal to the sons who were bound by religion and convention to treat them kindly. The influence of adult sons is given great importance in elite literature from the Middle Periods. The great biographer, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī (d. 1492 CE), for example, incorporated a volume of 1075 separate entries on women into his twelve-volume biographical dictionary. No matter their accomplishments in the wider world, whether poetess or politician, he never forgets to include details on how many children they bore, with a particular emphasis on sons (Lutfi, "Al-Sakhāwī's *Kitāb al-Nisā*'" 115). He speaks fondly of his own mother, calling her charitable, pious, and intelligent. In contrast, he says very little of his wife, something that Huda Lutfi attributes to a traditional unwillingness to shed light on one's "private" life, which apparently does not include the mother-son relationship ("Al-Sakhāwī's *Kitāb al-Nisā*'" 111). On the other hand, in a recent article on the mothers of Ṣūfī mystics, Arin Shawkat Salamah-Qudsi reveals how wives are more openly discussed in Ṣūfī literature than mothers, presumably because "mothers, according to a well-known view, were

usually surrounded by a strong tradition of sanctification that acted as a bar against any literary references" (201). It seems that context decrees what is considered acceptable to be written and what is too private, though, as we will see below, the *sīrahs* side more with Salamah-Qudsi's view that the bond of motherhood is indeed more sacred than that of marriage.

Other elite authors have also showed a great affection for their mothers in their narratives that they do not reveal when it comes to their wives or other female acquaintances. For example, the famous Ḥanbalī theologian, Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ibn Taymīyah (d. 1328), once wrote in a letter to his mother that "there is nothing that I prefer to being close to you, not only in earthly matters but also in religious matters" (*fa-lā yaẓunnu al-ẓānn annā nuʾthiru ʿalā qurbikum shayʾ min umūr al-dunyā faqaṭ, bal wa-lā nuʾthiru min umūr al-dīn mā yakūnu qurbukum arjaḥ minhu*) (Giladi, *Muslim Midwives* 53). This seemingly irreligious statement can be explained by Salamah-Qudsi's comments about Ṣūfī thought in the Middle Periods. As he points out, the idea of *ḥaqq al-wālidah*, or "the right of the mother" appears frequently in Ṣūfī hagiographies, dramatizing the struggle of the young mystic to fulfill his earthly obligations to his mother while at the same time longing to travel and more deeply develop his individual connection to God (Salamah-Qudsi 212). Mothers who valiantly renounced their rights are treated heroically, like the mother of the famous ʿAbd al-Wādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166 CE) who "allowed her son to go [to Baghdad] while making a pledge that she would not see him till the day of judgment" (Salamah-Qudsi 18). There is certainly a connection here to the Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān philosophy of an ideal motherless state, but the difficulties of such a

concept in practice show how strong the bond between mother and son was considered to be.

This sense of deep affection, commingled with obligation, toward one's mother was not confined to those bound by religious duty. The religious skeptic and poet, Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (d. 1058 CE), wrote that his grief at his mother's death was bottomless and that she was his only comfort in life (ʿAbd al-Rahman 331). Sentiments such as these should not be considered as innovations of the Middle Periods, but were part of a longer tradition. The ʿAbbāsī author, Abū ʿAlī al-Tanūkhī (d. 994 CE), also remarked on the close relationship of mothers and sons (El-Cheikh 136), and the *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, some of the earliest recorded Arab narratives, frequently place mothers in the role of intimate advisor and helper to their powerful sons (Lichtenstaedter 55). In one of these ancient anecdotes, an arrogant young warrior boasts to his mother that he will bring her a slave girl from the most powerful tribe in the region. She gives him the wise advice not to go, saying "Oh, my dear son, do not thus, for the B. Ḍabba are a tribe, from whom nobody escapes safe and sound or gains booty!" When he ignores her advice and is captured, she gives all her wealth as his ransom (Lichtenstaedter 56-57). In another anecdote, a young warrior, ʿAmr ibn Hind, tells his mother to make another man's mother serve her at a feast, in a show of dominance. The other young man kills him in his rage. (Lichtenstaedter 57-58). These citations and anecdotes serve to show that, from ancient times till the Middle Periods and beyond, a wide variety of writers honored the mother-son bond.

Other writers, however, see menace even in such a universally revered role:

mothers, and maternal figures like foster mothers or wet nurses, can scheme through their

sons and wards. When the son happens to be a powerful person, most medieval authors

see this tendency as potentially disastrous (Molins 171). While al-Tanūkhī, as mentioned

above, attests to the strong bond between mothers and sons and mentions his closeness to

his own mother, he also expounds at length upon the mothers of caliphs who used their

sons to gain power and wealth. Shaghab, mother of the caliph al-Muqtadir (d. 932 CE),

was a former slave who amassed great power with the aid of her son. She owned

extensive property and lived a life of luxury. As Al-Tanūkhī describes it, however, she

"played with the fortunes of this world" (El-Cheikh 143). Al-Rudhrāwarī (d. 1095 CE)

tells of the mother of the Būyid ruler, Ṣamṣām al-Dawlah, who convinced her son to

divide the vizierate between a man in her favor and one other man, which led to disaster.

Al-Rudhrāwarī comments that:

> Indeed when women interfere in politics, an unhealthy state of affairs results, disintegration begins and success departs. When they control affairs, the consequences are disastrous; the edifice is ruined. When they have a voice in the council, wrong measures are adopted. Destruction hastens upon the state as fast as a torrent descending. (Meisami 64)

We can notice here the similarities to the description in the "power-over" chapter of

Niẓām al-Mulk's comments on wives gaining power through their husbands. This

particular statement is grounded in a *ḥadīth* that was heavily utilized in discussing the

relationship of women to power. When the Prophet was informed that the Persians had

chosen a woman to lead them, he reportedly replied, ''a nation which places its affairs in

the hands of a woman shall never prosper!" (Al-Bukhari, *Al-Jamiʿ as-Sahih* #4425).

Because that particular empire subsequently fell to the Muslims, this was often taken as a

prophetic statement and used as an unconditional condemnation of the idea of putting

women in powerful positions. However, as Julie Scott Meisami notes,

> Most historians treat women in the same way as they do men. If the outcome of a woman's actions was positive, the woman might be praised for her wisdom, perspicacity, determination and so on; if it was negative, the old saw about women's malign influence might be trotted out, as if by rote; more often, the woman's actions were reported without comment. (64)

It should be noted, however, that this is an argument for the idea of acceptable women's

power being power-with, even in historical sources. The ends justify the means, and, if

the ends are deemed positive or successful, then so too are the means.

One interesting example of a historian's commentary on a mother ruling through

her son is that of Ibn Wāṣil (d. 1298), in his history of the Ayyūbid dynasty entitled

Mufarrij al-Kurūb fī Akhbār Banī Ayyūb. In his account, he describes Ḍayfā Khātūn, wife

of al-Malik al-Ẓāhir (the son of Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn (Saladin), the founder of the dynasty) when

she was thirty-seven years old. They had a single son, who died soon after her husband

but left a single grandson, whom Ḍayfā Khātūn successfully installed as al-Nāṣir II at

seven years of age. She ruled as his regent from 1236 CE until her death in 1243 CE (Lev

420-421). Ibn Wāṣil describes her rule as follows:

> She conducted affairs in the way the sultans do. Her kinghood was the best possible and (this happened) because her grandson was a minor…She was just and sympathetic toward her subjects, pitied them and lavished charity on them. She abolished customs duties and unjust taxation throughout the whole territory (of the kingdom) of Aleppo. She was inclined toward the mystics, the ascetics, the learned religious scholars and the jurists and offered them many gifts. (Lev 421)

As Yaakov Lev explains in his examination of this text, it "implies that female

sovereignty was acceptable only within the context of piety manifested by justice, charity

and the support of the various groups that made up the religious class" (422). Though her

status as the ruler's powerful grandmother was enough to allow her to assume the role of regent, more was required for her rule to be considered justified. This requirement of exceptional piety *and* family ties in order to justify a female ruler can also be seen in the *sīrah*s, specifically in the character of the heroine Dhāt al-Himmah. We will return to this aspect of her character at the conclusion of this chapter.

There are therefore several conclusions about motherhood to be drawn from the religious, literary, and historical works of the Islamic Middle Periods. For the most part, mothers were assumed to be emotionally close to their children, with their children revering them for their sacrifices and devotion in raising them. This relationship was considered to be so consuming that ascetics tried specifically to rid themselves of the distraction that it caused, something that was considered beyond the capabilities of most. The only exception to this rule was legal literature, which went to great lengths to ensure that mothers never retained custody of their children past the period in which they were needed to sustain them. The assumed closeness of mother and child was obviously regarded as a threat to male sovereignty. Stories about mothers of rulers who become involved in the political realm allude to this same threat. However, "all's well that ends well," and politically active mothers who did not cause what the historians considered to be disasters were unfailingly described as unusually wise and pious, since their actions, in a typical "power-with" scenario, had to be portrayed as being not on their own behalf but rather that of their sons and for the good of the society at large.

Mothers in the *sīrah*s

Motherhood in the *sīrah*s is portrayed as a challenge and sacrifice. The Qurʾānic verse above, "with troubles did his mother bear him and with troubles did she bring him forth" holds even truer for heroic sons *(The Qurʾān* 46:15). Extraordinary men make for extraordinarily difficult children and extraordinarily difficult parenting partners once they have children of their own. The narrators seem to sympathize with the heroic mother's plight. However, their message is that, for everything mothers overcome and everything they give up, they receive respect and status for their service to their children and to their community in raising extraordinary members of that community. When these mothers make mistakes or even commit sins, the ends justify the means: if the child becomes a hero, the mother has been successful, and is therefore honored. For the most part, however, the mother does not seek any reward or recognition for herself (unless she is a villainess). As the ultimate example of "power-with," the desire to uplift her children and the community is portrayed as a mother's only motivation.

In the *sīrah*s, motherhood is a necessary function of adult womanhood. Childless adult women are rare—rarer even than unmarried adult women or woman warriors. Even the most evil of villainesses and the most valiant of female heroes must also deal with child-bearing and -rearing in addition to their warrior pursuits. However, it is also acknowledged that not every woman experiences or practices motherhood in the same way. How a character deals with her children reveals much about her character. "Good" mothers treasure and encourage their children, acting as their protectors and advisors until they come of age, at which point the sons leave to join their fathers in raids and

battles and their daughters leave to join their husband's family. Sometimes mothers will accompany their sons on military campaigns, offering them support and advice. Other mothers remain at home, often using their son's reputation as a means of facilitating their assumption of leadership roles. Whether on campaign or home with the tribe, the mother of a hero is respected; her advice and orders are heeded almost as much as the hero's. The work done by these mothers in raising important sons, especially if they manage to overcome the unusually difficult circumstances engendered by raising a hero or sacrifice their own comfort to do so, is construed as the ultimate benefit to society and therefore the ultimate "power-with." Mothers perform this power-with in three different stages throughout the life cycle of their child (usually a son). The first is the act of bearing sons, in which a mother sacrifices her own body, comfort, and sometimes relationships for the greater good that is giving life to a son. The next stage is raising those sons, in which a mother is empowered to make choices about her children's direction in life, from their education to their marriages. In this stage, many sins can be forgiven as "power-with" so long as they shape a child's character in such a way that he becomes a hero. Finally, when a son is fully grown, a mother can glean several benefits in terms of behavior not usually considered acceptable for women. She can choose to either stay close to her son and act as his advisor, co-conspirator, or go-to military companion, or she can stay at home while he fights, supporting his interests within their society through political or monetary maneuverings. In each stage, her actions are condoned and even lauded, so long as she is sincerely attempting to help her son and, by extension, her society. Of course, when a mother's activities go over the line of "power-with" to "power-over," the

portrayals change drastically. "Bad" mothers deny or manipulate the mother-son bond for their own benefit. The "unnaturalness" of such a posture results in these women being portrayed as some of the most repulsive villainesses in popular narrative.

Bearing sons: Strength & Sacrifice

In the *sīrah*s, women are often held responsible for their sons' prestige. After all, they nurture them inside their own bodies, and, in the *sīrah*s if not in actual medieval society, provided for their education, as we will explore below. Through the lenses of both nature and nurture, the ultimate responsibility for their sons' personality is considered theirs. In Malcolm Lyons's introduction to his translations and outlines of several *sīrahs*, he claims that greatness was thought to pass down from the mother's bloodline:

> [There existed a] commonly held belief that it is the mother, rather than the father, who transmits genetic excellence to the child…the point is spelt out most clearly by a Kurd who wants to marry al-Qannāṣa, the mother of the hero, Ẓālim. He wants a son from her as 'it was she' (rather than her husband, the great ʿAbd al-Wahhāb) 'who was responsible for Ẓālim's noble qualities'…heroes require heroic mothers. (1:42)

I have not seen this assertion elsewhere, however, and it seems just as probable (and just as interesting) to attribute a son's character to his mother because, at least in the *sīrah*s if not in reality, it is she who raises and educates children, while fathers of heroes often either reject their offspring as part of a heroic origin story or are at the very least largely absent while they are fighting in battles. In the example of al-Qannāṣa and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb that Lyons mentions, for example, the father does not even know that his son exists until he is already grown. Though this is considered normal, if not ideal, for a hero's father, a hero's mother must meet a different and higher standard. No matter the

challenges, which are often dire, a good mother sacrifices her own body, well-being, and sometimes even eternal soul for her heroic son.

Heroic tales often begin by recounting a heroic pregnancy and birth. The term "heroic pregnancy" may strike the modern ear as strange, but it is merely the use of the term "heroic" in a different context. In his work on women in African epic narrative, Joseph Mbele notes that the modern concept of "heroic" is exceedingly male-centric, and as such "female characters attain heroic status by taking on male roles: typically, they disguise themselves as men and do what men are supposed to do, especially fighting battles" (Mbele 62). He proposes an alternate view of heroism that includes bravery and self-sacrifice outside of war. His first example of this is heroic pregnancy:

> The mother may carry the unborn hero for seven years, as is the case with Sundiata, or one hundred and fifty years, as is the case with the Akoma Mba epic, suffering incredibly in the process... Sundiata's mother not only endures the long pregnancy and the insults of other women, but she travels with Sundiata into exile, guiding and protecting him, and offering him crucial advice. (63)

Though such lengthy pregnancies are not the norm in the *sīrah*s, heroic children are indeed born in circumstances that are unusual and challenging for the mother. Heroes are often conceived in response to fervent and repeated prayer, sometimes overcoming obstacles like infertility, old age, or even unwillingness on the part of the mother. In the *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the hero Abū Zayd's father Rizq takes several wives in his attempt to have children; it takes four years before the prayers of Abū Zayd's mother are finally answered and she conceives (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl al-Kubrá* 50). Both the hero Dhāt al-Himmah, mother of the hero ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, and Fāṭimah, mother of the hero ʿAlī al-Zaybaq in his *sīrah*, are warrior women who would rather fight than raise children and have no sexual interest in the men whom they are forced to marry. Both are drugged and

raped, and both conceive heroic sons (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 7: 10; *Sīrat ʿAlī al-Zaybaq* 26).

Even *in utero* heroes are larger and heavier than average and require more sustenance (Renard 135). Prophetic and sometimes disturbing dreams (depending on whether the son will be a heroic or villainous figure) accompany the pregnancies. In *Sīrah Dhāt al-Himmah*, for example, two women give birth to villains at the same time, with one being told in a dream that he will bring dissension, and the other with vivid dream-images describing him as "the Satan of his time." Actual births are rarely described, but on at least one occasion, a mother is beaten so that her son, ʿUmar, will be born on a fortuitous date (*Sīrat Baybars* 1: 23). These challenges are always portrayed sympathetically, the women coming across as tragic heroes unappreciated by those around them. The ultimate exemplar of this sacrifice is Rabāb, mother of the hero Jundabah, a forebear of Dhāt al-Himmah. Rabāb is killed by a slave after he tries to seduce her soon after giving birth to her son. And yet, the narrative claims, even after her death her milk keeps flowing, sustaining her child until a childless king comes upon them in the desert (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 1: 11). The almost superhuman strength of these mothers, and their ability to persevere through challenges, sets them up as saintly figures sacrificing themselves for the greater good.

Raising Sons: Forgivable Sins

The mother-child relationship in the period between birth and adulthood is not often discussed in elite literature from the Middle Periods, but in the *sīrah*s it is where the bulk of the action takes place. After the birth, mothers of heroes have to draw even

deeper on their wells of courage and ingenuity. Heroes are often rejected by their fathers because of differences: often they are born black, while their fathers are white, or, in the case of the female hero Dhāt al-Himmah, born a girl instead of the desired boy. Of course, accusations of infidelity or unfitness are then directed at the mother, and several heroic mothers are banished or repudiated by their husbands after giving birth. In *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, the main hero Abū Zayd's mother, Khaḍrā, becomes pregnant after seeing a vicious black bird and asking God for a son like the bird, "even if he is black." As it turns out, the boy is born dark-skinned, and his father Rizq assumes infidelity, banishing Khaḍrā and the boy and telling her to return to her parents. Khaḍrā is devastated, reasoning that her parents will also assume that she has been unfaithful and kill her if she returns to them, while any of her husband's allies will turn her away out of respect for him. When she determines that she must then ask one of Rizq's enemies for sanctuary to protect her son, her escort leaves her and the infant to make her way through the desert alone (*Sīrat Banī Hilāl al-Kubrá* 1: 22-23). As another example, when Dhāt al-Himmah gives birth to her dark-skinned son, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, the other women advise her to kill the boy lest she be accused of infidelity. She refuses, exclaiming piously that it is God who decides who is created black and who is created white, and that as "a woman preoccupied with the next world," she cannot kill a child, an act which would never be sanctioned by Islam (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 7: 12). The women's warnings come true, however, and she has to spend much of her son's young life fending off the boy's father, who brings her before judge after judge in a fruitless attempt to avoid acknowledging his son (pt. 7: 30). She is so distressed by the situation that she threatens to fall on her sword

on multiple occasions, but the justice of her cause convinces her to carry on (pt. 7: 17, 32).

As we can see from these illustrations in the *sīrah*s, the process of raising a heroic child is portrayed as painful and difficult. Women who overcome the obstacles are portrayed sympathetically for their sacrifices. They are also allowed to commit infractions that other women are not and without punishment: Khaḍrā turns to the tribe's enemies for help, for example, and yet ends up in a position of honor rather than suffering a dishonorable death, because her service in bearing and raising a hero turns everything she does for him into "power-with."

Another questionable action that is deemed acceptable for mothers is deception, which often comes into play when a hero's mother is foreign to his father's tribe or kingdom. Foreign mothers face even more difficulties than their children. They often stay amongst their own people rather than following their husbands on their travels and campaigns. When the woman's people are hostile to the husband's, she must dissemble in order to protect herself and her son. For example, the hero Iskandar's mother, Hind, in *Sīrat Iskandar* is distressed when she discovers that she is pregnant after the father leaves her. However, her own father is in need of an heir, so he claims the boy as his own. Hind only reveals his true parentage when she reads in a letter that her son is unknowingly about to kill his half-brother (Doufikar-Aerts 292).

Even if her people are friendly to her husband however, a woman may hide her son's parentage as a way to keep him close, since heroic sons tend to set off to fight for their fathers the moment they get the chance (*Sīrat Ḥamzah* 2: 277; *Sīrat Dhāt al-*

Himmah pt. 20: 78). A major trope in several of the narratives, such as *Sīrat Baybars*, *Qiṣṣat Ḥamzah* and *Sīrat Sayf al-Tījān*, is for a mother to finally reveal her son's parentage once he meets his father in battle. Unlike the historical Ṣūfī sons discussed above, young heroes rarely ask their mothers for permission to join their fathers or express sadness at leaving them behind. In fact, many are angry about the deception that their mothers have carried out. A good example of this trope occurs in *Qiṣṣat Ḥamzah*, in which the Zoroastrian princess Ḥasanah converts and marries the hero Rustam, who leaves her with her father soon after their wedding, never knowing that she has become pregnant. Ḥasanah's father advises her to hide her son's parentage, warning her that sons always go off in search of their fathers and fight in their wars. She takes the advice, but the ruse is discovered when her son Balkān walks in on her praying in the Muslim manner. Balkān reacts with anger when she tells him the truth, saying that, if Ḥasanah were not his mother, he would kill her for letting him worship "the false fire," as well as for hiding his father's identity from him (*Sīrat Ḥamzah* 3: 210-211). As his grandfather has predicted, he immediately leaves to seek out his father. In this case filial loyalty only goes as far as honor demands, but Balkān's statement explicitly sets up the power dynamic here: mothers are allowed to engage in activities that others, women or men, cannot without punishment. The sin of a mother lying about a child's parentage, a very serious crime in a culture where, as mentioned in my introduction, even an adopted child has to be carefully separated from the adoptive parents' lineage, seems to be easily forgiven so long as she does eventually reunites the child with his father. In this example we should observe that Ḥasanah's motivations are partially selfish: she wishes her son to

stay close to her, as well as to keep him safe. However her behavior is portrayed with great sympathy, as another form of the "bereaved mother" trope from the *maqāmāt* described above: mothers do not wish their children to leave them, something that is considered natural, if somewhat inconvenient at times.

A final action that is considered forgivable for a mother in certain circumstances is abandonment of her children. As we have mentioned above, fathers abandoning their children is quite common in the narratives and this abandonment and future quest to win his father's respect is often portrayed as an essential part of a hero's development. Though the narratives are sympathetic toward fatherless children, the act of abandoning a child seems to have no effect on a father's character or success. They are never punished for the betrayal, and usually are happily reunited with their sons once they mature. For mothers, however, the situation is more complicated. Similarly to the sin of lying to her son, a mother abandoning her son usually reflects poorly on her and she will be punished, unless she repents and makes up for the betrayal later. In *Sīrat al-Iskandar,* Humānī, mother of the hero Dārāb al-Rūmī, and in *Sīrat Sayf*, Qamarīyah, mother of Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, both fear that their newborn sons will seize power from them when they grow up (Doufikar-Aerts 284, *Sīrat Sayf* 1: 27-28). Both try to kill the boys, but the first is stopped by her midwife, and the second by divine intervention. Humānī immediately regrets her actions and is eventually reconciled with her son, suffering no future consequences (Doufikar-Aerts 289). Qamarīyah only regrets that she did not succeed in killing her son, and becomes the greatest villain in the *sīrah* (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 152). Ward Shāh, in *Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh*, abandons her son out of fear that, when he grows up, he will assimilate to

the local religion and punish her for converting to Islam. When he eventually returns

fully-grown, she promptly abdicates the throne in his favor, disappearing from the

narrative thereafter (1: 9, 13). Maymūnah, mother of the hero Baḥrūn in *Sīrat Dhāt al-*

Himmah, allows a villain to follow through on his threat to throw her son into the sea

rather than submitting to him sexually (pt. 39: 21). Mother and son are eventually

reunited when he is grown, and, as we shall see below, her future devotion to him leads

her to stain her very soul (pt. 44: 5-6). Based on these examples, the posture of the *sīrah*s

on the issue of child abandonment seems to be that it is a forgivable offense, so long as

the mother remembers her place later on and makes amends. This is in contrast to fatherly

abandonment, which never negatively affects the father. Similarly to a father's

abandonment, however, a mother's abandonment serves a purpose: it is often a crucial

feature of a hero's formative years, allowing him to experience life in humble

circumstances with a foster family.

When a child destined to become a hero is abandoned by both of his parents, the

story always grants him a foster family. If he is still an infant, the child is sometimes

suckled by an animal instead of a woman, but there are no Tarzans or Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓāns

in the *sīrah*s. Someone, usually a childless couple, always comes upon the child and

decides to adopt him. Thus foster mothers come into play in the universe of motherhood.

Five of the tale collections I have analyzed (*Sīrat ʿAntar, Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah, Qiṣṣat*

Fayrūz Shāh, Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan, and *Sīrat Iskandar*) feature foster mothers, and it

proves to be a recurring theme in *Sīrat Baybars* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*. Most of the

mothers are of a lower social class than the hero's original family (heroes rarely come

from common stock), giving the hero a humble but righteous upbringing, yet retaining his noble bloodline. Usually, once the sons have grown, they end up back with their original parents, either because the mother has kept track of them, as is the case with the warrior mothers who do not wish to be burdened by a child but do not want to miss out on a potential warrior to add to their tribe, or because they discover their parentage and leave to find their birth family. The latter case is quite common. After all, heroes are unusually intelligent and talented even amongst their peers, so it is assumed that amongst commoners they will really stand out. As noted earlier, Dārāb, a hero in *Sīrat Iskandar*, fits this pattern. He is abandoned by her mother out of fear that he will take her throne when he grows up. When he is found floating down a river (like Moses and Sargon before him!) by a childless couple, they adopt, name, and raise him. When Dārāb reaches age twenty-four, however, he decides that these average people cannot possibly be his real parents. He confronts his foster mother with a sword, at which point she tells him everything she knows. He then goes in search of his birth mother, never looking back (Doufikar-Aerts 7r). In *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* we have a conflicting example, however. The minor hero Madhbahūn, daughter of the warrior woman Nūrah and the "man of wiles" al-Baṭṭāl, is raised by a foster mother whom he trusts implicitly. When Nūrah recognizes him as a grown man and asks for his help in a difficult situation, he refuses to believe her, or to help her, until his beloved foster mother confirms her story (pt. 43: 13). When she does, he considers it his duty to help his birth mother, even though his true loyalty remains with his foster family.

The situation in *Sīrat Baybars* is somewhat different in this respect, but is a good representation of the importance a mother figure plays in a hero's life. Though we learn that Baybars' parents were Khurasanian royalty, they are absent from his life from a young age. Thus, Baybars is indeed an orphaned slave when he is introduced to the story, but he gains at least two devoted, noble foster mothers without ever showing interest in finding his biological parents. In this tale foster mothers share basically the same function as biological mothers in the other tales: they act as educators, helpers, encouragers, and steadfast supporters of the hero. The first foster mother is his lifelong supporter Fāṭimah; a merchant and widow who adopts Baybars as a child when her nephew unfairly accuses him of assault (1: 162-164). We can see echoes of the Prophet's first wife Khādijah, also an older businesswoman who sacrificed her own standing and comfort in order to nurture and support the young Prophet. Fāṭimah worries about Baybars, gives him safe haven when he needs it, and supports him through many troubles.

However, it appears that one foster mother is not enough for a truly orphaned hero. After all, Baybars is destined to become royalty. Though having a commoner for a foster mother can teach him humility and hard work, he will miss out on too much knowledge without a royal mother to turn to when he is grown. As such, the narrative introduces a second mother figure for him: Fāṭimah Shajar al-Durr, who was discussed in detail in the last chapter because of the interesting differences in historical and popular sources regarding her brief period of political power. Shajar al-Durr, as described previously, is portrayed sympathetically in Baybars' *sīrah*, and one of the ways in which her piety is expressed is through her relationship with Baybars, whom she adopts and

supports in his rise to power (1: 462, 2: 933). She also treats him like a natural son in the matters of inheritance: the only stipulations that she demands at the time of her second marriage are that Baybars can visit her when he pleases and that he be made heir to her new husband. Even the enormous dowry that she requests ends up being for Baybars' benefit (2: 1004).

The fact that Baybars gains two foster mothers instead of just one suggests an anxiety about his orphanhood—it is so harmful to be without a mother that the narrator has to make sure that the hero has multiple women who are willing to foster him in order to make up for the deficit. If foster fathers are mentioned at all in the narratives, like fathers in general they play a much smaller role in their sons' young lives than maternal figures. As a whole, then, because of the theme of abandonment that helps build heroic character, foster parents, and foster mothers in particular, are given prominent roles in shaping young heroes. This is truly an act of "power-with." The provision of this service also seems to allow mothers who abandon their sons to live their lives without judgment, so long as they repent.

In addition to being forgiven for sins like lying and abandonment in service of their sons, mother figures are also allowed to (and expected to) direct a child's education, which, as I have already discussed, was described as a father's responsibility in the historical and legal literature of the Middle Periods. In the *sīrah*s, however, it is considered a mother's responsibility to provide an education and to determine its course. This is a very interesting discrepancy that could be a function of the ubiquitously absent

fathers in the narratives, or it might suggest that real mothers were more involved in their children's education in historical Middle Periods than other sources reveal.

Whichever is the case, even mothers who abandon their children to foster parents in the *sīrah*s take them back when they are mature enough to be educated. In the Bedouin romances like *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, this level of maturity seems to be demonstrated by the child's demand to learn how to ride a horse and fight (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 7: 13). Warrior mothers will often train their sons in the arts of war themselves. The warrior mother Ṭurbān in *Sīrat Ḥamzah*, who we mentioned in the last chapter as an example of the temporary nature of "power to" because Ḥamzah asks her to give up fighting once she achieves her revenge, manages to use her martial talents in a way that is more acceptable to her community than fighting on the battlefield: she personally trains her son Saʿd (2: 194-197). But her guidance does not stop there. When an opportunity arises to fight an enemy hero and prevent a war, Ṭurbān prompts her son to petition Ḥamzah to fight in his place, since as she puts it, it is better "to die in battle rather than in bed!" However, when her son does not prove to be up to the task, she makes sure that things do not go too far: the enemy hero refuses to attack her when she rushes onto the field of battle to carry her wounded son away (3: 53).

Less warlike mothers outsource their sons' education to others, but still determine the course that the education will take. For example, in *Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh*, the eponymous hero repeatedly refuses to become king because he wishes to spend his time fighting. Instead, the emperor Ḍārāb crowns Fayrūz Shāh's son, Bahman. Bahman is called "the most intelligent of the kings of the world," largely because his mother, ʿAyn

al-Ḥayāt, wisely chooses to pass over warrior training in favor of more scholarly pursuits

(4: 82-83). In an example that does not turn out as well, the hero's wife Mihrdukār in

Sīrat Ḥamzah also refuses to teach her son Qabbāṭ how to fight, claiming that she hoped

that it would keep her only son safe and away from the endless wars in which her

husband was involved. However, the son ends up being betrayed and killed by a

confidante; his mother is overcome by grief, and her husband blames her for the death (3:

84). However, regardless of the outcome of these educational decisions, fathers seem to

have little interest in or responsibility for teaching their sons. It is clear that mothers take

seriously this opportunity to shape their sons' futures, and, as such, that of their tribes and

societies. This is far different from the end of a mother's control after childbirth that was

described in the legal literature we explored above.

Mothering Adult Sons: Benefits

Once sons are grown, mothers can reap small but significant benefits in the

*sīrah*s, gaining the ability to take on unconventional roles like that of a helper, supporter,

and/or loyal sidekick to their sons. As helpers and, at times, "women of wiles" (such as

ʿAlī al-Zaybaq's mother, Fāṭimah, and sometimes Dhāt al-Himmah), these mothers are

constantly by their sons' sides, offering advice, doing favors, and sometimes even

working in secret on their behalf. They worry about their warrior sons, of course: a

recurring trope involves a mother demanding that the men in their lives drop everything

to help a mother's endangered son. Especially in *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, in which

several of the hero's wives live together, bickering over whose sons Sayf loves more

becomes a recurring theme (2: 122, 3: 114). In various *sīrahs*, mothers also plead with

enemies for their sons' lives, usually successfully (*Sīrat Sayf al-Tījān* 276, *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 1: 22, 84; *Sīrat Ḥamzah* 3: 52). Others resort to violence to defend or avenge their children, whether this means gathering armies to rescue them (*Qiṣṣat al-Zīr* 25, *Sīrat Sayf al-Tījān* 178, Lenora 120) or personally taking on their son's killer (*Qiṣṣat ʿAntarah* 8: 457, *Qiṣṣat Fayrūz Shāh* 33). All of these actions are considered acceptable, despite the usual disapproval of violence and political activity by women, because, by defending or avenging a valued member of the community, these mothers are benefiting the community as a whole.

By their service these "good" mothers gain the security of close proximity to their sons, the respect of the tribe as a whole for mothering a leader, and continued opportunities to influence the course of events. Unlike the temporary "power-to" situations of sisters and daughters who take on the roles of helpers and sidekicks, this state of increased control can last their entire lives, so long as they make sure to stay on good terms with their sons. Their sons in general seem to value and seek out their advice. When they do not follow their mothers' advice, they usually regret it. For example, in *Sīrat al-Ḥākim*, al-Ḥākim's wife Maryam advises her son not to get involved in his father's treasure-hunting adventures, and also advises him against another excursion when she thinks that the main villain must be lying in wait. On both occasions she is correct; both trips turn into disasters from which she and the other women have to save the reckless young man (Lenora 75, 78). Sons are also expected to respect and honor their mothers, and to return their unflinching loyalty. Even after Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan's evil mother Qamarīyah has attempted to kill him several times, he still attempts to serve her,

once saying: "Mother, all I ask from this world is your pleasure. If a son pleases his mother, then God is pleased with him" (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 201). When ʿAbd al-Azīz's mother is captured in *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah*, he vows that he will not marry his fiancée (necessarily remaining abstinent as well, of course) until he has news of her. When mother and son are finally reunited, they simultaneously faint with joy (pt. 51: 51, pt. 55: 37). Dhāt al-Himmah's son ʿAbd al-Wahhāb also rewards her with his loyalty. When she is kidnapped, a companion opines that "if you asked for the whole world in exchange for her, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb would think it a small thing" (pt. 13: 75). Only villains, like the two-faced al-Masʿūd who beats his mother in *Sīrat al-Ḥākim*, are cruel or violent to their mothers (Lenora 104). This is a qualification that cannot be extended to other family relationships, since even heroes may beat their wives and sisters without losing their heroic status.

A good example of the unconventional life that can result from mothering a hero is that of the heroine Dhāt al-Himmah, which brings together these three stages of motherhood (bearing sons, raising sons, and helping adult sons). As is typical for heroes, the process of giving birth to ʿAbd al-Wahhāb is no easy task: not only is he the product of her father, servant, and husband teaming up to accomplish her rape, but he is also born black, leading to dogged accusations of adultery (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 7: 15). Dhāt al-Himmah's perseverance in challenging these accusations, as well as weathering them even after her innocence is proven, is also portrayed as a heroic act of suffering and sacrifice. For example, long after respected Meccan judges attribute ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's coloring to intercourse during menstruation, opponents on the battlefield continue to taunt

her with epithets like "slave's mistress" (pt. 16: 47). In terms of raising her son, she trains

him herself to ride and fight, grasping the opportunity to shape his future as a warrior.

When the young man declares that he is now equal to his mother and should end his

education, she arranges a final exam by disguising herself and challenging him to a duel,

remarking proudly on his skill even as she defeats him (pt. 7: 65). Once ʿAbd al-Wahhāb

is grown, Dhāt al-Himmah is able to reap some benefits for her efforts bearing and raisin

him. First and most importantly, one of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's earliest heroic acts is to duel

with his father and paternal grandfather, killing them in the process. In this way, she is

both avenged and rid of their malicious influence, free to take up the mantle of political

and military power that has always been her goal (pt. 8: 8). After this point, most of Dhāt

al-Himmah's adventures are undertaken together with her son. She acts as his "woman of

wiles," rescuing him with ruses when he is captured (pt. 26: 36, pt. 32: 14, 51: 28-29, pt.

67: 62) and giving him advice (pt. 34: 63, pt. 61: 2). She also fights alongside him in

battle after battle, rescuing him with violence when her ruses do not work (pt. 28: 33, pt.

61: 10). In this way, like other heroic mothers, she gains the respect of her son and her

society, as a practitioner of the form of selfless piety known as motherhood.

However, even these adult benefits come with difficulties for Dhāt al-Himmah.

Like most heroes from the *sīrah*s, at times her son is arrogant and thoughtless, and his

mother has to regularly challenge him to duels to put him in his place or to keep him from

making bad decisions (pt. 7: 64, pt. 13: 6-7, pt. 19: 36-37, pt. 37: 31-32). For example,

when he is fighting his closest friend for the hand of Princess Nūrah, Dhāt al-Himmah

regrets that she has to fight her own son in order to prevent him from stealing the

beautiful princess away, but she does so anyway. In this instance she is so angry that she

ues ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's patronymic, "ibn al-Ḥārith," connecting him to his hated father

(pt. 20: 24). In another, perhaps less selfless example, when he tells his mother to join the

other women in their spinning and "leave your son to face the brave heroes," she

disguises herself and challenges him to a duel (pt. 13: 6-7). While Dhāt al-Himmah wins

each of these battles, she nevertheless saves her son's pride by acknowledging the

closeness of the match (pt. 19: 37). In reality, she continues to direct his education—in

learning to be a more community-minded and moral hero—throughout his entire life, not

simply during his childhood. Again, this is portrayed as right and proper, even though she

is exerting dominance over her son: as a powerful man, ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's decisions can

have wide-ranging impacts, and his mother's guidance is sorely needed to make sure that

these decisions are good for the community. It also shows that, though Dhāt al-Himmah

continues to be a warrior and a leader, motherhood is her most important priority. There

are other examples of this as well. When she is ambushed by her uncle and in grave

danger, she tells him that her only regret in dying would be to be parted from her son (pt.

7: 58-59). When she is told that he has been killed, she faints before breaking her

warriors' blades, swearing never to serve the Caliph, ride a horse, or fight again (pt. 61:

20). In this way, her devotion to her son is shown to override everything else that she

loves and everything on which she has built her life as a warrior, leader, and devotee of

Islam.

On the other side of the spectrum, we can explore the actions of the villainous

mother from the *Sīrat Sayf ibn Dhī Yazan*, Qamarīyah. As discussed above, the mother-

son relationship in the *sīrah*s is depicted as the most intimate human connection possible. As such, the inversion of this ideal state creates the most memorable villainess in all the tales. We first encounter Qamarīyah as a slave-girl sent to Sayf's father, ostensibly as a gift, but with secret orders to poison the king on their first night together. The ruse is discovered before she can carry it out, but she graciously surrenders the poison and regains the king's trust and love, immediately becoming pregnant with his child. After her husband's death (the cause of which is unknown, but an assassination from within the harem is suggested), Qamarīyah is named regent and finds that she enjoys her powerful position *(Sīrat Sayf* 1:26*).* When her son is born, she is filled with envy and rage, fearing that, when he grows up, he will wrest the kingdom from her grasp. She tries to kill him, but her arm is stayed by God; eventually, her midwife convinces her to abandon the infant in the wilderness so as to let God sort out his fate (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 27-28). Unlike some mothers who abandon their sons in the *sīrah*s, the narrator repeats again and again that Qamarīyah feels no remorse for her actions; once she has finally gotten rid of her child, she is "joyful" *(Sīrat Sayf* 1: 29*).* Thus, we can see that Qamarīyah starts off similarly to "good mothers," in having a difficult and unwanted pregnancy. However, whereas Dhāt al-Himmah refuses to kill her child in order to save herself, despite the urging of her companions, Qamarīyah actually attempts to do so out of paranoia, and is disappointed when she is unsuccessful.

Qamarīyah and her son are separated until Sayf is already a grown man. During these years of separation, Sayf gains a strikingly large, almost excessive, number of substitute mother figures in his life to reconcile his unfortunate motherless state, a

situation very reminiscent of Baybars' described above. First come a gazelle and a queen

of the *jinn* who suckle him in the wilderness (*Sīrat Sayf* 1: 29, 36), then a foreign queen

and mother of his future wife, Shāmah, and finally ʿĀqilah, the sorceress-mother of

another future wife, Ṭāmah, with whom he regularly exchanges the terms "mother" and

"son" (*Sīrat Sayf* 1:79; 88). Similarly to Baybars' story, Sayf's unusually large number

of devoted female helper-characters, including his foster-sister ʿĀqiṣah and his several

warrior wives, can be interpreted as an attempt by the storyteller to fill the unacceptable

gap in heroic guidance left by his unnaturally cruel mother, who never attempts to find

him. She does not direct his education or even protect him in secret, but rather pursues

her own political ambitions in his absence. Thus, unlike the mothers who take their

educational responsibilities seriously in order to uplift their sons and their communities,

Qamarīyah sets about gaining power for herself, to the disadvantage of both her son and

the city she rules, which she treats poorly.

When Sayf is twenty years old and has already had many adventures, he is sent to

attack Qamarīyah's city. Under her guidance, the city has purposely withheld its tribute

to the king, who happens to be Sayf's *jinn* foster father (1: 136-137). Qamarīyah pays a

secret visit to the young hero, planning to seduce him by wrestling with him naked.

However, instead she recognizes him through a necklace that her midwife had convinced

her to leave on the baby that she abandoned in the wilderness. Immediately changing

tactics, she tells Sayf that she was in a state of madness when she abandoned him and that

she has been miserable without him, weeping until he forgives her (1: 144). She now

leads him on a false quest to retrieve his father's treasure, during which she flatters him

shamelessly (at one point Sayf asks himself in justification, "Is it not the natural way of things… that mothers should feel compassion for their children?") until she can find another opportunity to kill him (1: 152). Throughout the remainder of the story, Qamarīyah attempts to kill her son several more times (1: 158, 202, 279). After each occasion Sayf manages to convince himself that she has finally changed her ways. In the end, it is his foster-sister and steadfast supporter, ʿĀqiṣah, who must kill Qamarīyah when he still cannot bring himself to do it (1: 368). Qamarīyah's hatred for her son is so unnatural that the young hero simply cannot believe it, even when it is proven again and again. As a villainess Qamarīyah inverts the "natural order." Instead of using the "power-with" embodied by most mothers, who exercise authority over their sons and the societies that trust their sons in return for the self-sacrifice involved with raising a hero, Qamarīyah merely desires "power-over" everyone whom she encounters, including her own son. Not only does she not nurture her son, she also leverages his desire to trust her, not in order to benefit the community by guiding and advising him, but instead to try killing him. Her gruesome death is portrayed as being long overdue.

The Female Hero: Ultimate Power-with

    It is important to recognize that the main difference between the powerful figures of Qamarīyah and Dhāt al-Himmah is a lack of "power-with" on Qamarīyah's part, which can also be understood as an expression of piety. Motherhood is a certain expression of the self-sacrificing piety required for women to exercise their influence in an acceptable way, but for women exercising as much power as female heroes or villains, typical motherhood is not enough to justify their actions. Other expressions of piety are required

as well, including the use of one's talents to enhance one's social and religious community. In reality both Qamarīyah and Dhāt al-Himmah demonstrate "power over" and "power to": it is the lack of any attempt at "power-with" on Qamarīyah's part, and the exceptional lifelong pursuit of "power-with" on Dhāt al-Himmah's part, that separates them. In every aspect "power-with" is how a female hero is made.

Dhāt al-Himmah exhibits "power over" in the ways in which she dominates men in battle and overrides their decisions (*Sīrat Dhāt al-Himmah* pt. 6: 58-59, pt. 22: 50-51, pt. 32: 59-60). She is even disrespectful toward the Caliphs when they violate her strict interpretation of Islamic morality. For example, when she hears that the Caliph might be mistreating the descendants of the Prophet, she swears to stop serving him, and later does fight the Caliph's forces when she disagrees with the succession (pt. 6: 41, pt. 69: 36). Perhaps in punishment for these breaches of propriety, she faces difficulties: the narrator has her overcome an unwanted marriage, marital rape, and the betrayal of her male relatives in league with her Caliph (pt. 6: 65-66). However, unlike many characters who exhibit "power over," she is not ignominiously killed or "converted" into a submissive wife, but instead goes on to lead a hero's life. Dhāt al-Himmah also exhibits "power to" in continuing her martial lifestyle and never agreeing to marry, despite many offers (pt. 6: 39, pt. 45: 37). She is not able to behave this way because of her position as a daughter or a sister to powerful men, as is the case with most other women. Not only does she have no brothers, but also she can only pursue her own goals by being freed from her father's influence rather than being able to leverage any relationship with him for her own purposes.

Instead, Dhāt al-Himmah's lifestyle and leadership are tolerated because of the manner in which she allows her exceptional piety to direct her talent. She is the most talented warrior and leader of her age, and as such she leads her tribe to greatness and success. But even so, the narrators are careful to explicitly justify all her actions as service to another, whether it be to her son or to God. For example, she explains to the Caliph that she does not want to be married because "I am a woman who does not like to be close to men, for God has made me detest the tents of women and of ladies secluded by curtains" (pt. 6: 65). In this statement, our hero positions herself as liminal, outside of what she considers to be normal society. And yet, she specifically attributes this tendency to the will of God. Thus, it is God who has created her this way, and as such it is His will that she live an unconventional life.

However, even with her service to God, her heroic son, and her society, her actions as a warrior and a leader require more proof of her piety. As such, she is frequently shown to be the exception to the rule of feminine behavior rather than a model of what is considered acceptable: one of her major roles in the *sīrah* is to be the upholder of heterosexual and patriarchal norms, as the only person who can control other women who are spreading *fitnah* by dominating men. Despite her claim just noted, about "detesting" seclusion with women, there is in fact a subset of women whom she admires: warrior women like herself. Her relationships with these warrior women mostly revolve around a search for marriage partners for her son: even in her homosocial relationships, Dhāt al-Himmah is serving heterosexual norms. For example, with the dangerous character of Nūrah whose story we have discussed previously, the situation is dire. Desire

for the young warrior princess has forced a wedge between Dhāt al-Himmah's son and his best friend Al-Baṭṭāl. None of the men can defeat the princess in battle because of their desire. In the end, Dhāt al-Himmah is the only one who can fix the problem. She captures the girl in battle despite being tripped by her own soldiers, and eventually needs to be summoned by al-Baṭṭāl on his wedding night to drug and tie up the bride so he can consummate the marriage (pt. 20: 43). This is perhaps the clearest example of Dhāt al-Himmah's sacrifice: despite her own terrible experience with marital rape, she is willing to inflict the same fate upon another in order to uphold the social order and subdue an agent of chaos.

This is not the only example of Dhāt al-Himmah playing this role, either. While watching the Christian Queen Zanānīr (who, like Nūrah, "has no interest in men" and in fact "inclines toward the ladies") fight a mutual enemy, Dhāt al-Himmah prays to God for her success and also for her conversion. Zanānīr does succeed in the battle, but, when she refuses to convert, Dhāt al-Himmah is obliged to capture the dangerously attractive woman herself (pt. 26: 36). The princess Maymūnah, also having "no interest in men," only decides to marry Dhāt al-Himmah's son because of her admiration for his mother. The narrative portrays the two women as being close, right up until the moment when Dhāt al-Himmah kills her for reconverting to Christianity and making war on the Muslim tribes (pt. 55: 35). This cycle of respect, betrayal and violence plays out again and again in Dhāt al-Himmah's *sīrah*. Dhāt al-Himmah's status as a single woman, who is considered admirable against all odds for her devoted motherhood and piety on the one hand and for her many successes in tribal and martial leadership on the other, means that

she is the only person who can stop the agents of chaos that women exercising "power over" men represent. Again and again, she visits violence upon the only members of her gender whom she admires in order to uphold the social order of her tribe, that being in itself an expression of her piety.

Dhāt al-Himmah is unique in the *sīrah*s as the only main female hero, and, based on all the requirements that she has to satisfy, it is easy to understand why. She has to be a self-sacrificing mother, a devout Muslim, committed to the good of her community, and an upholder of law and custom for everyone but herself in order to achieve such a status. She combines in a single character "power over" and "power to," but in the end, as with all other women in the *sīrah*s, it is to "power with," in several different manifestations, that she owes her portrayal as heroic.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is clear that motherhood was both respected and feared in medieval Islamic society, and that this is reflected in *sīrah* literature. However, while elite literature usually goes straight from the intimacy of infancy to dutiful adult sons, much of the *sīrah*s' treatment of motherhood takes place in that very intermediate period that elite literature avoids. While elite literature stresses a father's responsibility to educate his children, the *sīrah*s usually omit him altogether during a child's formative years. It is impossible to say which picture is a more accurate representation of motherhood in the Middle Periods, but the love and devotion shown by mother figures and the emotional (and perhaps physical) distance of fathers in popular literature obviously resonated with audiences in order for it to be so ubiquitous in every narrative.

The overwhelmingly positive picture of mothers, however, does not necessarily reflect on the image of women as a whole. The respect, liberties and extra freedoms granted to mothers are balanced by their sacrifice and devotion throughout the hero's childhood, and thus still require submission and service in order to be earned. A mother is judged heroic for her sacrifices, not necessarily for her actions. While ambition on behalf of her children is extolled, ambition for her own sake is discouraged. It is in this way that mothers truly embody "power-with."

Thus we can see that "power-with" is considered the only fully acceptable form of power for women, no matter who a woman is or what she is attempting to do. In the *sīrah*s female power is acceptable, but only if its pursuit is for some higher purpose, rather than for the personal gain or ambition of the females themselves. Often explained simply in the *sīrah*s as "piety," this "power with" can be undertaken in order to lead a struggling community, to bear and raise a future hero, or to fight for the glory and victory of Islam. In a heroic form of literature, in which personal achievement is considered the peak of heroism for men, women are the characters expected to uphold the intensely communal nature of their societies. In a case such as that of Dhāt al-Himmah, who is both a hero and a woman, her extensive personal achievements require the justification of all three "higher powers" of community, motherhood, and religion. When these justifications fail, as is the case with Qamarīyah, who is a poor leader, a hateful mother, and a pagan, a potent villain is created. But what goes further than anything toward proving her evil is her "unnatural" hatred and treatment of her son. Her other inadequacies are portrayed as naturally following upon those already clear tendencies.

Conclusion

This study has to a large extent been an attempt to make order out of chaos. I began my research intending to write about recognizable "stock characters," ("the heroine," "the villain," "the helper," etc.) as Malcolm Lyons and Peter Heath had for the male characters from the *sīrah*s. It soon became clear, however, that I had vastly underestimated the flexibility and assimilatory nature of a genre based on a such a long oral tradition, and perhaps the complexity of medieval Islamic views on women. My list of characters that fit into recognizable categories quickly became shorter than my list of "exceptions," and I realized I would have to look at these complex characters through a different lens if I wished to understand their roles. After much thought and discussion, after the creation of many charts and spreadsheets, two connected organizing principles began to appear: the bonds of family and the ways in which women's power was interpreted, praised, or punished by the narrators of the *sīrah*s. Family ties, as the primary structure of medieval Islamic society, largely determined in what ways women were able to exercise power. The expression of this power determined whether its practice was lauded, tolerated, or punished.

The preceding chapters have been an attempt to thoroughly explore these connections, as well as how their portrayals of women were different from or similar to those in more elite forms of medieval Islamic literature. In the first chapter, I explored how women deemed sexually available to men in medieval Islamic society, no matter their age or marital status, were considered potential threats to male sovereignty and

agents of chaos (*fitnah*) in the *sīrah*s. This is a departure from the portrayals of women in elite forms of literature, where only non-virgins are portrayed as threatening. I determined that the figure of the virgin princess, usually foreign and possessing a dangerous combination of beauty and vigor, had more in common with the witty slave concubines of historical, biographical, and *adab* literature of the period than they did with the shy virgins described in that corpus. In the *sīrah*s, access to power over men is by definition temporary: either a woman is "converted" to more traditional womanhood, or she is summarily killed. Her talents, be they intelligence, martial skill, or leadership ability, are seen as potentially beneficial to society. However, certain social structures are too important to break, and women who refuse to enter into them cannot be allowed to prosper.

In the second chapter, I explored how sisterhood and daughterhood, as familial relationships that are defined by Islamic law and custom as necessarily non-sexual, grant women another form of temporary power in the *sīrah*s. What I have deemed "power-to" can be seen in almost identical expressions in both the elite and popular literature of the Middle Periods: sisters and daughters are able to obtain a temporary dispensation to act in unconventional ways because their societies conflate their identities with those of their brothers or fathers. Because these relationships are seen as naturally nonsexual, they are allowed to be emotionally close without fears of female domination. However, this is merely a temporary withholding of judgment: either a sister or daughter commits to using her talents exclusively to better the lives of her family and community, thus transmuting

her activities into "power-with," or she pursues an independent agenda and is judged to be exercising "power-over," with all the consequences that designation carries.

In the final chapter, I described the only expression of female power that is allowed to continue indefinitely in the *sīrah*s: "power-with." All other expressions of power must eventually be judged to fulfill the requirements of this category in order to be accepted as beneficial to the community. Though the actions of both male and female characters in the *sīrah*s are judged by whether they benefit society, there are fewer requirements for men than for women, and more flexibility in how the requirements are expressed. Finally, when it comes to being judged a hero, a female character must fulfill the idealized roles of both a man and a woman in order to be successful.

As I have emphasized throughout this study, it is difficult to say just how reflective the attitudes displayed in the *sīrah*s may be of society in the Islamic Middle Periods. These tales are by nature mutable, and they assimilate the views of each individual storyteller in the centuries before they are written down. They were also meant to entertain, and some of the more extraordinary female characters are likely meant to be just that: extraordinary, or exciting, or an escape from the realities of everyday life. However, the sheer volume of complex female characters impossible to essentialize to their "stock" characteristics, which appears to be unique to popular literature, suggests that a particular audience, separate from that addressed by more elite forms of literature, was interested in these portrayals. Was the juxtaposition of women and power titillating to male audiences for its strangeness, or did men recognize aspects of women they knew in these characters and cheer for them? Were there women in the audience to whom the

storytellers wished to appeal, or was it an unremarkable fact of life that women were more involved in the public aspects of society than the authors of more elite forms of literature were willing to admit? In many ways, my study has revealed as many questions as it has answered, which opens exciting avenues of inquiry.

Future Directions

The impetus to begin this study was my realization that the secondary sources on the *sīrah* genre had thus far completely ignored the many and varied roles played by female characters. My hope is that the comprehensive approach I have taken here, emphasizing connections and similarities within the genre, can act as an accessible introduction to the vast universe of female characters in these narratives. From here, I think it is essential to go in the opposite direction, with studies emphasizing differences. Studies of the female characters in individual *sīrah*s could treat aspects that a broad study like this one could not. Research exploring linguistic and narrative elements that affect female characters, like naming conventions, how a rural or urban setting affects the portrayal of women, and whether women's poetry differs from that of men, would be able to show how individual *sīrah*s construct their own attitudes about women that may be different from other examples of the genre. Tracing how the portrayal of women changes over time in the various versions of specific *sīrah*s could show how much a given storyteller's biases affect characterization. This would be particularly valuable for those stories, like *Sīrat ʿAntar* and *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*, that are still being adapted and interpreted in modern forms of media. Finally, for the tales that exist in various different languages and cultures, like *Sīrat Iskandar* and *Sīrat Ḥamzah*, examining how female characters

change or remain the same in the various cultural interpretations would be a valuable

contribution to our understanding of how these characters reflect their societies. These

are just a few ways in which I hope my research can act as a starting point for the truly

rigorous study of female characters in the *sīrah*, who can add a great deal to our

understanding of medieval Islamic morals, practices, and cultural attitudes.

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